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# PETR EBEN'S ORGAN CYCLE: THE LABYRINTH OF THE WORLD AND THE PARADISE OF THE HEART <sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

John Amos Comenius (1592-1670; known in Czech as Jan Ámos Komenský), was a bishop and spiritual leader of the Bohemian Brethren (*Unitas Fratrum*), a grouping of Czech Protestants dating back to the fifteenth century. In addition, he was a widely respected and highly influential philosopher, writer, educational theorist and theologian. His book *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* (first published in Czech in 1631) is the story of a fictional spiritual journey, but it is also a reflection of the author's personal suffering during the Thirty Years' War.<sup>2</sup> It is about a pilgrim who wanders through a metaphorical world characterised by vanity and pointlessness in

<sup>1</sup> This article is the third in a series on Petr Eben's organ works in this journal. It is based on the doctoral dissertation on Eben by Mario Nell (2015), which includes a complete recording of these remarkable works.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the information given here refers to the work of Rood (1972), Jelinek (1953) and Spinka (1943).

search of the deeper meaning of human existence.<sup>3</sup>

A strong feeling of spiritual kinship with Comenius, and specifically with the book *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*, inspired Czech composer Petr Eben (1929-2007) to compose a cyclical organ work with the same title. The composition's musical and dramatic design is based on the book, while text extracts are inserted between the movements for recitation during performance.

The composition's fourteen movements are based on a selection of scenes from the numerous episodes in the book. In this respect, as in the alternation between music and recitation, Eben follows the example of his earlier works *Faust* and *Job*. The parallels between Comenius's book and Eben's own life give the work a degree of autobiographical significance. The composer repeatedly performed improvisations on scenes from the book during several concert tours between 1991 and 2003. In 2002 he gave these improvisations their definitive notated form. It was to be his final organ cycle.

Eben describes his approach to the work in the Preface to the score:

The pilgrim passing through the labyrinth of the world finds nothing pleasing in it and turns to his God in his heart. However, what I find most moving about Komenský's attitude

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<sup>3</sup> Comenius's *Labyrinth* precedes John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress from This World, to That Which Is to Come* of 1678 by four decades and could be regarded as an equally significant contribution to a literary genre that includes Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1320).



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is his tireless work to improve this world. In this he can serve as an example even for our present society: to preserve one's own critical view of, and separation from, this world but to devote all one's powers to improving it.

In the organ improvisations I quote chorales from Komenský's Amsterdam cantional. Sometimes I try to express dramatic passages in the text in a more modern way, for instance the deformation of human faces, the whishing of arrows, and the slipping off the Wheel of Fortune. The whole atmosphere of the text is not an idyllic stroll through the world but a bitter, satirical, bizarre, and sometimes almost apocalyptic view of the world - and such is the character of the music (Eben, 2003:6).

Eben's interest in Comenius's book dates back to the time of his youth and it seems clear that the story had many parallels with Eben's own life, while having a lasting influence on him as an artist. He felt that the book was still relevant, even today. It sustained him during the dark years of his imprisonment by the Nazis at Buchenwald. It also provided a parallel to the situation in communist Czechoslovakia later in his life, where he witnessed the regime's obsession with the glory and power of the state. Similar to Comenius, Eben saw that amid all the joy and the beauty that the world offers, the tragic is never far away, and that the realities of suffering, separation and loss, not to mention the finality of death, are as much part of life as are experiences of affirmation. The conflict between Good and Evil, a life-long preoccupation in the composer's work, is the focal point of the organ cycle, as it was in the earlier cycles *Faust* and *Job*.

As mentioned, for his work on *The Labyrinth* Eben also took inspiration from Comenius's most important contribution to hymnology, the *Kancionál*, published in Amsterdam in 1659.<sup>4</sup> His extensive use of melodic material from this hymnal helps to create a sense of unity in a work that is rather diverse in other respects. None of Eben's other works contains such consistent quotation of hymn melodies.

The titles of the work's fourteen movements are related to the extracts the composer selected from Comenius's book. Each passage presents a specific vision occurring

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<sup>4</sup> See Horyna (2003) for an extensive discussion of Comenius's *Kancionál*, an important source of information on early Czech hymns. According to Horyna the *Kancionál* was based on an even earlier Bohemian hymnal. Of the 606 hymns in the *Kancionál*, 146 were written by Comenius himself, in addition to his revision of the 150 psalms. It contained 406 melodies. Eben's statement should not be taken absolutely literally, because he does include melodies in his work that are not found in the *Kancionál*.

to the pilgrim as he wanders through the world, led from one to the next by a guide. A prologue and an epilogue frame twelve such visions, ordered in progression until, in the thirteenth movement, the pilgrim turns away from the world in disgust and returns to God. The composer states that his main concern when transforming his improvisations into a fully-fledged composition was to “work with motives through which I wished to capture the symbolic content of an image and transform it into an image in music” (Eben, 2003:10). He adds that the “whole atmosphere of the text is not an idyllic stroll through the world but a bitter, satirical, bizarre, and sometimes almost apocalyptic view of the world - and such is the character of the music” (Eben, 2003:6).

