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VLADIMÍR HELFERT AS A CRITIC OF MUSIC

(Concerning the fight for a conception of modern Czech music)

Vladimír Helfert (1886–1945), the founder of musicology in Moravia and its first Professor at the University of Brno, enriched Czech musicology with his pioneer monographs on the music of the baroque era (*Barok na českých zámcích – Baroque in the Czech Manor Houses – 1916* and *Hudba na jaroměřickém zámku – Music at the Mansion of Jaroměřice – 1925*), on the Czech musical emigration of the 18th century (especially Jiří Benda 1929, 1934), and on new Czech music (*Tvůrčí rozvoj Bedřicha Smetany – The Creative Development of Bedřich Smetana – 1924*, Leoš Janáček I, 1939, and others). In these works of his Helfert laid the scientific foundations of Czech musical historiography. Perfectly prepared for his scientific career in the school of the Czech historian J. Goll and the Czech aesthetician O. Hostinský, he also made use of the ideas of G. Adler in his extensive musical-historical work, and made an organic union of the requirements of research on musical style with those of research into the national, social and cultural-historical conditioning of musical composition. In Czech musical historiography he thus created a methodology which aimed at a complex understanding of music as a spiritual and artistic expression of a historically determined national individuality.

This approach of Helfert's to the history of music grew out of the idea of revived Czech national feeling, which again was the product of long-standing anti-Hapsburg struggle of the Czech nation in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. At the moment of Helfert's entrance into scientific life the social and national struggle of the Czechs was again growing stronger. Here we can also find the explanation for that national renaissance pathos of Helfert's early works, in which the voice of the stormy pre-revolutionary time is mirrored together with the scientific view of the author. The ideology of the awakened nation, the ideas of the revivalist function of music, were in these works sometimes accented in a way that did not always correspond to the investigated musical-historical matter.¹

¹ In his later monographs Helfert revised this conception. It was above all music that became the main goal of his research into musical history, and musically analytic and comparative methods became his main methods. He made use here of the

In a two-volume musical-historical monograph on baroque and music in the Czech manor houses this conception of music of Helfert's was balanced by a careful musically analytic and comparative interpretation of the compositions of the Moravian country-seat maestro F. V. Míča. In the extensive musically critical work, however, from which Helfert's conception of modern Czech music was developing, this accentuation of the national-renaissance mission of music created criteria of evaluation which led to the weakening of criticism in appreciating the music itself. The idea of the homeland and the glory of the Czech nation, as it was set to music by the founder of Czech modern music B. Smetana in his programmatic compositions and operas, became the norm for appreciating artistic progressiveness and all that was in some way beyond this norm in Czech music was to be rejected *a priori*. Helfert's whole critical activity in Prague musical and cultural magazines (1907–1918) was tributary to this romantic conception of music, the genesis of which can be traced since the first struggles for Smetana's work in the second half of the 19th century.

At that time the adherents of extreme formalism (in fact the disciples of the Czech Herbartian, the aesthetician J. Durdík, whose height of thought and conception, however, they never attained) and of neo-romanticism (O. Hostinský),² clashed in a controversy about the new Czech music.

For the time being only Smetana was the centre of the controversy and not modern Czech music as a whole, which was so far only preparing for its real upsurge. After Smetana's death and especially on the threshold of our century, however, that is to say, at the time of the impressive artistic début of A. Dvořák and his school (Novák, Suk), when beside Z. Fibich and his continuators (O. Ostrčil), even Janáček began to claim his place in modern Czech music, a new measuring of standpoints in opinion took place, which already concerned modern Czech music as a whole. At that time the celebrated "struggles for Dvořák and Smetana" culminated in Czech musical criticism and musicology, during which Czech musical journalism separated into two camps antagonistic in opinion:

The camp defending Dvořák and his school and following with understanding, too, the first serious artistic experiments of Janáček (with its critical tribune in the magazine *Hudební revue* [Musical Review]) was perhaps to blame for the schism only so far as it did not manage to defend its relatively objective view of modern Czech music by convincing aesthetic-critical arguments³ and that it based its critical judgments for the most part upon a rigorous analysis of the musical form (or its elements).⁴

knowledge and methods of historical science, aesthetics and sociology as partial subordinate components of musical historical investigation proper. In the pioneer study *Periodisace dějin hudby* (The Periodization of the History of Music, 1938) this new conception and method of Helfert's is elaborated with a definitiveness we do not find in any musical historical work of his.

² In many ways these struggles of Czech musical criticism remind us of the controversies of opinion between the adherents of Wagner and Hanslick (Brahms).

