

Oskar Nedbal and Vienna

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The composer, viola player, member of *The Czech Quartet*, and conductor Oskar Nedbal (1874 – 1930) spent the most successful part of his artistic career during the years 1906 – 1919 in Vienna as the director of the famous *Tonkünstlerorchester* and as an author of ballets and operettas, of which especially *Polská krev*¹⁾ has achieved worldwide acclaim.



Oskar Nedbal

Oskar's childhood and youth

Oskar Nedbal was born on March 26, 1874 in the South Bohemian town of Tábor, into a music-loving environment of a family of Dr. Karel Nedbal, a local lawyer. Karel Nedbal stood at the foundation of *Philharmonic Society*, an amateur orchestra which has existed in Tábor without any interruption since 1877 to this day (at present it continues under the name of *Chamber Orchestra Bolech*).

The young Oskar Nedbal performed many times with this orchestra in his native town as a student and also later already as a well known artist. Among Karel Nedbal's friends, there were outstanding artists of the day – for example the dramatist and poet Jaroslav Kvapil (the librettist of Dvořák's opera *Rusalka*) and Antonín Dvořák himself.

Oskar's first music teacher was the Tábor choirmaster František Enderle. In 1885 the young musician entered the Prague conservatory. There he studied the violin and viola in the class of the director Antonín Bennewitz, and composition under Antonín Dvořák. His best friend was his classmate – violinist Josef Suk (1874 – 1935). Already in the autumn of 1891 a student quartet, formed in the class of the violoncello pedagogue Hanuš Wihan, began to perform in public. The members were: Karel Hoffmann – 1. violin, Josef Suk – 2. violin, Oskar Nedbal – viola, and Otto Berger – violoncello. This ensemble soon gained fame and continued to exist until the 1930's under the name of *The Czech Quartet*. (After the untimely death of O. Berger, professor Wihan himself took up the cello position).

Along with the quartet's concert tours throughout all of Europe, Nedbal was also developing his ambitions as a conductor and composer. Already in 1896, he conducted for the first time the *Czech Philharmonic*. In the 1890's, his first serious compositions saw the light of the day, mainly in the chamber vein (especially for the violin, cello, and piano).



The Czech Quartet

In the summer of 1898, Oskar married Josefina Setunská (daughter of a Tábor hotel owner). In the same year, his Quartet colleagues also got married. Josef Suk married Dvořák's daughter – the soprano Otylia, and Karel Hoffmann married Marie Mokrý. Oskar Nedbal was achieving his first big successes during this time, as well as enjoying a happy family life. This came to a sudden end in January 1903 with a tragic event – the young Josefina Nedbalová died. Their little son Oskárek was not yet two years old.

Oskar Nedbal, overcome with grief, recovered after some time thanks to his tireless work, and found consolation and a new romance, the wife of his colleague, the first violinist of *The Czech Quartet* - Karel Hoffmann. The socially untenable situation led to the two lovers leaving Bohemia in March of 1906. After a stay in Egypt and other Near East countries, they settled in Vienna in the autumn. In this city, Nedbal produced in the following 13 years the best his multifaceted talent offered.

The Vienna Period

I. Oskar Nedbal - Conductor

Oskar Nedbal was not unknown in Vienna. The public remembered him from his concerts with *The Czech Quartet*, and also as the author of the successful ballet *Pohádka o Honzovi*²⁾ which was premiered in April 1903 by the ensemble of the Court Opera at the Théâtre Paré under Gustav Mahler on the occasion of the visit by Georg, the King of Sachsen. Nedbal himself conducted this ballet already in the same year. The critics did not spare on superlatives.

From the beginning of his stay in Vienna, Oskar was striving to establish a new orchestra, even though Vienna already had for a long time its established orchestras: *The Court Opera Orchestra* under Mahler's direction played as the *Philharmonic*, the outstanding conductor Ferdinand Löwe was leading the symphony orchestra of the *Wiener Konzertverein*. Despite this, Nedbal was successful in the founding of the *Viennese Music Artists Orchestra (Wiener Tonkünstlerorchester)*, thanks to his many influential cultural contacts and the help of the Austrian Music Union.

