

# THE TIMES

Saturday, October 28, 2017.

OBITUARY

## Zuzana Ruzickova

Harpsichordist known as ‘Mrs Bach’ who survived the Nazi camps and Communist persecution



Zuzana Ruzickova in 1968, the same year that she played an all-Bach recital at the Purcell Room in London GETTY IMAGES

When Zuzana Ruzickova was crammed into a cattle truck to be taken from Terezin to Auschwitz she scribbled on a scrap of paper the sarabande from Bach’s G minor English Suite. To her dismay the wind snatched it away, but it blew into another truck and was found by her mother, who knew then that her daughter was alive.

Bach and his music proved to be the one constant in the turmoil of Ruzickova’s life. Many of her earliest concerts were of his music;

she completed the herculean task of recording his complete works for keyboard and his music brought her into conflict with the postwar Communist authorities in her native Czechoslovakia. It also brought her to the Wigmore Hall in London, where she made her debut in March 1963.

The critics were generally warm about her recordings and concerts. In 1968 a *Times* critic admired the “huge vitality and momentum” in her all-Bach recital at the Purcell Room while

finding “a touch of wantonness in her treatment of the music”. However, it was towards the end of her life that Ruzickova became known to a much wider audience as students, journalists and even the BBC beat a path to her tiny apartment on the outskirts of Prague, where she had lived since the late 1940s, sipping endless cups of coffee and puffing on cigarettes.

“I couldn’t live without music,” she said of suggestions after the war that she had suffered too much to begin forging a career. “It is not enough to be an extraordinary musician. You have to be crazy. You have to have the feeling that you cannot live without music.”

Zuzana Ruzickova was born in Pilsen, in the west of Czechoslovakia, in January 1927, the only daughter of a couple who owned a department store. Her mother was from an Orthodox Jewish background while her father was an atheist who had spent four years learning his trade in Chicago in the 1920s. It was from him that Zuzana learnt English.

She was a sickly child. Nevertheless, she showed promise in piano lessons and, as a reward for recovering from illness, was promised harpsichord lessons in Paris with Wanda Landowska, the Polish musician who had settled in France in the early 20th century. The Führer had other ideas. “I had no experience with antisemitism until Hitler came,” she told *The Times* in 2016. “But I was so flabbergasted by being something ‘different’ that I immediately started to read everything about Zionism. I would argue with my father’s friends — assimilation is not possible.”

She was 15 when she and her parents were among the first to be deported to the Terezin concentration camp, where her father and grandparents died from disease. She practised on an old piano, learnt Latin and Hebrew, and sang in rehearsals for the children’s opera *Brundibar* that was written by Hans Krasa for the inmates, only to be deported before it was performed. “By the time I went to Auschwitz [December 1943] I had already read

the book of Samuel and Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*,” she recalled.

At Auschwitz she believed that the gas chamber was imminent. Fate intervened. She and her mother, Poldi, were selected to go to Hamburg as forced labour. She recalled eating soup in a canteen when she heard the music of Chopin on the radio. “I fainted. It was so fantastic that somewhere in the world somebody was playing Chopin.”

You have to have the feeling that you cannot live without music

Before long they were on the move again. “If Auschwitz was hell, Bergen-Belsen was another hell,” she said of her next destination. “This was the lowest part of hell . . .” She survived, she said, because “the spirit of Bach was always with me and kept me alive”. By the time she was liberated by British forces in April 1945 her body was racked by bubonic plague and her hands had been torn to shreds by years of manual work. “They were not quite as good as they should have been,” she said with classic understatement. “I had to do exercises for two years before I could play again.”

Yet back in Pilsen she was determined to return to music, finding an upright piano, practising 12 hours a day and joining a music school. “Every three months I went up a year,” she said proudly, and by the age of 20 she had been admitted to the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. There were still hurdles to overcome, particularly with her preference for harpsichord over piano. “One of the leading critics in Prague said it was like using a *fiker* [horse and carriage] when I could have a car,” she recalled.