³ On the contrary where the spokesmen of this camp touched aesthetic questions, they usually brought confusion into them by repeating the arguments of the extreme formalistic aesthetics of the 19th century. This concerns for example the extensive

The second camp, which had its critical tribune in the magazine *Smetana*, presented a conception of the development of modern Czech music which, owing to its justifiable critical zeal for Smetana (and for Fibich), rejected practically everything in both Czech and foreign music which fell short of its ideas of modern music as a stylistically hypertrophied and homogeneous current. According to this conception Dvořák and his school represented mere "musician types", which was to be something inferior, reactionary, narrow-minded in itself, since mere musicianship (absolute music) never guaranteed sufficient artistic reflection, weightiness of thought and self-criticism.⁵ On the other hand Smetana and Fibich (the latter above all, according to Nejedlý) conceived musical art in a far more cultural and

study of one of the editors of the *Musical Review*, K. Stecker, *Otakar Hostinský a jeho význam ve tvorbě Bedřicha Smetany* (O. Hostinský and His Importance in the Creative Work of Bedřich Smetana, 1910), to which later on, on the pages of the *Musical Review* and *Smetana*, one of the greatest musically critical controversies of its time was developed. Helfert reacted to Stecker's deductions with his study *Smetanianismus a Wagnerianismus* (Smetanianism and Wagnerianism, *Smetana I-1910*, pp. 167-173, 188-197) and by further polemic articles (*ibid.* pp. 253-255, 305), in which he rehabilitated Smetanianism as an individual and Czech counterpart of Wagnerianism and thus defended the positive role of Hostinský in Czech musical criticism of the 19th century, on which Stecker threw doubt.

⁴ In this struggle for the method of Czech musical criticism Helfert acquitted himself as a keen and informed polemist. He analysed the weak points of the descriptive method of the critics of the *Musical Review* in his study *Hudební věda a naše hudební poměry* (Musicology and Our Musical Situation, *Smetana I*, pp. 4-5), in which he showed that genuine, i. e. creative criticism must no doubt count upon objective analysis, but in its final aim it rather aims at the knowledge of higher artistic laws. The limit of the critical discernment of the critics of the *Musical Review* showed itself perhaps most conspicuously in the newspaper campaign which culminated in the "protest" of thirty Czech musicians against the critical reflections of V. Helfert and J. Bartoš upon the significance and work of Dvořák. This scandalous incrimination, touching even the honour of Helfert and Bartoš, went so far on the pages of *Národní listy* (National Letters) that even the Czech literary critic F. X. Šalda reacted upon it by his study *Affaira Dvořákovská* (The Dvorakian Affair, *Česká kultura - Czech Culture I-1912*, pp. 191-192), in which he stood up for both the young musical critics morally and factually.

⁵ See for instance Helfert in his paper *Více Dvořáka* (More of Dvořák, *Czech Culture I-1912-3*). The "anti-Dvorakian struggle" was of course practically initiated by Z. Nejedlý in his *Katechismus dějin české hudby* (Catechism of the History of Czech Music, 1902) and was continued by him in numerous papers and studies (mostly in the 3rd annual volume of the magazine *Smetana* and in *Czech Culture III-1923*). Beside Helfert also J. Bartoš (his study *Dvořáková tvorba komorní - Dvořák's Chamber Formation*, *Smetana*, vol. II. and his book *Antonín Dvořák*, 1913) and O. Zich (his aesthetic paper *Dvořákův význam umělecký - Dvořák's Artistic Significance*, *Hudební sborník - The Musical Miscellany I-1913*) followed Nejedlý's suit. Nejedlý, Bartoš, Zich and Helfert investigated various aspects of Dvořák's works by various methods, but the tenor of their final judgment of evaluation always was in Dvořák's disfavour. Even in the evaluation of the role of Dvořák in the development of modern Czech music the body of Hostinský's disciples started from the thoughts of their teacher. Hostinský, however, judged the weak points of Dvořák's opera formation in a much more tactful and sensitive way (*Antonín Dvořák ve vývoji naší dramatické hudby - Antonín Dvořák in the Development of Our Dramatic Music*, 1901, in book form 1908) and unconditionally appreciated his contribution as one of the founders of Czech concert music and composition (*O nynějším stavu a směru české hudby - On the Present State and Tendency of Czech Music*, *Květy - Flowers*, 1880).

many-sided manner as a synthesis of music and of the extra-musical, personal or supra-personal poetical idea, the presence of which in a musical work was at the same time the guarantee of stylistic and artistic unity and entirety (in opera, in the spirit of the Wagnerian musical-dramatic principles). That was the genuine modern and "progressive current" of Czech music, which the work of J. B. Foerster and O. Ostrčil, both fundamental figures of the Czech music of the 20th century, also imbibed.⁶

The first and main, as well as the most zealous and temperamental advocate of this extreme and sharply defined conception of modern Czech music was Zdeněk Nejedlý,⁷ but *mutatis mutandis* even the other critics from the body of Hostinský's disciples, O. Zich, J. Bartoš and V. Helfert, were identifying themselves with it as well. All without exception accepted and defended the neo-romantic artistic and aesthetic ideas (referring to the work of Hostinský and Fibich — even the latter counted with them as a "musical scientist"⁸ thanks to his knowledge of music) which they regarded as a guarantee of the "progressiveness" of future music as well. According to the critics of the magazine *Smetana* it was not only Dvořák who was conservative, but his prominent disciples as well, especially J. Suk and along with him, too, Dvořák's adherent from Moravia, Janáček. In international music the Italian, French and Russian composers were denoted as conservatives, not excepting Verdi, Debussy and Mussorgsky. The roots and causes of the artistic conservatism of these masters were identical: their music was allegedly hampered by the want of poetical reflection, excessive technicism, the want of poetical content, or even the existence of a poetical content which did not correspond to the Smetanian conception of the idea of native country and nation; from the musically dramatic

⁶ We have already suggested that Hostinský should be regarded as the spiritual father of this conception of the development of modern Czech music. Hostinský saw in Fibich the only consistent romanticist in Czech music and thus, too, stylistically the "most progressive" Czech musical master, who in his scenic melodramatic tetralogy *Hippodamia* even reached "beyond the goal which Richard Wagner set for himself" (*Slovo o významu Mistra Zdeňka Fibicha* — A Word on the Significance of the Master Zdeněk Fibich, 1901) and who, as a dramatist, anticipated his time by full twenty years (*Česká hudba 1864—1904*, Czech Music 1864—1904). This erroneous thesis of Hostinský on the artistic progressiveness of Fibich and on neo-romanticism as the programmatic movement of the whole modern Czech music was exaggerated to the utmost by Nejedlý, first in his *Catechism of the History of Czech Music* (1902) and hence, too, in his whole critical work.