## ANALYTICAL OBSERVATIONS

### I. Prologue

The first movement, *Prologue*, serves as an overture to the work and, according to Eben, it should “evoke in listeners the image of a majestic entrance onto the stage of the world” (Eben, 2003:10). The movement opens with majestic chords played on *Tutti* registration before the beginning of the main melodic theme is introduced in m. 2. This melody is taken from Comenius’s *Kancionál*, where it appears as the hymn *Bohu duchu svatému o tři hlavní ctnosti* (“God the Holy Spirit and the three main Virtues”). The melody is widely known as that of the chorale *Von Gott will ich nicht lassen* (1563),<sup>5</sup> which, in turn, was probably adapted from a sixteenth century French secular song, *Une jeune fillette de grand’ valeur*.<sup>6</sup> It is likely that Eben was not only familiar with the Czech hymn, but also with its German original.

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<sup>5</sup> *Evangelisches Gesangbuch* no. 365.

<sup>6</sup> Bach Cantatas Website (2011).



Figure 1: *Bohu duchu svatému o tři hlavní ctnosti*<sup>7</sup>

It is not immediately clear why Eben chose this specific chorale for the *Prologue*. Perhaps the first lines of the German text hold the key, in which trust in God is proclaimed, even when one has lost one's way in the world: "Von Gott will ich nicht lassen, denn er läßt nicht von mir, führt mich durch alle Straßen, da ich sonst irrte sehr".<sup>8</sup> The allusion to "alle Straßen" ("streets") is particularly apt for the organ cycle's underlying programme. This is a more plausible explanation than the reference to the Czech words above. Phrases from *Bohu duchu svatému* also provide the most important thematic material for the next three movements, while brief references continue to appear later in the work.

At the beginning of the movement (mm. 1-19) the eight phrases (counting the repetition) of this hymn tune (now with C as tonal centre) are each presented separately on the *Reed* stop of Manual II, alternating with other thematic material on the *Tutti* of Manual I. The most striking aspect of these citations is that they are presented in octaves without harmonisation and that their rhythmic profile is distorted to the extent that accented notes become unaccented and vice versa. (This is also characteristic of later hymn quotations, e.g. in movement XIII.) This free metric setting of the hymn could be influenced by Eben's well-known predilection for Gregorian chant and perhaps also by the rather inconsistent metric notation of melodies in the *Kancionál*.

<sup>7</sup> *Kancionál* (1992:138). It is interesting that the last note of the first phrase, A, is presented as F in the chorale *Von Gott will ich nicht lassen*, in the original French secular song *Une jeune fillette de grand' valeur* as well as in Eben's use of the melody in *The Labyrinth*. This might be a printing error in the *Kancionál*.

<sup>8</sup> *Evangelisches Gesangbuch* no. 365.

The alternating material consists of fortissimo chords with melodic interest in the lower voices, also revolving around the central pitch C. The resulting melodic line, with its free and irregular metre, has the character of a Gregorian chant melody, doubled - almost organum-like - in parallel octaves and fifths. The alternation between these two musical ideas prevails throughout the movement and shows the eclectic nature of Eben's style. They are varied and transformed continuously, in some cases almost beyond recognition, for example, by outlining the main pitches, but then placing them into a novel rhythmic and pitch context. The initial alternation is illustrated in the example below:

Allegretto maestoso ♩ = 108

I. (Tutti) *ff*

II. (Zungen) *piu f*

I. I. I.

*f*

Figure 2: I *Prologue*, mm. 1-2

The movement has three divisions, indicated by tempo changes: *Allegretto maestoso* (mm. 1-47), *Allegro* (mm. 48-99) and then *Allegretto* (mm. 100-135). As was mentioned before, the phrases of the hymn are presented in the first part of the first section on the tonal centre of C, alternated with organum-like material, which is then extended rather freely before the hymn appears on the tonal centre of B flat in the second half of the section (mm. 32-47). The sense of key is distorted by the parallel fifths and thirds in which the various phrases are presented respectively, even though the florid accompaniment in a register high above it has a clear orientation towards B flat.

In the second section of the movement the hymn phrases are presented with different tonal orientations, for example, on F in the first few measures (mm. 48-52), while they are placed in block chords reminiscent of the organum-like material from the first section. In the second half of the section (mm. 71-99) they are distorted even further, to the extent that they become barely recognisable.

The third section represents a strongly varied recapitulation of the first section, in which phrases from the hymn again alternate with the quasi-Gregorian theme, ultimately gravitating towards the tonal centre of C. Though the hymn phrases are on occasion presented in parallel octaves again, they are deformed rhythmically and tonally in such a way that only their basic pitch outline can be recognised, as in the following example:

The musical score for Figure 3: I Prologue, mm. 113-115, is presented in three systems. The first system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The second system also consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The third system is a single bass clef staff. The music is in 3/4 time and B-flat major. It features two systems of staves. The first system has a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The second system has a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The third system is a single bass clef staff. The music includes dynamic markings like 'più f' and 'f', and articulation like '5' and '3'. First and second endings are marked 'I.' and 'II.'.

Figure 3: I Prologue, mm. 113-115

The grand coda of the movement (mm. 129-135) ends on C major, spread over the entire range of the instrument.

