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(Translated by Rolf Liebergesell)**

**ZUZANA RUZICKOVA,  
Grande Dame of the Harpsichord  
by Deborah Cowley**

Prague, November 1989: Sirens, police every where, masses of agitated people course through the narrow streets of the inner city. Mass protests against the communist regime. Suddenly the rumor: "Tanks are coming." The words fly from mouth to mouth. Will history repeat itself? Will the cry for freedom and democracy be brutally suppressed as in the 1968 "Prague Spring"? Uncertainty, fear and tension hover over the city.

No, not over the whole city. In the center of Prague there is an oasis of quiet: a small recording studio. Here, the harpsichordist Zuzana Ruzickova records the six Brandenburg Concertos by J.S. Bach. Music lovers have waited for this recording a long time. Zuzana Ruzickova does not want to disappoint them. Recording engineers have come especially from London.

The musician is doing the fifth concerto. Just as she begins the great harpsichord cadenza, a man enters: "Tanks are coming! We must leave!". "We cannot leave now. I cannot abandon my team" answers Zuzana Ruzickova. She continues, her fingers flying a little faster over the keyboard.

Only when the concerto is finished is she ready to leave. She wonders if anybody will notice later on that they were "busy."

This was not the first time Zuzana Ruzickova was in danger and not the first time that she demonstrated courage. She and her mother survived three and a half years in concentration camp. Seventeen family members were murdered there. In the fifties she survived the show trials against Jews, who were branded as "enemies of the people" and condemned by the communist regime of Czechoslovakia. Zuzana Ruzickova lived for 40 years under communist domination. But never did she yield to the temptation to go to the West, even though she could have expected a more secure and comfortable life there.

Zuzana Ruzickova displays no signs of bitterness. In 1967 she accepted an invitation from Germany and played in the country of her concentration camp torturers. The concert took place in Ansbach during the "Bach Week." There she performed regularly until 1991. "It was difficult," she says, "I was always afraid that I might see somebody in the audience who had beaten me in the concentration camp. But then I thought about Bach and his music. Music can heal. So I said to myself that music can change these people."

Zuzana Ruzickova's life has been marked by iron discipline and hard work. They are the key to her success. Although she will be 72 next year, she still follows a strenuous regime; practice, teaching, and concert performances all over the world.

Zuzana Ruzickova is the Grande Dame of the Harpsichord. For decades she has been counted among the best Bach interpreters. Her mastery is evidenced by 37 recordings of all of Bach's known works for harpsichord. She received the coveted "Grand Prix du Disque" four times. Her name is connected with the record in Baroque music: Over 300,000 of her LP's and CDs have been sold. The Supraphon recording company honored her with a Gold Record.

The British harpsichordist and conductor, Christopher Hogwood says, "Nobody plays as passionately as she. She goes to the bottom of each work." I experienced her captivating power of expression during a 1995 concert in Prague. Zuzana Ruzickova came on stage of the Suk-Hall in the Rudolfinum and sat down for a minute at the harpsichord, concentrating. Then she began with Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in C minor. The audience was mesmerized. At the end, a long silence. And then, thunderous applause.

"There is a special bond between my public and me," she told me later. "The people know that they can expect something extraordinary -- I always give them my best. Nevertheless, each concert is a risk for me. But I am an old lady, I may take risks."

Zuzana Ruzickova is the daughter of Jewish parents and was born on January 14, 1927 in Pilsen. The family had two toy stores. The whole family was musical. The mother played piano, the father composed songs. They all sang a lot, when walking, in the mountains, at home, everywhere. Her grandmother took the child Zuzana to the opera and the ballet. The more music Zuzana heard, the more she became enthusiastic about it.

Zuzana was a sickly child. She missed school often. At age 9 she had serious pneumonia. To humor her, her parents promised to fulfill her any wish, no matter what. Zuzana knew exactly what she wanted -- a piano. She got one when she recovered. She took lessons from the pianist and organist Maria Provaznikova, who was amazed about her talent. At age 11, the girl played effortlessly the most difficult pieces, preferably Bach.

Maria Provaznikova believed that Bach's music should be played on the organ. She recommended to change instruments. But the doctor thought that the organ was too strenuous for Zuzana, so the teacher suggested the harpsichord, the instrument Bach also loved very much. Zuzana did not know what a harpsichord was, none existed in Pilsen. She determined to study with the famous Polish harpsichordist, Wanda Landowska, in Paris later on. For the time being, she continued with the piano, and read a lot.

Suddenly, Zuzana's childhood comes to an end. When the German army invaded Czechoslovakia in September 1939, she was twelve. As a Jew, she can no longer go to

school, and the music lessons have to be kept secret. And she has to wear the Star of David. The adults in the family considered to immigrate to America, where they have relatives who can be of help but Zuzana's father is against leaving his home country.

In January 1942, he and many other family members, including Zuzana, were deported to the Theresienstadt concentration camp. Zuzana was then 14. She was allowed to take only a few things with her. Among these items was the music for her favorite piece, a Sarabande from Bach's English Suites.

Theresienstadt is about 40 miles north of Prague. For most Jews, this concentration camp is only a transit point. Soon they are transferred to other camps. Most transports go to Auschwitz. Auschwitz! The biggest death camp of the Nazis. Zuzana finds it difficult to sleep in the camp. She plays Bach pieces in her head, which is helpful in the murderous surroundings.