⁷ In contradistinction to Helfert, however, Nejedlý practically never extricated himself from these views, on the contrary he contributed by his influence as teacher to their acceptance and further dissemination even by younger critical generations. In the thirties, for instance, they were savagely defended by Bedřich Bělohlávek, the critic of *Rudé právo* (Red Right), *Právo lidu* (The Right of the People) and of *Sobota* (Saturday), and Nejedlý's disciple. Nejedlý's critical work became the idol, too, of a section of Czech musical criticism as late as the fifties. In the periodical of the Union of Czechoslovak Composers, *Hudební rozhledy* (Musical Views), even a column "Teachings from the Work of Zdeněk Nejedlý" was introduced, in which various critical studies of Nejedlý were reprinted. They were to serve to the youngest Czech critical generation as models, regardless of the disparateness of the time and of the goals of its art.

⁸ V. Helfert, *Z Fibichovy knihovny* (From Fibich's Library), Dalibor XXXII-1910, p. 331.

point of view these composers were rebuked for not having cared about dramatic truthfulness, which Hostinský's school, however, unconditionally identified with the principles of musical drama (Wagnerianism and its Czech analogy Smetanianism).

For this reason, too, the critics of the magazine *Smetana* did not accept Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* on the occasion of its Prague first night (1910),⁹ for this reason they rejected Janáček's opera *Jenůfa* even on the occasion of its memorable and brilliantly successful Prague première (1910)¹⁰ and for this reason they minimized the work of Suk in every possible way.¹¹

Rather than the empirism and formalism of the critics of the *Musical Review* it was then the aesthetic-critical conceptions of the body of Hostinský's disciples that introduced a sharply one-sided opinion into Czech musical criticism and historiography. In fact this opinion signified the preference and petrification of one stylistic range and current, and that even at the time of great stylistic and evolutionary changes in both European and Czech modern music. And it signified, too, a certain reversal in the aesthetic evaluation of music, which may have intended to open the way to the understanding of the inner world of art, of its laws and regulations, but unfortunately at the very cost of forsaking the rational core of formal aesthetics. In Bohemia, thanks to Hostinský (in his studies *O hudbě „programní“* – On the “Programmatic” Music – 1873 and *Das Musikalisch-Schöne und das Gesamtkunstwerk vom Standpunkte der formalen Aesthetik* – 1877) aesthetic theory had already once rejected the attempts at hermeneutic interpretation of music, and along with them the unreal classification and evaluation of music into music with “poetical content”

⁹ The insertion of this work into the repertory of the opera of the National Theatre instigated the critics of the magazine *Smetana* to an entire campaign. It was Nejedlý whose word was of greatest weight in it and who, under the influence of the former rejection of *Boris Godunov* by the dramaturgist of the National Theatre, Z. Fibich, to whom he also appealed in his criticism, remarked that Mussorgsky's opera was a “dead work”, as it did not achieve the modern progressive principles of *Smetana* and his continuators (*Smetana* I, pp. 46, 52). Even Zich followed Nejedlý's suit in his critical gloss *Pokračování v idylle* (The Idyll Continued, *ibid.*, p. 15). The editor of *Smetana*, A. Rektorys, published a notice before the Prague première of *Boris Godunov* (*Smetana* I, p. 15), in which he confronted the negative attitude of Fibich with the programmatic declaration of the principal of the opera of the National Theatre, A. Kovařovic, who backed Mussorgsky's work unconditionally, as he saw in it a first-rate artistic piece of work and a presage of new music.

¹⁰ Nejedlý judged this work negatively as early as in his book *Česká moderní zpěvohra po Smetanovi* (Modern Czech Opera after *Smetana*, 1911), but he did not write his notorious and scandalous report until 1916 (*Smetana* VI-1916, also as an offprint). Zich wrote a negative criticism of *Jenůfa* in *Osvěta* (Cultural Education, XLVI-1916). Helfert did not directly review the Prague première of *Jenůfa*. In his short critical gloss Jaroslav Jeremiáš, *Ad vocem Janáčkovu “Pastorkyňa” a Smetana* (Ad vocem Janáček's “*Jenůfa*” and *Smetana*, *Smetana* VII-1917, p. 47), however, he pronounced the opinion that in this work of Janáček “our art sank below the great and high goal marked out by *Smetana*”.

¹¹ Most of all, of course, again Nejedlý in the already mentioned *Catechism of the History of Czech Music*, and in the Prague periodicals *Osvěta* (Cultural Education), *Den* (Day), *Pražská lidová revue* (Prague Popular Review), *Smetana* etc.