On October 10, 1907, at a ceremony in the great hall of the musical society the *Musikverein*, Nedbal was officially named the chief conductor. In the following years, he fully stood his ground in the face of competition of well-known conductors like G. Mahler, F. Löwe, Hans Richter, and Felix Weingartner, and soon was counted among the top internationally recognized conductors. His triumphs were built not only on his quality as an interpreter, but also on an interesting dramaturgy. While the *Vienna Philharmonics* were focused mainly on oratoria, Löwe's orchestra on time-proven, more or less traditional repertoire, Nedbal chosen path of preference was music newly or recently composed. In Vienna and on European tours, he was systematically propagating the music of Czech authors: Smetana, Dvořák, and his contemporaries Josef Bohuslav Foerster (lived in Vienna in 1903 – 1918), Josef Suk, Vítězslav Novák (1870 - 1949), Otakar Ostrčil (1879 – 1935), and others. Among other contemporaries other than Czech, Nedbal was focusing on the works of Gustav Mahler (complete symphonies), Richard Strauss (symphonies and symphonic poems), and also Edgar Elgar, Mieczysław Karłowicz, Karol Szymanowski, Sergei Rachmaninov, Anton Rubinstein, Igor Stravinsky and many others, including his Viennese colleagues Felix Weingartner and Johann Strauss III (1866 – 1939).

The following quotation from the article *O. Nedbal in Vienna*, by Ludmila Vrkočová, testifies to Nedbal's hectic, work-laden, but happy life: *Since he knew how difficult it was to provide for material security of the orchestra, he made great effort to engage in a lot of activities with the orchestra. He started a cycle of Thursday subscription concerts, beside these, on every Sunday and Wednesday he organized in the Volksgarten and the Sophiensaal popular concerts at reduced admission fees. Sunday mornings he conducted symphonic matinees at the Theater an der Wien and concerts in workers' housings, where workers and students paid minimal admission. Every Sunday evening, he conducted concerts at the Freie Volksbühne, in the summer months he performed with the orchestra in the spa towns of Baden-Baden and Bad Ischl. In this way, the orchestra was able to earn sufficient income, and Nedbal was becoming to be known through his hard work as one of the best European conductors. Such was his reputation. And that was not enough for him, as he wanted to involve himself as a theatre conductor. He accepted an offer from the director of the Volksoper for the position of a conductor, and started with this new activity on October 4, 1908 with Wagner's 'The Flying Dutchman'. The success was such that the audience demanded the repetition of the overture, something which had never happened in the Volksoper before. (...) On top of that, he was holding a number of honorary functions. For example, he was a member of the directorate of the Vienna New Conservatory, founded in 1909. The many reforms and new pedagogical processes which were introduced at this institution were also Nedbal's own contributions. These reforms were intended to lead to a so-called 'education in style'. Subjects, such as the history of music and the art of harmony, were put on the same level with the core courses. Students themselves had the opportunity to teach in a practice school. All tests were public and took place under the motto of 'music education, not technical drill'. Although Nedbal was contributing with his ideas and recommendations, he personally did not want to teach. He did not accept an offer to teach conducting, nor to teach the viola. However, other Czechs were teaching there – Josef Bohuslav Foerster, František Ondříček, Arnošt Grünfeld and later also Otakar Ševčík. (Available on: www.oskarnedbal.cz)*

Besides touring with the Tonkünstlerorchester around Europe, Nedbal was acting as a guest conductor with many other European symphonic and theatre orchestras. He was collaborating with excellent soloists of his time. Of the Czech ones, we can name the singers Emmy Destinn, Karel Burian, Leo Slezák, and violinists František Ondříček, Jan Kubelík and Otakar Ševčík. Among other artists, there were the Russian singer Feodor Chaliapin, the Belgian violinist Eugène Ysaye, and Spanish cellist Pablo Casals. (The last one always insisted to play the Dvořák's cello concerto in b-minor only under Nedbal).



The Author Ludmila Peřinová in the Oskar Nedbal Hall

Oskar Nedbal was one of the most popular conductors in Vienna. *World renowned artists had a huge trust in him, his name was a guarantee of a high attendance at all concerts in which he was engaged. He was popular with the Viennese public and the members of his orchestra liked him too. He represented Viennese music abroad, and as a composer of operettas, he contributed to the continuing high standard of this stage form, and so he helped to save operetta from its decline. It is fair to state that he dedicated his most productive years to this city, and by being active in Vienna, he became a world artist. Despite this, he had to leave Vienna. And at home, they were either not able or willing to appreciate him.* (Vrkočová, L.: available on www.oskarnedbal.cz)

II. Oskar Nedbal – the composer of Polenblut

Nedbal's first ballet *Pohádka o Honzovi* (composed in 1902) to a libretto by F. K. Hejda had its premiere in Vienna in 1903, well before Nedbal moved to the city on the Danube. This success made it later easier for Nedbal to join the top Viennese artistic community. It is certain that under the influence of the operetta form, which was still popular in Vienna, he moved to composing operetta, besides still composing ballets.