## II. View of the world

As a young man, the pilgrim is unsure of what he wants to do with his life and explores “diverse classes and ranks of people” (Eben, 2003: 118), before he decides which of them to join in his search for an occupation. With a guide at his side he enters a walled city surrounded by a great abyss. The city is a representation of the world. When the pilgrim first enters, it looks beautiful and he experiences it as well-ordered. Its main streets represent different social sectors: domestic, productive, academic, religious, political and military.<sup>9</sup>

The music begins without clear orientation towards a tonal centre. The first part is conceived in chords alternating restlessly between different manuals, although there is only slow harmonic movement. Voice-leading patterns and the grouping of chords

<sup>9</sup> Comenius (1901:69).

seem to be directly influenced by Eben's improvisational style. The combination of energetic *toccata*-like figures, a bright *plenum* registration played with a *staccato* touch, rapid manual changes and intriguing rhythms all combine to represent the pilgrim who begins to "look around, considering whence and how to begin", choosing a career (Eben, 2003: 118). Initially, the harmonies are complex and unpredictable, but gradually move from darkness to the light of tonality in m. 53.

The second section of the movement (from m. 54 onwards) is introduced with an evocative but rhythmically complex accompaniment figure. Against it the chorale *Bohu duchu svatému* is presented in the Pedal, this time on the tonal centre of A. Brief interjections, inserted between the phrases of the *cantus firmus*, interrupt the flow of the music, and might represent the intrusion of the guide, being "of a lively gait and agile speech" (Eben, 2003: 118), and who offers to lead the pilgrim through the city.

The third section of the movement, from m. 86 on, begins with brief exclamatory chord groups outlining fragments of the chorale melody. Brief references to the abrupt interjections in the previous section reappear in mm. 118, 120 and 122.

The image shows a musical score for two staves, treble and bass clef, in 3/2 time. The first measure (m. 117) has a treble staff with a series of chords and a bass staff with a bass line. The second measure (m. 118) has a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with a series of chords. The score is marked with '117' and 'II.' and includes a 'tr' marking and a '6' marking.

Figure 4: II *View of the World*, mm. 117-118

A change of meter, introducing music of a sprightly dance-like character, announces the start of the fourth and final section of the movement in m. 126. It resonates well with the optimistic expectation with which the pilgrim follows his guide into the city.

126 ♩ = 88

II. *molto ritmico*  
*f*

I. *più f*  
II.

*mf*

Figure 5: II *View of the World*, mm. 126-129

### III. Masks

From a distance, the city appears to be a perfect system of interlocking and interdependent parts, but on closer inspection it reveals itself as rather chaotic. Citizens walk around in the marketplace wearing masks, which makes it difficult to recognise them for who they are. They stumble and fall, which also leads to arguments. The pilgrim notices that the scene is filled with people, some of whom are whispering while others are shouting, beating and bumping into one another.<sup>10</sup>

The movement opens with the melodic material of *Bohu duchu svatému* presented in dissonant clusters in the bass register. In his “performance comments” the composer calls for “sharp and bizarre registration”, in line with the “deformation of human faces” expressed by the music (Eben, 2003: 10). In addition to motives from the chorale, the movement contains a great deal of starkly contrasting thematic material, placed into sharp relief by diverging registration, in line with the image of masks and the deformed faces and sick bodies they hide. An example of this already appears right at the beginning, where the dark-coloured chorale melody is set against chromatically inflected melodic interjections in the brightest possible registration:

<sup>10</sup> Comenius (1901:73).

Sarcasmo, Quasi recitativo

1      III. (16', Zunge 8')      II. (Solo 4', 2', Zimbel)

The score shows three staves. The top staff is for the right hand, the middle for the left hand, and the bottom for a solo instrument. The music is characterized by sharp changes in meter and dynamics, creating a complex, rhythmic texture.

Figure 6: III *Masks*, mm. 1-2

As the movement progresses it seems like a jigsaw puzzle of sharply differentiated fragments. The constant metric changes create an exciting atmosphere, perhaps even suggestive of a grotesque carnival spirit through its employment of dance rhythms (e.g. mm. 28, 31, 38), as background to joyful, but at the same time bizarrely dissonant exclamations, in bright registration (8', 4', 2', 1  $\frac{1}{3}$ ').

28      II. (8', 4', 2', 1  $\frac{1}{3}$ ')      I.

The score shows three staves. The top staff is for the right hand, the middle for the left hand, and the bottom for a solo instrument. The music is characterized by sharp changes in meter and dynamics, creating a complex, rhythmic texture.

Figure 7: III *Masks*, mm. 28-29

Although the last section of this movement is labelled *Fuga*, it is not a fully-fledged fugue in the conventional sense. It does have a conventional exposition, the theme being answered at the fifth against a counterpoint of chromatically descending steps, followed by a few measures resembling an episode, upon which several middle entries are presented in different "keys". However, its most striking characteristic is the jagged rhythm and contour of the theme. It is presented seven times (in mm. 45, 47, 49, 51, 58, 60 and 62 respectively), perhaps setting up a correspondence to

the seven people revealed behind their masks, namely the one who “had a pig’s lip, another teeth like a dog, another the horns of an ox, another a donkey’s ears, another the eyes of a basilisk, another a fox tail, and another the claws of a wolf” (Eben, 2003: 118). The eighth, strongly varied entrance of the theme (in mm. 68-69) could then be linked to those people who “mostly, however, [...] resembled apes” and “monsters” (Ibid.).