("ideological") and music with merely musical content ("non-ideological"). Hostinský, thanks to his aesthetic system, his concrete formalism, did not classify and evaluate music in this way. In the studies quoted he clearly says that from the musical point of view the principles of Hanslick's formalism on the one hand and both Liszt's programmatic music and Wagner's musical drama (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) on the other hand do not contradict each other, as "the aesthetic validity of musical forms is in them entirely separate and independent of the aesthetic validity of other forms lying outside that province".

Some of Hostinský's disciples, above all Nejedlý and under his influence to some extent Helfert as well, abandoned the concrete formalism of their teacher, however, and replaced it by the aesthetic of content which was to serve them for substantiating their artificially created conception of the modern and conservative currents of Czech music, on the basis of the key "ideological" music and "non-ideological" music. With the lapse of time Helfert (in *Smetana a Dvořák — Smetana and Dvořák, Index VI — 1934*) still saw in this "contentual" interpretation of music a certain progress in comparison with the original "formalistic" standpoint of Hostinský, obviously mainly because it led to the knowledge of extra-aesthetic values and functions (i.e. of artistic ideas as programmatic tendencies and hence, too, of the musical work as a functioning cultural property of the nation). In the practice of musical criticism, however, even this new aesthetic starting point brought many problems and errors.

According to this new key of evaluation the music of Smetana, Fibich, Foerster, Ostrčil, Wagner (and also of Mahler and early A. Schönberg) was "ideological" music, but that of Dvořák was no longer so. Neither was Janáček an "ideological" composer, whose rhapsodically "scattered ideas with their directness and purely musical craftsman-like affectation" no doubt appealed to Helfert (*Smetana VII, p. 46*), but this, with Helfert's critical view at the time of Czech "musical craftsmanship" and of Janáček in general, did not yet signify anything (he did not regard the Czech "musical craftsmanship" as a naturally developed musical manifestation of the Czech national character, but as an unoriginal, primitive and naturalistic phenomenon, *Smetana III, 1913, p. 232*). Suk may have been an "ideological" composer, at least in some chamber and orchestra works, but the ideological character of his music was rather a proof of a limited "musically poetical creative imagination" (*V. Helfert, K tvorbě Sukově — On the Artistic Composition of J. Suk, Pražská lidová revue — Prague Popular Review, VI-1910, pp. 123-124*) or of his ideas having gone astray. Helfert denoted Suk's *Meditation on the Old-Czech choral St. Wenceslas*, this profoundly heart-felt chamber composition with its significant content,

¹² For instance in the penetrating aesthetically critical study *The Motif of Smetana's Vyšehrad*, *Smetana VII-1916-7*, and before that partly and very briefly in the paper *Souborné provedení Dvořákových symfonických básní* (The Collective Performance of Dvořák's Symphonic Poems, *Smetana V, 1914-5, pp. 80-81*). Here in Helfert's critical thinking the influence of Zich's aesthetics already announces itself, the aesthetics which assumed a decisive importance in his work beginning with the twenties.

as a passive composition, poor in ideas, as a mere play on individual themes, lacking deeper psychological content. That is why, according to Helfert, this composition — in comparison with Smetana's *My Country* and *Libuše* — produces "rather the impression of a certain monastic, desponding, pensive mood, devoid of even the slightest energy and self-confidence" (Smetana V, p. 8). Similar very free manipulations with fictitious "ideological" categories distorted the musically critical judgments of Nejedlý in particular, but we have intentionally shown that even Helfert did not resist them successfully, even though he managed, as early as in some of the aesthetic-critical studies of his Prague period, to support the ideological (contentual) interpretation of the musical work even by evident proofs on the basis of a method which built on the "criticism of musical expression" and on musically analytical proofs.¹² All the same, however, Helfert could make use of this method, and that only with certain reservations, solely in the critical investigation of the works of the explicitly neo-romantically inclined composers (it is symptomatic that it was not until later that Helfert duly appraised Smetana as a composer of the romantic and classical synthesis, which meant that he weighed Smetana's artistic qualities, too, from the purely musical point of view), whereas in the investigation of the other currents of Czech music this approach rather prevented the understanding of composers different in type and inspiration (Dvořák, Janáček, Suk and at that time, too, the whole of pre-Smetana music).¹³

In concluding the first part of our paper we may then say in general that Helfert entered into the subconsciousness of the Czech musical life of the pre-revolutionary time as a musical critic strongly prejudiced in favour of Smetana, which signified, under the conditions pertaining at that time in Bohemia, that he unconditionally accepted the conception of modern Czech music which derived its purport, substance and "progressive quality" from romantic ideas on art and according to them judged the character and significance of the other composers (in principle the decisive factor was here the relation of the composer to "ideological" content as a programmatic tendency and to severe dramatism in the sense of Wagnerianism or Smetanianism). We have shown that even in Helfert's critical practice it was this conception that prevented him from reaching an objective understanding of the development of modern Czech music as a whole. If Helfert as early as his cultural-political paper *Naše hudba a český stát* (*Our Music and the Czech State* — already published during World War I, on 24th February 1918!) wisely spoke out against the prevailing party-spirit in Czech musical criticism and against cultural centralism in general, then we cannot, even in his case, comprehend this inciting voice otherwise than as a conviction which he put into practice in the future, and that with all the material and moral consequences which ensued from this programme even for himself in person.