When the Communists took power there was a debate over whether Bach was inappropriate fare for the workers. “Somebody from the party came and said, ‘You are working with Passions, with Christ, with religion’. They said the harpsichord was a feudal instrument and asked how I could teach young people without having had a Marxist education.” She shot back that Bach was an employee of Leipzig, and if he

were an employee of Prague perhaps he would have written cantatas about Lenin instead. “The man didn’t know what to say — he couldn’t say yes, he couldn’t say no. So he let me go.”

Meanwhile, in 1952 she had married Viktor Kalabis, one of her students and a non-Jewish Czech composer. They refused to join the Communist Party, leading to surveillance and the denial of professional status including their doctorates, the right to teach Czech students, opportunities to perform with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra and the ability to travel overseas together. They refused to be cowed.

She did manage to get a permit from the authorities to enter the ARD International Music Competition in Munich in 1956. However, the Czech conductor Rafael Kubelik, a political exile in Germany, refused to conduct the finals if

there was a Czech artist representing communist Czechoslovakia. “So I gave my last ten deutschmarks to the porter of the hall, he let me in at six in the morning and I learnt the orchestral part of the first two movements of my concerto,” she told *The Times*. Playing the solo and orchestral passages of Benda’s concerto for keyboard, she won the top prize. One of the jury invited her to Paris for lessons — an opportunity denied almost 20 years earlier.

Now she faced the dilemma of whether to perform in Germany. “I shuddered,” she recalled, fearing that there would be former Nazis in the audience. Yet Kalabis told her she had a responsibility to play there. “He said, ‘Play Bach to make them realise that there is another Germany, that Hitler didn’t destroy all the great culture’.”

Zuzana



Ruzickova in her apartment in October last year GETTY IMAGES

Despite many British admirers, after the 1960s there were only occasional forays to these shores, including a visit to the Edinburgh Festival in 1990, although she did tour Australia with Josef Suk, the Czech

violinist, in 1971 and made a couple of visits to the US.

Still she and Kalabis lived in the tiny apartment that she had been allocated in the

1940s. Her mother, who lived until 1987, slept in the bedroom while Ruzickova and Kalabis slept underneath the piano — which had at least been upgraded to a grand. After the fall of Communism in 1989, during which she took part in the protests in Wenceslas Square, they were able to acquire the apartment next door and knock through to create extra space.



She retired from the concert platform in 2006, the same year that her husband died. She now dedicated her life to preserving his legacy, organising the Prague Spring international harpsichord competition and supporting the work of a younger generation of harpsichordists and early music practitioners. It was not until the mid-2010s that she was jolted back into the public eye with the re-release of her 20-CD Bach recording odyssey timed to coincide with her 90th birthday coupled with the meteoric rise of her student Mahan Esfahani. The “harpsichord ninja” called her “Mrs Bach” and became the driving force behind western interest in her life and work.

Although Bach remained a constant throughout her life, Ruzickova explained that her approach to his music had changed. “You never play the same, you change as a person. And when you go on stage you have to be strictly truthful. You cannot be somebody two years ago. You’re already another person. And you have to be yourself again.” When asked how she could face the world after the deprivations of the German camps, she would quote her father: “Don’t hate. Hate is something that poisons your soul,” adding: “To live with music is really a wonderful blessing.”

**Zuzana Ruzickova, harpsichordist, was born on January 14, 1927. She died on September 27, 2017, aged 90**

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*Some reader comments on the article: -*

*Bel Ami*

What a wonderful woman.

*GrubStreetGeezer*

If that's being crazy who would want to be sane? Rip.

*Geoffrey Fielding*

Her life was an inspiration; a triumph of human brilliance, strength and indomitable courage over terrible adversity.

*MargaretB*

What a woman. She grappled with the very darkest of human wickedness but came through because of her own tenacity and her love for Bach who would have given her his hand in defiance of the Nazis who tried to crush her. Bravo x