The young Oskar Nedbal. www.antonin-dvorak.cz

The first one, *Cudná Barbora* ³⁾ (libretto by R. Bernauer and L. Jacobsen) was first premiered in Prague at the *Theatre Na Vinohradech* (1910), and soon was accepted by the *Vienna Raimund Theater* (1911). Oskar Nedbal as a composer was noticed with interest by musical specialists immediately upon his arrival to Vienna. As soon as he arrived, he was visited by a well-known librettist (...) Leo Stein who asked Nedbal if he would be interested in composing an operetta. And right away, he started talking about the publishing of his future work by the publisher Herzmansky. A contract was concluded, but there was no libretto, which Stein in the end never delivered. And so, to keep the terms of the contract, other Viennese librettists had to help. This is how the operetta *Cudná Barbora* was born. Nedbal composed the work during his holidays in Bohemia at a chateau at the *Hodnov Estate near Zruč*, and entrusted its premiere to the *Theatre Na Vinohradech*. He had signed the contract with the *Vienna Karltheater*, and in fact had composed the operetta for them, but since this theatre was daily presenting with great success *Lehár's Ziguenerliebe* and *Leo Fall's Puppenmädel*, Nedbal allowed the enterprising director Štech to talk him into leaving the premiere to the *Vinohrady Theatre*. Following Nedbal's reputation as a composer of serious music, *Cudná Barbora* came as a shock. The Prague premiere was visited by some 30 theatre directors, journalists, and publishers, and caused a great excitement. They could not believe that Nedbal had really written an eccentric operetta. But they did come to accept it. (Vrkočová, L.: available on www.oskarnedbal.cz)

Soon after there followed perhaps the greatest success of Nedbal's life, the premiere of his second operetta *Polenblut* written to a German text by the established Viennese librettist Leo Stein (the author of librettos to several famous operettas – for example *Die lustige Witwe* by Franz Lehár and *Die Csárdásprinzessin* by Emerich Kálmán) on the motives of Pushkin's short story *The Young Miss Peasant*. ⁴⁾ On October 25, 1913 under the composer's direction, the operetta *Polenblut* was presented to the public at the *Vienna Karltheater*. All the newspapers without exception wrote about the operetta only in superlatives. One daily – *Fremdenblatt* – even compared the work to the premiere of Puccini's *The Girl From the Golden West*, which took place at the *Court Opera* the day before the premiere of *Polenblut*. The comparison was unanimously in favour of *Polenblut*. The paper was also comparing the two authors present at their events – while Puccini supposedly maintained a gloomy and stern expressions, Nedbal was in excellent mood and during the actors' jokes on the stage, was putting a handkerchief in his mouth to overcome laughter so that he could concentrate on conducting. After several hundreds of repeats at the *Karltheater*, *Polenblut* was performed in front of constantly sold out audiences in the *Volksoper* and after that it was seen with great success perhaps on all European stages. Critics in Prague did not like the fact that Nedbal was in this way representing Viennese operetta, a genre with its own established characteristics. But that is how it was. With *Polenblut*, Nedbal joined the Viennese operetta's representatives like *Johann Strauss*, *Franz von Suppé*, *Carl Millöcker* and *Richard Heuberger*.“ (Vrkočová, L.: available on www.oskarnedbal.cz)

This stage work, to this day the most played and artistically the most valuable of Nedbal's works, has been endowed with critics' superlatives from its very beginning. *Reichspost*, a contemporary newspaper, published shortly after the Vienna premiere: *Finally an operetta not only with a dramatic, but also an ethical story*. The magazine *Die Zeit* noticed: *In every bar we feel the hand of a refined, highly cultured musician*. Even the *Czech Workers' Papers* published in Vienna, which were usually rejecting the operetta Muse, wrote: *This is Nedbal's attempt to imbue the devalued operetta genre with a new artistic significance. A whole string of numbers are painted with real poetry and feeling, which does not just stay on the surface and does not sink into sentimentality, while other parts carry the unmistakable mark of Nedbal's native land. It is after many years the first operetta which we do not discourage from visiting*. (Peřinová, L.: *The Life and Work of O. Nedbal, The Way to Immortality*. Available on: www.oskarnedbal.cz)

Nedbal, encouraged by the success of *Polenblut*, immediately started to compose another operetta. *Vinobraní* ⁵⁾ (libretto: L. Stein and J. Wilhelm) was played for the first time on February 11, 1916 at the *Theater an der Wien*. The premiere was highly successful, but despite it the operetta did not achieve as high an acclaim as the previous work, and to this day it trails *Polenblut* closely behind. Nevertheless, already at the premiere, the public liked especially the waltz *Má krásná vílo kouzelná* ⁶⁾

The following operettas, however, did not reach the level of *Polenblut* nor of *Vinobraní*. *Krásná Saskia* ⁷⁾ (libretto A. M. Weillner and H. Reichert) saw the light of the day at the *Karltheater* in 1917, *Erivan* (libretto F. Dörmann)

at the *Wiener Komödienhaus* in 1918, and in the same year, *Mamzel Napoleon* (libretto E. and A. Golze) was played on the stage of the cabaret *Die Hölle*.