¹³ On the basis of the results of his two-volume monograph on the musical baroque (*Musical Baroque in the Czech Manor Houses* and *Music at the Mansion of Jaroměřice*) Helfert then rejected all our music of the time after the White Mountain as a manifestation of a primitive and "non-ideological musicianship", the modern branches of which were Dvořák (see the quoted study of Helfert "*More of Dvořák*"), Janáček, Suk and others.

We cannot disregard the fact that Helfert realized this programme of his in another cultural milieu and another artistic climate, in his new place of work, Brno, on which, in the quoted study *Our Music and the Czech State*, he had already set his hopes, believing that it would become a cultural and artistic pendant to Prague in the free Czechoslovak state. In 1918 Helfert may not yet have anticipated, however, that it would be a counterpart to Prague, different, specific and in its own way equivalent to Prague.¹⁴

Apart from certain different traditions of cultural development it was above all the current Brno musical life of the twenties that must have astounded Helfert, considering the views on modern Czech music which he held at that time: certain features of the musical avant-garde were here presented not only by the premières of the new works of Janáček, but also by the systematic performance of modern music, with Stravinsky, Schönberg, Berg, Bartók, Debussy, Honegger, Szymanovsky etc., sometimes even with the direct participation of these composers (thanks to Janáček Brno was then not merely a provincial reflection of international music festivals, one of which had just been held in 1924 in Prague).

Even after his arrival in Brno Helfert's first thoughts and actions were devoted to the genius of Smetana, whom he helped to discover for Brno and Moravia (including his enthusiastic propagating and conducting of *My Country* with the Brno Orchestral Association). From the year of the Smetana and Janáček anniversary (1924), however, we already have evidence that Helfert was reaching the level of and gradually being assimilated to the cultural and intellectual currents of his new place of work. In the periodical *Hudební rozhledy* (*Musical Views*), which he published along with his Brno collaborators and friends G. Černušák, V. Kaprál and L. Kundera, he devoted a whole double number to Janáček and wrote for it his first studies of this composer. In the same annual volume of *Musical Views* we can also read Helfert's critical glosses, in which he defended the cultural and artistic individuality of Moravia, "which organically and consistently grew out of the dissimilar character of the local population and of historical conditions" (*Moravská a pražská „svojskost“* — The "Individual Personality" of Moravia and Prague, *Musical Views* I-1924/25, p. 90). The personal and intellectual association which he at this time set up with the musical intellectual circles of Brno (all of which belonged to the Janáček school) was genuine and permanent.¹⁵ These ties with the Moravian cultural events were soon extended, too, by friendship and collaboration with his students (Vetterl, Racek, Štědroň, Z. Blažek) and with philosoph-

¹⁴ When after his lecture *O českém muzikantství* (*On Czech Musicianship*, Brno 28. 3. 1913) he met with the representatives of the then "Young Musical Moravia" (L. Kundera, J. Kunc, and others) he was willing to see nothing more than "Moravian cultural separatism" in the manifestations of the cultural and artistic individual character of Moravia, and in the music of the Moravian country seat maestro František Míča, which he then studied, only a manifestation of the primitive Czech "musicianship", as we have already shown.

¹⁵ That in the evaluation of the formation of the composers from Brno and Moravia this friendship sometimes paid its toll (for example in *Czech Modern Music*), we shall regard rather as a natural human weakness and not as a loss of critical objectivity.

ical and literary intellectuals of the Brno Left (in the periodicals *Index*, *Levá fronta* — *Left Front* etc.). Invaluable for the further development of Helfert's views is the fact that after coming to Brno he dissociated himself from the methods of Prague musical criticism, troubled as they were by party controversies, thus gaining the necessary distance from his own earlier work¹⁶ and at the same time a wider range for the revision and new formulation of his views. His friendship and collaboration with the aesthetician Otakar Zich, who in the first post-revolutionary years (1921—1924) came regularly to Brno to give his university lectures on psychology and aesthetics (Zich, too, was responsible for Helfert's acquiring the qualification of Docent at the Brno university and dedicated to him his work *Symfonické básně Smetanovy* — Smetana's *Symphonic Poems*), is of indisputable significance for Helfert's further aesthetic orientation and critical method. Helfert regarded the investigation and elaboration of this method as at least equally important¹⁷ with his own critical considerations of modern Czech music and its main representatives, to whom he devoted concentrated attention once again at the turn of the twenties and thirties.

An indisputable novelty in Helfert's critical method now was his attempt to set musical criticism on a firm gnoseological basis. Not that Helfert had not been conscious earlier of the notional function and significance of criticism. Helfert's study *Hudební věda a naše poměry* (*Musicology and Our Situation*) from the first annual volume of the periodical *Smetana*, on which we have earlier given a positive comment, decidedly contains certain rational starting points in this direction (Helfert regarded objective analysis as a component of the critical method, even though not as its aim). We have seen, however, that in his own critical practice Helfert many a time abandoned these objective notional aspects and that he thus fell, to use his own words, into "mere accidental and consequently also worthless critical impressionism" (*Hudební věda a moderní hudba* — *Musicology and Modern Music*, *Musical Views I*, p. 160). Enlightened by his own errors he now sought to create such a critical method and such a type of musical criticism, in which, beside evaluation, "the notional moment would be strongly represented as well" (*ibid.*).

For this reason Helfert even in musical criticism primarily asked the

¹⁶ He confesses it himself in *Epištoly o hudební kritice* (*The Epistles on Musical Criticism*, *Index III-1931*, p. 5): "The observer from Brno, who had perfectly become familiar with Prague critical methods and had himself to struggle laboriously with their results in his own heart, looks at all these things more clearly, because in a more matter-of-fact and calm way".