#### IV. The Arrows of Death

The pilgrim is deeply upset at seeing Death walking around in the marketplace. He realises that people actually provide Death with the arrows with which she in turn kills them. Some people squeal or whine, but then life in the city goes on again as usual.

The musical effects in this movement occupy the full range of the organ, spanning more than four octaves. In his comments Eben describes the movement as “expressing respectively the shooting of arrows and their flight, and the magical turning of the Wheel of Fortune with the falling of unsuccessful aspirants” (Eben, 2003: 10). For this he suggests a sharp and piercing registration of 8’ and 1 1/3’. The trajectory of shooting arrows hitting their targets is depicted in the music quite literally by means of rapidly ascending semi- or demi-semiquaver runs, as in the following example:



Figure 8: IV *The Arrows of Death*, mm. 28-31

The whole movement is permeated by the depiction of such flying arrows, frequently handed to Death by the victim personally, thus being “the instrument of his own death” (Eben, 2003: 119). The other thematic element pointed out by the composer represents the Wheel of Fortune, while the recited text also refers to people

“attending to [...] foolishness and debauchery”, even in the presence of Death walking amongst them. This irony is made audible by the swinging waltz rhythm with its dissonant harmonies in the first part of the movement (e.g. mm. 8-10 and 15-28).

Figure 9: IV *The Arrows of Death*, mm. 7-10

The “Wheel of Fortune” is represented later in the movement, perhaps in the section beginning in mm. 42 or 48, the latter demarcated by a solo registration (8', *Nazard* 2  $\frac{2}{3}$ ', *trem.*). Mm. 48-49 are based entirely on the whole-tone scale:

Figure 10: IV *The Arrows of Death*, m. 48

This movement brings finality to the first section of the work (movements I-IV), where the original thematic material gradually disintegrates, before new material is introduced in movement V. The motivic material of *Bohu duchu svatému* is still present in IV, although by now totally distorted and almost unrecognisable (e.g. mm. 18-20).

## V. The Sweet Chains of Love

In Comenius's story there are six major streets in the city. Married people live in the first of these. People are allowed to enter through the gate to this street in pairs only, so that men and women are matched as couples at the gate, in many cases not because of love, but for financial reasons. The pilgrim stands in awe as he observes how these couples are handcuffed and welded together once they have been paired up. Often this leads to suffering and unhappiness, and sometimes children are handcuffed to the couples as well. It is only when Death strikes one of the partners that the other is freed.<sup>11</sup>

This movement is a musical representation of the first street entered by the pilgrim, acquainting him with marriage and family life. The first part of the movement is based on new melodic material. It is unclear why Eben chose this particular melody, as it cannot be linked to any of the hymns in the *Kancionál*. It does, however, show some similarity to the Gregorian chant *O mi pastor egregie Gregori*, but this may be coincidental.



Figure 11: *O mi pastor egregie Gregori*<sup>12</sup>



Figure 12: V *The Sweet Chains of Love*, mm. 9-12

<sup>11</sup> Summarised from Comenius (1901:89).

<sup>12</sup> Global Chant Database (2009b).



Figure 14: V *The Sweet Chains of Love*, mm. 75-79

After a full statement of the chorale in A major, in *Plenum* registration, the first two phrases are presented in several different keys, as was mentioned earlier. They are C major, B-flat minor, C major, C-sharp minor, F-sharp minor and C-sharp minor. Of these, the section beginning in m. 131 deserves special mention. Here the texture changes abruptly and after the consistent build-up in respect of fluency and dynamic levels, the sudden contrast in sentiment may be heard as an indication that all is not as well as it seems, as expressed by the pilgrim in the recited text: "Oh, most cruel captivity! Anyone who once enters into it has no hope of liberation for all eternity."

The image shows a musical score for 'The Sweet Chains of Love' (mm. 130-134). The score is in A major and 3/4 time. It features a piano part with triplets and a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic, and a vocal line with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. The score is divided into two systems, with measures 130-131 in the first system and measures 132-134 in the second system. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#).

Figure 15: V *The Sweet Chains of Love*, mm. 130-134

However, the festive character of the music returns quite soon (from m. 141 onwards), in keeping with the final words in the recitation: "...but there is no reason to fear it. For the sweetness of this state is such that one gladly submits to this yoke." As mentioned at the outset, the movement ends with "wedding jubilation in full sound" (Eben, 2003:10), returning to A major on *fortissimo* registration.

## VI. The Ceremony of the Academy

Eben resumes the story where the pilgrim proceeds to the third street, which houses the "learned" class. People are examined in order to enter this street through a gate called "Discipline". The text refers to "the sound of trumpets, summoning to a ceremony" (Eben, 2003: 119), while the "performance comments" highlight "the festive entry of the scholars [...], which should evoke the euphoria of scientific discovery" (Ibid:10). In keeping with these images, the main theme of the movement is based on a variation of the beginning of the festive hymn *O drahém a spasitedlném*, as heard in the previous movement. Initially, the theme is presented in the manner of a fanfare, played on the *Trumpet 8'*, as if to depict a ceremonial procession of scholars for a graduation ceremony. Though the melody is clearly in A major, its accompanying

harmonies emphasise the submediant, subdominant and dominant domains of the key rather than the tonic, giving it a different tonal aura than when it was presented in an unambiguous A major in the previous movement. It also has to be pointed out that it is the festive character of the melody rather than an association with its text (which deals with various aspects of love), that seems to have prompted Eben to use it for this movement. In this sense the festive melody (and not the words associated with it) can be heard as a unifying motif shared amongst several movements.