Oskar Nedbal with the performers of the premiere of *Vinobrani* at the Prague Theatre Na Vinohradech in 1916. Source: *Wikipedia*.

In parallel with his operettas, Nedbal also dedicated himself to the in Vienna popular ballet. The ballet *Z pohádky do pohádky*⁸⁾ had its premiere in 1908 at the *National Theater* in Prague, and *Princess Hyacinta* at the same venue in 1911 (both to the libretto of Nedbal's friend Ladislav Novák); the Viennese premieres of following works were also mostly successful: *Čertova babička*⁹⁾ was warmly accepted (the libretto by the duo K. Zesky – G. Stöhr was offered to Nedbal by Mahler) in 1912 at the *Court Opera*. *Nedbal included in the ballet a popular Viennese drinking couplet, composed years before by an inn-keeper on the Prater. As an accompaniment, Nedbal prescribed a heckelphone, which imitated the sound of a bassoon and earned a great approval by the audience.* (Vrkočová, L.: O. Nedbal in Vienna. Available on: www.oskarnedbal.cz). The ballet *Andersen* (libreto L. Novák and J. Kvapil) caught less attention when it was introduced in 1914 at the *Ronacher Theater*.

Alternating greater and lesser successes of his own stage works and a widely developed career as a conductor filled the period connected with the imperial capital on the Danube. Even under the difficult conditions of the First World War, Nedbal was trying to work with maximum effort. The joy at the end of the war, however, did not correspond to his next period of life. After the dissolution of the monarchy, Oskar Nedbal moved in 1919 to the newly established Czechoslovakia. But his old country did not accept this artist of European fame.

O. Nedbal's Fate in Czechoslovakia

I feel like Mahler once felt. Not too long ago, I was marked as panslavist, for Vienna I am Czech, and in my homeland a stranger. This quote is ascribed to the artist by the author Miroslav Šulc in his biographical novel *O. Nedbal's Road to Immortality* (Prague 2007). Prague did not accept Nedbal's personality in those revolutionary times. With his professional credentials Nedbal was too much of a threat in the relatively small city where a number of lesser competitors were protecting their positions. Since the composer had not involved himself in national matters and had behind him 13 happy years in the 'alien' Vienna, he needed to be removed from Prague before he would be able to settle there.

After a series of unsuccessful attempts, Nedbal finally ended up at the end of 1923 in Bratislava at the recently established *Slovak National Theatre*. As the director of the opera, he was able to raise the theatre to a European level. However, he was unable to resolve the difficult financial situation which had plagued the theatre from the beginning.

His gradual retreat from fame was preceded by a tragic event in 1918, when Nedbal's only son Oskar shot himself. In the 1920's, the composers creative activity declined. As a conductor, though, Nedbal still set out on many tours, either with international orchestras or with the opera ensemble of the *Slovak National Theatre*.

In December 1930 Nedbal left for Zagreb in Croatia and just before Christmas he conducted the Zagreb Philharmonic and at the local *National Theatre* he presented his ballet *Pohádka o Honzovi* – the work which was perhaps the dearest to him and from which the famous *Valse triste* travelled around the whole world.

Under the stress of financial problems of the *Slovak National Theatre* and due to his worsening health and long term psychological problems, Oskar Nedbal voluntarily ended his life on Christmas Eve by jumping from the window of the Zagreb opera.

Until recently, he was buried at the local Mirogoj cemetery. In 2006 he was moved (thanks to the violinist Josef Suk – the grandson of Nedbal's colleague from *The Czech Quartet*) to the Prague Slavín cemetery. Oskar's wish to be put to his final rest *at the quiet slopes of Tábor near the River Lužnice* has not been fulfilled.

Notes:

- ¹⁾ Polká krev, Polish Blood (English), Polenblut (German)
- ²⁾ Pohádka o Honzovi, The Tale of Honza (English), Der faule Hans (German)
- ³⁾ Cudná Barbora, Chaste Barbara (English), Die keusche Barbara (German)
- ⁴⁾ The Young Miss Peasant (English), Das Fräulein als Bäuerin (German)
- ⁵⁾ Vinobraní, The Vineyard Bride (English), Die Winzerbraut (German)
- ⁶⁾ Má krásná vílo kouzelná, My Little Nymph from the Danube Strand (English), Du kleine Fee vom Donaustrand (German)
- ⁷⁾ Krásná Saskia, Beautiful Saskia (English), Die schöne Saskia (German)
- ⁸⁾ Z pohádky do pohádky, From Fairy Tale to Fairy Tale (English), Grossmütterchens Märchenschätze (German)
- ⁹⁾ Čertova babička, The Devil's Grandmother (English), Des Teufels Grossmutter (German)