¹⁷ Under the indisputable influence of Zich Helfert is now engaged in aesthetic problematics much more than ever before. He writes a number of papers, critical glosses and articles which touch upon both the aesthetics of music and the general theory of art [mainly in *Musical Views*; for Pazdírek's musical encyclopaedia I-1929 he elaborated all the items relative to the aesthetics of music (absolute music, philosophy of music, phenomenology, hermeneutics, programmatic music, realism, romanticism; even the item "aesthetics", not designated by a cipher, is undoubtedly Helfert's work)], in the years 1921—2 (summer term) he lectures at the university on the aesthetics of free musical forms, in 1924—5 (winter term) on the foundations of musical criticism, in the years 1925—6 on the aesthetics of music.

question of what can be known in the artistic musical object and what is to be the decisive starting point of the critic's evaluations. "It is questionable to seek in music above all what is being expressed by music. The point in question in music is, in the first place, the structure of the work, i.e. whether it is at all able to be the spokesman of ideas", he proclaims in his programmatic critical declaration in *Musical Views*, Čeho je třeba (What is Necessary, I-1924/25, No. 1-2, p. 1). We can guess that he here supports Mersmann's aesthetic device „nur das Kunstwerk selbst sollte im Mittelpunkt stehen“, which he by no means, however, comprehends in the abstract, statically, as did the older Hanslickian formal aesthetics, but in a much more dynamic, modern way (this lively empiric basis is particularly perceptible in Helfert's critical investigation of concrete musical phenomena): he regards musical structure and its parts as phenomena of spiritual life, which are conditioned and borne by the specific musical talent of the composer, by his faculty of creating musically, that means to think artistically in the categories of music ("a composition is the intellectual world of the composer changed into music"). The substance of the musical structure and music, their comprehension, cannot then be contained in and exhausted by its mere tonal (sonic) appearance, but by "musical thinking", which he regards as a synthesis of the structure of melody, harmonic sequences and combinations, polyphony or homophony, tonality, atonality or polytonality, the compass of form, the palette of colours, instrumentality or vocality etc.

Beginning with the above-mentioned study *What Is Necessary* (published on 10th October 1924), the concept "musical thinking"¹⁸ becomes the key to Helfert's critical method, the support and corrective of his personal evaluation of a composition, of the individual contribution of the musical creator (for artistic individuality reveals itself above all in the individual ways of "musical thinking").

The technical term "musical thinking" was, owing to its axiomatic character, many times considered to be the weak point of Helfert's aesthetic view, whose consequence was that Helfert conceived the aesthetic of music as a "doctrine of composition *sui generis*, or, more strictly speaking, as a psychologically designed analysis of the musical object" (Ivan Poledňák, *Estetika – Aesthetics III-1966*, p. 163). Certain difficulties of this concep-

¹⁸ It is a concept which was introduced into Czech aesthetics by O. Zich. He employs it in his book *The Symphonic Poems of Smetana* (according to Zich musical thinking, "comprehending melodies – musical ideas – in their various connection", is immediately linked up with the musical percept), or in his study *Hudební estetika* (*Musical Aesthetics, Musical Views I*, p. 6), where he speaks of musical thinking as of a "sort of vivid thinking, i. e. thinking in tones". It may be then said that Helfert takes over this "Zichian term" and along with it, too, its import as an aesthetic category. Later in his *Prolegomena to Czech modern music* Helfert made the contents of the concept "musical thinking" more precise. He placed it higher than the concept of musical form and divided it into two mutually penetrating components: into inspiration (not the source of inspiration!), that "divine spark which, above all, can give the works the impress of genius", and into creative work, the construction of the artistic organism, "which is not anything merely rational" (pp. XIII-XIV). Helfert then includes in the concept "musical thinking" even those components of the "musical creative genius" which can be rationally apprehended and defined only with difficulty.

tion of "musical thinking" in the eventual solution of some aesthetic problems of music are obvious (the neglect of the notions of meaning and functions of music which can be felt more or less objectively in the work concerned). The "musical thinking", however, was for Helfert neither the only nor the final aim of critical knowledge, but rather the standard of the investigation of the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic values and functions of the musical work, of its artistic nature. He did not eliminate, for instance, tendentiousness in music, but accepted it only when it was directly indicated by the artistic, i.e. by the musical structure too, by "musical thinking" ("tentiousness as artistic idea and not as a propaganda moment"). The Creative Development of Bedřich Smetana, 1924). Even though he seriously considered the sociological aspects and social functions of modern music (Krise moderní hudby a obecnstva — The Crisis of Modern Music and Audience, Musical Views II-1925/26, pp. 74-79), he emphatically rejected the opinion that "class" or other points of view should determine the aesthetic value of music and art ("art is only one and is either strong or weak; such artists as Shakespeare, Beethoven, Smetana created for all people and not for a certain class"). Out of these attitudes of Helfert eventually crystallized the famous, substantially correct and till lately execrated thesis of his Prolegomena to Czech modern music (p. X), that "the structure of the musical work cannot communicate anything from the artist's ideology by musical means" (though even according to Helfert "a critical knowledge of the ideological orientation of the artist can explain the structure of the work in many ways", and it is thus not possible to exclude it from criticism). This thesis was his reaction in the thirties to the new attempts of a section of Czech musical criticism to evaluate music only from the point of view of a certain "ideology" and according to the old classification of music into "ideological" (progressive) and "non-ideological" (formalistic) music.¹⁹