The second section of the movement, beginning in m. 20, introduces a strong contrast (to be played *con espressione* and without *Trumpet*), when the theme is presented in grossly distorted form and in distant tonal regions, again indicating that all is not what it seems, and perhaps foreshadowing the false character of the scholarship, as revealed in the next movement. In m. 45 a transformed version of the third phrase of the first hymn, *Bohu duchu svatému*, is quoted in the highest voice, this time in a minor key. For the rest, however, the pretence is maintained, and the festive theme returns for the final section (mm. 51-59), cadencing on F-sharp major and giving the movement an overall ternary form.

## VII. The Ignorance of the Learned

The narrated text leading to this movement is about a graduation ceremony for the “learned people” featured in the previous movement. Comenius describes how the students present themselves, how they graduate, but also how the pilgrim becomes aware of their glaring ineptitude, despite their qualifications. The “emptiness of [their] ignorance” is now revealed for what it really is (Eben, 2003:10).

The music opens with motivic material derived once more from the beginning of the hymn *O drahém a spasitedlném*, first introduced in movement V. Its festive character is again the reference point, not its textual content. Initially, the presentation of the theme seems to follow the chorale. It is enhanced by a scale-like flourish on a *Reed* stop in the left hand.

Allegro ♩ = 138

I. (8', 4')

*f*

II. (Zunge)

*mf* 7

5 *mf*

Figure 16: VII *The Ignorance of the Learned*, mm. 1-8

However, the metric and melodic structure of the theme then begins to unravel (as from m. 6). A second presentation of the theme (mm. 13-30) is followed by further disintegration, so much so that the second and third sections of the movement (from m. 31 and m. 49 respectively) strip away all pretence and reveal the full extent of the “ignorance” in all its shallow “emptiness”.

♩ = 84

48

III.

*mp* (ansiosamente)

III.

II.

*mp*

Figure 17: VII *The Ignorance of the Learned*, mm. 48-52

The example also shows how the music explores more or less distant keys, in this case featuring D minor quite prominently.

### VIII. The wheel of fortune

The guide leads the pilgrim to the Castle of Fortuna. The building appeals so much to the people that they seek ways to enter it in order to meet Lady Fortuna but the only way to gain entrance is by way of an incessantly turning wheel. Crowds of people line up outside, but Lady Fortuna sends her official, named Chance, to select only a few to climb onto the wheel, while the others slip and fall off.

Eben does not mention this movement in his performance directions. However, it is clear from the description above (as recited before the performance of the movement), that the vision of a castle, a turning wheel of fortune and crowds of people desperately trying to get onto it, but then falling off, are the inspiration for the various motives and themes in the movement. The most immediate impression is that of continuous circular movement as a characteristic of almost all the motives, however different they may be in other respects. This is again reminiscent of the Baroque *circulatio* figure. However, constant rests and manual changes, the alternation between single melodic lines, parallel octaves and harmonised passages, all of them highly dissonant, and disparate dialogues between solo voices and accompaniment prevent the establishment of any degree of fluency, creating a haphazard effect, as unpredictable as the wheel of fortune. Sections with complex and dissonant harmonic effects may be heard as illustrative of the milling crowds, while single lines could be linked to individual people scrambling for, or falling off the wheel. Such an effect can be observed in the section beginning in m. 5:

The image shows a musical score for three staves, numbered 5, 6, and 7. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in bass clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The music consists of complex, dissonant chords and triplets, with many notes beamed together. The key signature is D minor, indicated by one flat (Bb) and one sharp (F#). The notation includes various accidentals and rests, creating a haphazard and unpredictable effect.

Figure 18: VIII *The Wheel of Fortune*, mm. 5-6

An example of a dissonant single melodic line (on a *Trumpet stop*) can be heard in the section beginning in m. 34:

The musical score for Figure 19 shows measures 34 and 35. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 96. The top staff is for the first trumpet (I. (Tromp.)) and the second staff is for the second trumpet (II.). The left hand part features a sixteenth-note pattern with a forte (ff) dynamic. The right hand part features a single note with a forte (f) dynamic. The trumpet parts have a dissonant melodic line with triplets and a forte (ff) dynamic.

Figure 19: VIII The Wheel of Fortune, mm. 34-35

In m. 50 a solo melody is introduced on the pedal, which assumes the significance of a *cantus firmus*. It seems to be a distortion of the hymn *O drahém a spasitedlném*, first heard in movement V.