Zuzana's father died in Theresienstadt. Soon after his death, on a cold 1943 December day, Zuzana and her mother are transported to Auschwitz. She is not allowed to take her beloved music with her. In a hurry, she copies the music in tiny writing on a small piece of paper and hides it in a pocket.

In Auschwitz, Zuzana is pushed out of the railroad car and has to climb, together with other girls, on a truck. Her mother is separated - tears, despair. She looks for the small piece of paper. She finds it, but a gust of wind sends it flying away. But Zuzana's mother catches it, runs to the truck and gives it to her daughter. A few of the girls reach out for the mother and pull her on the truck, and mother and daughter are reunited. Ever since, the small piece by Bach has a special sound for Zuzana Ruzickova.

Destruction, Murder, Beatings, Fear, Exhaustion, Hunger: that is Auschwitz. Typhoid is rampant. Smoke from the crematorium hangs in the air. The prisoners know that the Nazis will kill them.

Miraculously Zuzana and her mother survive. The Germans need workers to repair bomb damage to military installations. 1000 men and 1000 women, Zuzana and her mother, are removed from the concentration camp. They are sent to Hamburg.

For 12 hours a day, they have to dig trenches to repair subterranean fuel lines. They have to remove broken walls and rocks, all in a freezing cold. Zuzana's hands become raw, definite traces can be seen to this day. The daily rations consist of one cup of ersatz coffee and half a pound of bread. "The hunger was so bad that the whole body was in pain," she recalls. "I feared I would go mad."

Towards the end of the war, Zuzana and her mother were transported to the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. They expected to die. There was a break-out of the bubonic plague, the air was heavy with the smell of decaying bodies.

Then, what no prisoner dared hope -- suddenly liberators arrived, British troops. Mother and daughter were quarantined for 3 months, only then could they go home to Pilsen. After three and a half years of fear, terror and pain.

Zuzana, by now 18 years old, weighs only 60 lbs. Can she play again, with her splayed hands? She practices for 12 hours a day, mostly in terrible pain. Two years later, Spring 1947, she plays Chopin's Valse Brillante at her graduation exercises.

The professors at the Prague Musikakademie are impressed by her playing. They accept Zuzana Ruzickova, although she does not meet the academic requirements. She graduates after four years as one of the three best. The Czech Philharmonic engages her for concerts.

During the last semester at the Academy she notices by chance an announcement on the bulletin board. A professor seeks students interested in the harpsichord. "I grasped the opportunity immediately and from the beginning was enthusiastic about this instrument. Just right for Bach's music. This way I returned to Bach, my favorite composer."

1951 is the year of her first harpsichord recital. Shortly after, she wins first prize at a competition and scholarship in Paris.

Then she met the Czech composer Viktor Kalabis. "First I fell in love with his music, then the man," Zuzana Ruzickova relates with a smile.

This is also the time of the awful show trial of the Jewish politician, Rudolf Slansky. Zuzana warned Viktor Kalabis of the risk now to marry a Jewess. It was too dangerous and would hurt his career, but Viktor was firm -- they married. The result is a happy marriage.

Her career progressed upwards. Zuzana Ruzickova was one of the few artists who was allowed by the Communist regime to travel to foreign countries, but without her husband. But, as she says, "Only because the state needed hard currency." As a teacher she did not have much luck. The authorities tried to blackmail her: In order to obtain a position as professor, she had to join the Communist Party or take courses in Marxist-Leninist ideology. She refused, and finally she was allowed in 1984 to teach a few students. For over ten years she commuted between Prague and Bratislava as harpsichord teacher and she was permitted to conduct master classes in Zurich and Stuttgart.

During a visit to London in October 1989, she realizes again how oppressive the atmosphere in Czechoslovakia really is: After a class at King's College the students ask her to join them in the cafeteria. There, professors and students sit together, talking and laughing. Zuzana thinks of her students in Prague, who have to make do with bad instruments and shabby practice rooms. She wonders: when will they be able to live their lives unencumbered like these young Englishmen? When will they be able to speak freely? Zuzana Ruzickova cannot foresee that her country will be returned to democracy four weeks later in a bloodless revolution.

Since these historic days in November 1989 Zuzana Ruzickova has witnessed many changes in her country. "Today my students meet musicians from all over the world. They can study in Paris, London or Salzburg." For her, many things have changed as well. She is Professor at the Musikakademie in Prague. President Vaclav Havel signed her letter of appointment personally. "My life's dream is now reality."

As we talk, students enter and take their seats. About a dozen listen each week with great intensity to her lecture on Bach's Well-Tempered Klavier.

Their famous teacher also gives her time for charity concerts. She has performed dozens, without fees. She wants her country to improve. She has also raised money to finance a memorial plaque for Freddy Hirsch. Hirsch, a German Jew, was in Theresienstadt at the same time as Zuzana and was instrumental in improving conditions for the children in the camp. "Without Freddy, many of us would not be alive today," she says.

In the meantime, Zuzana Ruzickova has received many awards and honors. She is particularly proud of this one: She is the first foreigner to be elected to the Directorate of the New Bach Society in Leipzig. Johann Sebastian Bach has accompanied her entire life.

The artist looks out of dormer windows of her Prague apartment. "I must be thankful," she says, "particularly that I am blessed with such a love for music. It gives me new strength each day."