The tenor and aim of Helfert's new critical method was clear. He built on the principle that the artistic value of the composition cannot be determined either by its title, or by the "ideological" purposes or opinions on life of the author (these are rather included in the conditions and impulses of composition which are called by Helfert sources of inspiration) and

¹⁹ The above-mentioned B. Bělohlávek attacked Helfert for this conception of music in a polemic study *Česká hudba a svět* (Czech Music and the World, Saturday VI-1935, pp. 98-100), to which Helfert responded by his article *O tzv. ideovosti v hudbě* (On the So-Called Ideological Content in Music, Index VII-1935, pp. 1-4). He refused in it the tendency of appreciating music only on the basis of "ideological content", which he regarded as the out-of-date "heritage of the romantic ideology". Where the ideological interpretation of music could lead was shown by Nejedlý's book *Sovětská hudba* (Soviet Music, 1936). Nejedlý backed in it the rude attacks of the politicians of the Stalinist era against D. Shostakovich and supported his attitude by ideological points of view. He then commented with approbation upon the then intervention of Stalin in the words: "Stalin himself spoke, and spoke well" (p. 140). It was not accidental that Helfert at the same time rejected this political campaign against art, owing to its "mistaken aesthetic basis" and that he even expressed his apprehension that similar ideological controversies could "at least retard, if not endanger the current of the musical creative genius" in the USSR (Czech Modern Music, p. 163). Nowadays it is not perhaps necessary to comment on both these attitudes in detail.

not at all by some subjective interpretation of the critic of the "ideological" or "programmatic" character of a musical work, which is not able to take the place of knowledge based on objective analysis and critical comparison of "musical thinking". This conception was now utterly rejected by Helfert as unscientific, dogmatic, corresponding neither to the character nor to the evolutionary tendencies of modern Czech music²⁰).

According to Helfert it is for instance not possible to understand, interpret and appreciate Bedřich Smetana objectively — to speak first of all of the composer whose stylistic orientation and musical poetics had for years been the support of Helfert's view of the whole of modern Czech music — only from the point of view of programmatic character, extra-musical sources of inspiration, of the national and cultural mission of his music. That would not be enough. Musical criticism must ask the question of how Smetana's works are musically constructed and thought out, what lies behind their musical inspiration and what is the artistic quality and individuality of this inspiration. No doubt it is impossible to assert that Helfert had formerly completely ignored these problems: we have called attention, for instance, to his brilliant aesthetic-critical study *Motiv Smetanova Vyšehradu* (The Motif of Smetana's Vyšehrad — 1917) which is based on the musical analysis of the artistic object. So far, however, as Helfert formerly investigated the musical structure of Smetana's composition more closely, then it was above all from the point of view of the categories of romantic aesthetics, which in the new conception lost their determining significance. It was above all the artistic qualities of "musical thinking", the artistic qualities of musical inspiration, that now provided the decisive moments of critical investigation and appreciation. And the individuality and passion of musical inspiration, as Helfert thought, manifesting itself in the intensity of musical expression, rank Smetana among the great musical individualities (we recognize Smetana's music after a few bars), just as his sense of inner construction ranges Smetana among the tectonic types of composers (even his "programmatic" compositions fully stand up to the proof from the point of view of musical logic). In his work Smetana always managed to balance these two components of "musical thinking" harmoniously and to combine them logically into a compact artistic organism, a musical form, which never pays brainless tribute to the fixed types of form. In the conception of both the contents and form of the musical work Smetana is an exemplar of the "free creative spirit", whose musical creative genius did not allow itself to be fettered by the aesthetic norms of "ideological" programmatic requirements and musical dramatism in the sense of Wagner²¹). He is the master who "brought a

²⁰ We must of course admit that Helfert arrived with his "anti-romantic" view after a certain delay, if we consider that F. Busoni programmatically declared the departure from the neo-romantic aesthetics and Hanslick's extreme formalism as early as 1907 in his *Návrh nové estetiky hudby* (Proposal for the New Aesthetics of Music).

²¹ Helfert endeavoured to deprive the romantic vindicators even of Z. Fibich (*O Zdeňka Fibicha* — In Defence of Z. Fibich, Musical Views II-1925/6, Czech Modern Music etc.), but could not but state Fibich's consistent romanticism with all its

musical-philosophical ferment into modern Czech music, who synthesizes wealth of inspiration with the creative thinker's construction of the musical organism" (*Česká moderní hudba – Czech Modern Music*, p. 159). It is in this synthesis of free creative work and unique musical inspiration that the modern and permanently topical substance of the personality of Smetana, of his method of composition, is comprehended, as was after all shown by the development of post-Smetana music²²).

A number of Czech composers of the 20th century, regardless of the generation or current they belonged to, Otakar Ostrčil (the disciple of Fibich), Vítězslav Novák and Josef Suk (from the school of Dvořák), Ladislav Vycpálek and Alois Hába (from the school of Novák) took their stand on this Smetanian line of modern Czech music, even though they naturally kept shaping it individually in many ways and enriched it by new values of inspiration and tectonic processes (according to Helfert it was Novák who showed the highest degree of initiative).