## IX. The crimes of humanity

This movement is about Lady Fortuna awarding immortality to those selected for it. However, it turns out that immortality is given not only to people who have performed good deeds, but also to those who have committed the most abhorrent crimes imaginable: murder, blasphemy and even sentencing God to death. Again, the composer does not refer to this movement in his performance comments, but the rather descriptive tempo indications *Lamentando* (at the beginning) and *Tristamente* (for the last section) hint that the music is a reflection on the crimes mentioned and the wretchedness of humankind in general, more than it is a depiction of the crimes themselves.

The music contrasts strongly with the surrounding movements, not only in respect of character, but also due to the fact that it does not contain a chorale melody. Nonetheless, brief references to intervallic or contour elements from the chorale *O drahém a spasitedlném* do appear occasionally. It is also interesting to note that the chord of D minor defines both the beginning and end of the movement. The music divides into five sections (mm. 1-24; mm. 25-30; mm. 31-47; mm. 48-63; mm. 64-95).

Whether these sections each relate to one of the crimes mentioned above is a question that depends on how literally one interprets the music. Here is the beginning of the movement, exemplifying its *Lamentando* character:

Lamentando ♩ = 100

II.

III.

*mp*

*p*

*p*

*p*

Figure 20: VIII *The Crimes of Humanity*, mm. 1-5

The second section (mm. 25-30) marks an increase in tempo. It is a more agitated version of the first:

♩ = 152

25

I.

*f*

*f*

*mf*

Figure 21: IX *The Crimes of Humanity*, mm. 25-27

The movement ends with a return to the sad and pensive mood of the beginning, indicated as *Tristamente*, reflecting the pilgrim’s last words in the recited text: “Not only I but my whole race is wretched, and also blind, knowing not its wretchedness. We grasp at a shadow; the truth everywhere escapes us. Alas! And again alas!” (Eben, 2003: 120).

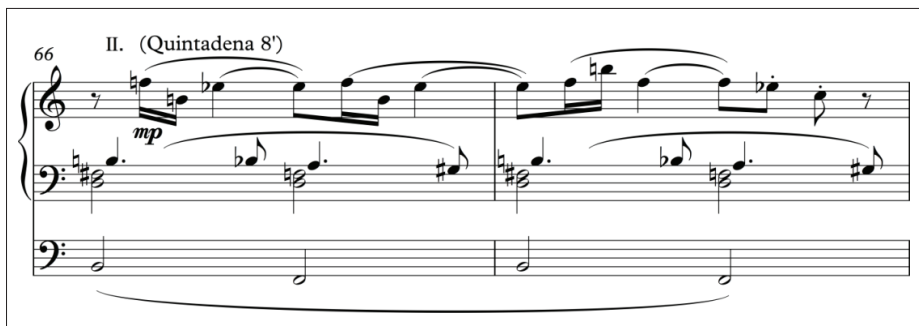


Figure 22: IX *The Crimes of Humanity*, mm. 66-67

This movement concludes the second part of the suite (movements V-VIII), once again unified by common thematic material in the form of a shared chorale.

## X. False promise of a golden age

The title “Golden Age” evokes a term from the work of the ancient Greek poet Hesiod (ca. 700 BCE). In his *Works and Days* he takes a retrospective look at the earliest era of human existence, an age when humans still lived in prosperity and peaceful harmony, like gods (Hesiod, 1996: lines 106-126). This era was followed by four increasingly less harmonious ages (silver, bronze, heroic and iron; lines 127-201). By way of contrast, Comenius’s use of the term refers to an age of the future, a “golden age in the world” (Eben, 2003:120). It is an era in which Solomon, King of Israel, will establish justice in the world, a prospect for which the pilgrim expresses high hopes, but which, ultimately, turns out to be a false promise. However, the dashed hope does not yet feature at this point in the music. According to the composer’s “performance comments” the movement suggests “the vision of a new life governed by justice [...]. The enthusiasm at the arrival of a ‘golden age’ is expressed with a chorale decorated with figurative garlands in the right hand” (Eben, 2003:10).

The melody used in this movement is that of the German chorale *Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl*, with words by Martin Luther and a melody by Johann Walter (1524). An English translation of the first and last stanzas reads as follows:

The mouth of fools doth God confess,  
but while their lips draw nigh Him,  
their heart is full of wickedness,

and all their deeds deny Him.  
 corrupt are they, and every one  
 abominable works hath done;  
 there is not one well-doer.

Who shall to Israel's outcast race  
 from Zion bring salvation?  
 God will Himself at length show grace  
 and loose the captive nation;  
 that will He do by Christ, their King;  
 let Jacob then be glad and sing  
 and Israel be joyful.<sup>15</sup>

When Eben describes this movement as “a second lightning in the cycle”, he refers to the exuberant character of the music. The “figurative garlands” accompanying the chorale are made up of an almost consistently diatonic semi-quaver pattern, which develops into different structures throughout the movement, but always returns to its original form. It is accompanied by a lively quaver pattern in the bass:

