

Tomas Svoboda (1939-)

By Marilyn Shotola

Tomas Svoboda is an internationally renowned composer, performer, professor, and conductor who has composed over two hundred works, including six symphonies, orchestral, choral, and vocal works, diverse works for large and small ensembles, string quartets, and solo instruments, especially piano. Over fifty of his compositions have been recorded, and there have been more than thirteen hundred performances of his works throughout the world. He has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Governor's Arts Award in 1992. In 1985, he was named Composer of the Year by the Washington and Oregon Music Teachers Associations for his collection of piano compositions for children. A professor in Portland State University's Music Department, he was awarded the Branford Price Millar award for Faculty Excellence in 1983.

Nature has been Svoboda's major source of inspiration. His Opus One, a piano piece written at age nine, is entitled "A Bird," and his first symphony, written at age sixteen, is entitled *Of Nature*. His second symphony, dedicated to his love, Jana, was originally scheduled by the Czech Philharmonic to be performed in 1964. It was canceled when Tomas and his parents escaped the country. On the landmark evening of November 12th, 2016, the Portland Youth Philharmonic presented a moving premiere of the work.

His compositional style often combines Slavic folk elements with complex meters and rhythms in a contemporary Classical structure, creating an intense, vibrant effect. Neal Gittleman, artistic director and conductor for the Dayton Philharmonic, called him "one of the great composers of our time."

Svoboda was born in Paris on December 6, 1939, of Czech parents. His father, Antonin Svoboda, was a professor at the Czech Technical University, head of research at the Institute of Mathematical Machines, and an accomplished pianist. After escaping from Czechoslovakia at the beginning of World War II, the family lived in Boston, where three-year-old Tomas started piano lessons with his father. After the war, the family moved to Prague, where Svoboda studied at the Prague Conservatory. He graduated in 1962 with degrees in percussion, composition, and conducting and was recognized as a piano virtuoso.

In 1964, the family fled the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia and returned to the United States. Svoboda's fiancé, the artist Jana Demartini, escaped in 1965, and they were married in Phoenix, Arizona. In 1966, Svoboda entered the University of Southern California, where he earned a master's degree in composition. He studied with composer and teacher Halsey Stevens, who said of him: "It was almost embarrassing to have him come to lessons with work...that needed almost nothing in the way of criticism."

Svoboda moved to Portland with his wife and small son, Martin, in 1970 to teach in the Portland State University Music Department, where he was beloved by his many students. The couple later had a daughter, Lenka (Moor). Svoboda taught composition, counterpoint, and theory for twenty-seven years while continuing to compose and perform. He retired from the university in 1998.

Svoboda has been involved in many Oregon Symphony concerts, some as conductor of his own works and some as keyboardist. In July 2003, the symphony released an *All Svoboda* orchestral CD featuring *Overture of the Season*, *Symphony No. 1*, and the *Marimba Concerto*, which received a 2003 Grammy Award nomination. The symphony commissioned and performed his "Vortex" in 2009.

A versatile chamber pianist, Svoboda composed for and performed in the Composers' Ensemble and Cascadia Composers. For fifteen years, he led Trio Spektrum, the flute, clarinet, and piano trio for which he wrote six works. The group recorded two CDs.

In addition to his love of nature, the other passions that have shaped Svoboda's life include his love of family, hunting mushrooms, and playing chess at a master's level. For fifty years, he kept a daily record of local weather. He suffered a stroke in 2012, followed by a long period of recovery. He lives with his wife in Portland.

Sources

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