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Coffee Break

with Janette Fishell

Janette Fishell is organist royalty—one of the most respected players and educators of our time. She is professor of music and chair of the organ department at Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music and an internationally sought-after recitalist. Her career-long engagement with the music of Czech composer Petr Eben has led to a definitive complete recording. Janette has brought renewed attention to Eben's unique compositional voice—a combination of Romantic lyricism and modernist textures, framed within his deep sense of spirituality and cultural resilience. Volume 1, Petr Eben: Velvet Revolution, *was met with critical acclaim, and the second volume is due to be released in 2026.*

ALEX HODGKINSON

The music of Petr Eben has been a constant presence throughout my professional life, and a source of endless inspiration and joy. I earned my undergraduate and graduate degrees at Indiana University, and I would say that the seeds were sown back then. It was the mid-1980s, and there was a great sense of experimentalism going on, the tail end of the avant-garde time of the '60s and the early '70s.

When I was an undergrad, my teacher, Wilma Jensen—she's now 96 and is still my great friend and mentor—did a tour of what was then East Germany and bought all the scores she could find, including *Sunday Music*. One of the grad students played the "Final." I sat there mesmerized, thinking, "What's going on?! What is this music?!" I loved the drama. I loved the rhythmic vitality. I loved the individuality in terms of approach to harmony. It was complex music, but it could be grasped on a visceral level even at first hearing.

Next, I heard the German organist Johannes Geffert play *Faust*, and again I was struck by the drama—the drama of the literature played out in music. My sister's an actor, and we grew up doing a lot of singing and acting, putting together crazy programs. It's kind of embarrassing to look back on, but you know, when you're a teenager, you just do these things out of sheer joy and abandon.

I set about learning Mr. Eben's music, and I deliberately learned it chronologically. There's something about taking on these complete packages of repertoire—whether it's Eben, or Bach, or Franck—that feeds me both artistically and pedagogically. It's just such an exciting journey you take with the composer through their development and their influences.

No matter what the texture, no matter what the articulation, or the volume, or the color, he always wants lyricism in his music. He considered himself a Romantic composer. It's so funny: when you Wikipedia him, he's called a Neoclassicist. He's rarely called a Romantic, but that's how he thought of himself. And when you play his music lyrically, I think that becomes clear. The first concerto encapsulates his Romanticism in a really visceral way, as do the first two movements of *Sunday Music*.

One thing that drew me to Mr. Eben was his direct experience of the tumult of Europe in the 20th century. This was music that had come in from the cold. It was forbidden music, full of hidden messages of resistance, written while he was living under the Communist government.

He visited the United States for the first time in 1983, with Susan Landale. The first stop on their tour was in Nashville, Tennessee, where I was teaching. I arranged to meet him and interview him, and he gave me so much time. He was so shocked that anybody really knew who he was, because he was literally from behind the Iron Curtain. His wife, Šárka, was not allowed to come with him on that tour; she was supposed to come, but the authorities kept her back at the airport to prevent him from defecting. It was really like a John le Carré novel! We began a correspondence that lasted for the rest of his life, and we would meet up face-to-face whenever we could.

I had many musical questions of course, but I just remember being hugely impressed by him as a person, someone who had lived through so much. He had been interned in Buchenwald [concentration camp] with his family as a young adolescent during the Second World War. He had the most hair-raising stories about it. But despite this, despite the hell he had been through in his life, he was so spiritually centered, and so kind and humble, and so optimistic.

Faith was a prevailing influence on his music. His father was Jewish—which is why he was sent to Buchenwald—but he was raised Catholic by his Catholic mother. Many of his works seek to marry these two traditions—for example, his organ cycle *Job*, where each of the eight movements illustrates a quotation from the book of Job. And throughout there is Christian chant and the chorales of the Czech Bohemian Brethren. The fourth movement of *Okna* for trumpet and organ, one of the greatest works, combines Russian Orthodox chant and Hebrew cantillation. His artistic credo was that music must praise God; otherwise, as he said of his marvelous cycle *Laudes*, "the stones would cry out."

Czechoslovakia has been a doormat in European history, and the 20th century was especially brutal. For Mr. Eben, growing up, coming of age, marrying, and raising three sons to be Christian was often dangerous. Through his music, he was clinging to a sense of national identity, or lost identity, or closeted identity. He was very much part of the artistic underground resistance movement that brought democratic reform. In this way, his national identity became part of his faith tradition, but never in a way that was jingoistic.

In his music we can find themes of suffering—for example, *Labyrinth*, which is an allegory for our earthly struggle for truth and God. I think he saw himself in some ways in the role of that pilgrim who was struggling. But he was also the guide. He was pointing out for us the folly of violence and conflict. I think when we plumb the depths of who we are, and explore our God-given gifts of expression in the toughest of times, we carve out a deeper sense of ourselves.

For those wanting to listen to or play Mr. Eben's music, I recommend starting with the second of the *Two Versetti*, a series of variations on *Adoro te*. They're only moderately difficult, and they're beautiful.

One of my favorite movements from *Job* is "Longing for Death," which is this haunting passacaglia that builds and builds. One of the first pieces I ever heard and loved was the "Song of the Beggar with the Barrel Organ" from *Faust*. It's very Steve Reich, very minimalist. And it's just so much fun to play and so much fun to listen to. "Gretchen" is another really beautiful piece from that work that encapsulates his lyrical writing. Of course, *Sunday Music* is great. I love it; I love all of it!

It's really difficult to limit oneself to just one "best" piece of advice, but, given our focus, I will quote Mr. Eben, who once said to me regarding his musical style: "I never turned somersaults to please anyone and always tried to stay true to myself." The world is full of a variety of opinions, gifts, and passions, and we benefit from listening to many perspectives. Honor the one *You* that you bring to the world, and work all your life to make it worthy of your art, values, and faith.

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