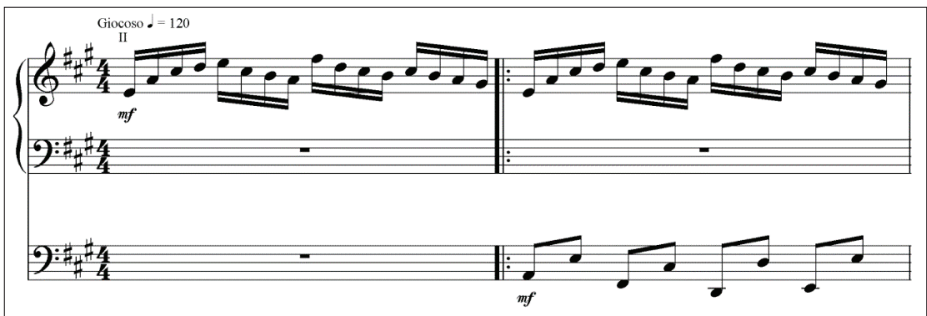


Figure 23: X *False Promise of a Golden Age*, mm. 1-2

Against this double-layered accompaniment the chorale is then presented as a third layer, in the form of a *cantus firmus*, at first in the tenor register in A major, then, after a brief modulation, in the pedal in C major (mm. 23-36). The A major section is

<sup>15</sup> Translation by Richard Massie, 1854 (*The Open Hymnal*, 2017). Lack of space prevents citation of all six stanzas, but they all seem relevant to the present context.

recapitulated in mm. 41-57. The extremely boisterous character of this movement is truly a fitting musical representation of the “vision of a new life governed by justice” (Eben, 2003: 10).

## XI. Vanity of vanities

The title of this movement is reminiscent of a phrase that Eben used in one of his early compositions, the cantata *Pragensia* (1972). This work was subtitled *Three Renaissance Scenes with Prolog* and is based on words by Vavřinec Kříčka. According to Eben, *Pragensia* is “a plea for peace and harmony in our days,” to which he added the words *Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas* (Vanity of Vanities, all is Vanity; Vítová, 2004: 163).

*Vanity of Vanities* is the first of the final group of movements, in which “the intensity of desperation and of the hopelessness of human life increases steadily” (Eben, 2003: 10). The music is a response to the disillusion that sets in when Solomon, after crying out loudly: “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!”, approaches the Queen of Wisdom, “raised his hand and took from her face the veil, which at first had seemed costly and glittering but was now found to be nothing but a cobweb”. The pilgrim and all bystanders “were so horrified that we stood as though frozen” (Eben, 2003: 120).

Disillusion about the true nature of vanity, i.e. that something dressed up to appear attractive is, in reality, “displeasing” and has “foul breath”, is expressed very skilfully in the music (to be performed *Tragicamente*) by a complete distortion of the chorale *Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl*. It reveals that the promise held up in the previous movement was indeed false. The chromatically inflected notes of the melody, now in A minor and broken up into short fragments, can barely be recognised above the dissonant harmony (much of which suggests F major) and the heavy *Reed* registration.

Tragicamente  $\text{♩} = 108$   
I. (Zungen)

Figure 24: XI *Vanity of Vanities*, mm. 1-2

Further distortions of this dotted rhythm motive (mm. 20-36) then serve to accompany an expressive *cantus firmus*-like melody played on a different manual and with *Sesquialtera* registration.

19  
III. (Sesquialtera 2 2:3' + 1 1:3')

Figure 25: XI *Vanity of Vanities*, mm. 19-24

A third section is reached when the music is cast into the style of a toccata (mm. 37-66). Eben describes this section as representing “outcries” about the “desperation [...] of human life” (Eben, 2003: 10). Extremes of dissonance, loudness, thickness of texture, all of it spread over the full range of the instrument, characterising the music from here on. They reach their highest point of intensity from m. 50 onwards:



Figure 26: XI *Vanity of Vanities*, mm. 50-51

The ugliness of vanity is certainly depicted in a convincing manner in this movement.

## XII. Horror and swooning

With this movement the cycle reaches its climax in dissonance, harsh timbre and density of texture. The key to its understanding is of twofold kind: firstly, the composer's reference to outcries of desperation and hopelessness is linked directly to the vision of utter horror described in the recited text. Secondly, it is important to recognise that the hymn featuring in the next movement is already foreshadowed in this movement, albeit in a much distorted version. It is Nikolaus Decius' *agnus dei* hymn *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig*, with its passionate plea for mercy and peace in the Lord.

Fragments of the first two phrases of the melody appear in the course of the movement's first section (mm. 1-23), to be performed *Appassionato*. The distortion of the original hymn tune is such that it is presented in a minor key with consistent chromatic inflection and dissonance at the cadential point (mm. 2-4). The preceding motive (mm. 04-1) already foreshadows the first phrase of the melody, while it is echoed in mm. 5-6. The second phrase of the hymn is presented in the same manner in m. 7. Extended and more dissonant versions of the two phrases are presented in mm. 12 and 16 respectively.



Figure 27: XII *Horror and Swooning*, mm. 1-5

The question as to why a deformed and fragmented version of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* is presented in this movement already, and not saved for the next, can perhaps be answered by pointing to the last line of the recited text: "Oh God, God, God, if you are a God, have mercy on wretched me!" (Eben, 2003: 121). All that remains for the pilgrim, who has reached his lowest point of hopelessness here, is to cry to the Lord for mercy in the midst of desperation – Decius uses the verb *verzagen* –, even if it is in an utterly incoherent manner.

In the following section, mm. 24-29, the repeating *ostinato* patterns in the left hand and pedal parts serve to accompany a further variation of the second phrase of the chorale melody.



Figure 28: XII *Horror and Swooning*, mm. 24-25

The next sections also contain highly distorted variations of the hymn's melodic material, too numerous to mention. The movement ends without respite, repeating the motive with which it began.

### XIII. The return to God

This movement introduces the final section of the cycle and is linked to the second part of the title: "The Paradise of the Heart". Its title "The Return to God" explains the unreserved peacefulness that is expressed in the music. In the first half (mm. 1-19) this is achieved by a rather conventional four-part setting of the chorale already alluded to in the previous movement, *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig*, the various phrases of which are presented in alternation with spoken text. The last phrase of Decius' hymn, *Gib deinen Frieden, o Jesu* ("Give us your peace, o Jesus") could be the reason for Eben's choice of this particular hymn at this point in the cycle. The message is that the return to God, forgiveness and peace can only be achieved through Jesus as the Lamb of God. An additional level of meaning can be discerned when one knows that a visual depiction of the Lamb of God, bearing a victory flag and surrounded by the Latin inscription *Vicit agnus noster, eum sequamur* ("Our Lamb has conquered, let us follow him"), is the emblem of the Moravian Church, a direct successor of the Bohemian Brothers to which Comenius belonged. The allusion to the "paradise of the heart" finds its explanation in the image of the "living temple that [God] fashioned for himself" in the pilgrim's heart and which Jesus chose for his dwelling. Finally, the pilgrim finds his destiny and his true self, "when God enters into a person's life" (Eben, 2003:10).

From m. 21 on the melodic material shows a strong resemblance to the melody of the Gregorian chant *Qui custodit veritatem Lauda anima* as basis for the musical material that is presented with the readings. The text of this melody can be translated as "He keeps the truth".

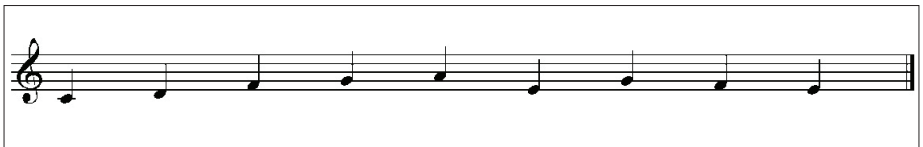


Figure 29: *Qui custodit veritatem Lauda anima*<sup>16</sup>

The musical material develops through multiple transpositions of the thematic material before it concludes with a last statement of the *Ó Beránku Boží svatý* theme in mm. 60-63.

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<sup>16</sup> Chant Database (2009<sup>a</sup>).

60

Text 8

Figure 30: XIII *The Return to God*, mm. 60-64

The dramatic effects of the previous movements now give way to a completely different mood. This is achieved by extreme simplicity in all the formal parameters. In combination with the readings (which act as a kind of “over-voice”), it is as if the music transforms into an act of worship. The text and the musical material seem to correspond closely, revealing the composer’s sentiments at their most intimate. They are an expression of hope, peace, salvation and love in Christ.

#### XIV. Epilogue

In the final movement yet another chorale melody is introduced, this time that of the morning hymn *Du höchstes Licht, du ewger Schein*. Its melody is attributed to the Bohemian Brothers, while the words are by Johannes Zwick (see *Evangelisches Gesangbuch* No. 441).

Figure 31: *Du höchstes Licht, du ewger Schein*

Du höch - stes Licht, du ew - ger Schein du Gott und treu - er Her - re  
 mein, von dir der Gna - den Glanz aus - geht und leuch - tet schön so früh wie spät.

1. Thou highest light, day without end,  
thou God and my most faithful Lord,  
from thee the light of grace goes forth  
and brightly shines for all the earth.
2. He is the light of all the world,  
in whom men clearly may behold  
the bright and beauteous light of day  
that brings them blessing and all joy.<sup>17</sup>

The first entry of the chorale melody is in the left hand, here presented in E-flat major. In m. 10 it appears in the right hand in a slightly varied form. In this case the intention seems not to distort the melody in the gross manner in which it was done in previous movements but perhaps to transcend it. This interpretation is supported by the harmonising chords, which include pitches from completely different tonal regions, and which give the whole movement a sublime, almost other-worldly sound. From m. 30 the melody, now in its original form again, is transposed to F major and doubled in octaves, while the sublime-sounding chords continue as before. Ultimate peace is achieved at the end, confirming the composer's suggestion that the cycle should end in "quiet meditation" (Eben, 2003: 10). Eben transforms Zwick's morning hymn into the vision of a spiritual new dawn.

As Petr Eben's last large-scale organ cycle, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* is truly a magnificent and at the same time moving and deeply spiritual work and a fitting conclusion to his life-long grappling with the conflict between Good and Evil. Good has finally triumphed over Evil. This can also be said in respect of the other two works discussed in this series of three articles on the large-scale organ cycles of Petr Eben, *Faust* and *Job*.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> English translation by Jean Lunn. Internet source: [www.conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/New-YearsJan2010Program.pdf](http://www.conspirare.org/wp-content/uploads/New-YearsJan2010Program.pdf). (Accessed 27 October 2019).

<sup>18</sup> See *Vir die Musikleier* 37 (2017) and 38 (2018).

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