Helfert presented a fundamental revision of his former view also in his appreciation of Antonín Dvořák, whom he once denoted as a "mere Czech professional musician". The thesis of the Hostinský school, setting Dvořák (a mere "absolute musician") opposite to Smetana (according to the former romantic terminology a composer of "programmatic ideological qualities"), appeared according to Helfert's new conception in a new light. From the former sharply opposed positions of Smetana versus Dvořák, programmatic music versus absolute music, the dogmatic rules of the romantic aesthetics were entirely dismissed (even with the problematic classification of romantic musical forms as a symptom and condition of "progressiveness" in music) and thus, too, the obvious artistic qualities of Dvořák's music could shine fully, particularly the wealth of his musical inspiration, his Czech and Slavonic folk temperament, his entirely specific gift of imagination in sound, which he poured into classical musical forms. The variety of forms, individuality and intensity of this musical inspiration ensured Dvořák a place close to Smetana in modern Czech music and opened up a second road for modern Czech music. From the musically historical point of view Helfert thus definitively disproved the absurd thesis of Smetana versus Dvořák (in his critical study *Smetana a Dvořák – Smetana and Dvořák*, Index VI-1934, he expressed his rejection in a lapidary and telling phrase "nowadays not Smetana versus Dvořák is valid, but Dvořák along-

merits and problems, which this movement brought into music by its theory of united arts. Insufficient sense for musical tectonics, subjective expression and character of musical inspiration, and the stylistic backwardness of Fibich's music weaken his evolutionary significance. Helfert thus disproved the legend of Hostinský's school of the lively topical mission of Fibich: according to Helfert Fibich was not a continuator and consummator of Smetana but rather an anachronistic phenomenon of modern Czech music.

²² It cannot be denied that Helfert's new opinion of Smetana means a certain rapprochement to the conception of the Czech formal school (J. Durdík and eventually even O. Hostinský). On the other hand we must say that Helfert's actualized approach to Smetana has nothing in common with the dogmatic worship of Smetana in the fifties, when some Czech composers imitated his music.

side Smetana"²³), and thus he also newly formulated the relation of modern Czech music to the music of the pre-Smetana period, including the formation of classical and pre-classical masters of music on the one hand and folk song on the other: the historical continuity and artistic justification of the Czech "musicianship" (for which he now chooses a more adequate term "musical creative genius") was in Helfert's conception discovered and defined as a natural permanent and typical phenomenon of Czech musical culture. After all even Smetana drew from the traditional Czech "musical creative genius" and even the musical inspiration of Novák, Suk, Vycpálek, Martinů, Hába and most of all perhaps of Leoš Janáček took from it its vital strength (in Janáček's work these traditions, owing to realism, led also to important conclusions in the field of formation of style).

The new critical investigation of the two founders of modern Czech music then led Helfert to a fundamental reevaluation of the hitherto accepted view of modern Czech music. When in *Czech Modern Music*, critical studies in *Index* and elsewhere he spoke of the Czech music of the post-Smetana period or even about the development of the Czech generation of composers between the two wars, he continued to return to Smetana and Dvořák as to the law-givers of Czech "musical thinking", as to the supporting pillars of the methods of composition bound up with the Czech mentality, with the traditions of Czech intellectual development and art history. Modern Czech music and its entire centuries-old history thus appeared to Helfert as currents internally differentiated according to stages and styles, some constants of which were to be found above all in melodically rhythmic inventiveness (Smetana and Dvořák were ingenious melodists, but a spontaneous expressive melodicy and rhythm characterizes most of the other composers of Czech music too), in the intensive harmonic feeling (this process was begun by Smetana and consummated by Hába), in the specific brilliant charm of musical sound (especially due to Dvořák and his school) and last but not least in the sense for musical tectonics (a moment which does not appear in Czech music until the time of Smetana). And these must have been discoveries which even in their universality proved the mansided artistic fulness and individuality of the Czech "musical creative genius".

The idea of the individual (national) character of modern Czech music as a fundamental artistic category, however, contained one serious danger: it could lead, and sometimes in Czech musical criticism in fact led, to an uncritical emphasis on the significance of native artistic traditions, of the Czech autochthonous musical development, to a tendentious overestimation of the romantic idea of the nation in music²⁴). Helfert, once himself one

²³ Analogously Helfert rejected the new party struggles of Czech musical journalism juxtaposing Novák and Ostrčil by a categorical formulation: "*Both Novák and Ostrčil*" (*Index* III-1931).

²⁴ This artistic opinion was symptomatic for the Czech renaissance generations of the 19th century, but even the 20th century did not withstand it fully. A new wave of the national conception of Czech music, as we have partly shown,

of the propagators of this view, now well realized its onesidedness and static character. That is why he understood and interpreted both the founders of modern Czech music, Smetana and Dvořák, not only from the national point of view, but in critical comparisons with the work of their contemporaries and predecessors (at the same time the comparisons with German music naturally assumed a foremost place and by them Helfert only corroborated his idea of the individual character of Czech national music; see the comparative study Richard Wagner und tschechische Musik, Prager Rundschau III-1933). These critical confrontations, however, were especially important for an opinion on the post-Smetana generation of composers and the Czech musical modernism between the two wars, i. e. those stages of the development of modern Czech music which originated against a historical background that was already politically and socially reassessing the older romantic idea of nation.

These changes in the political opinions of contemporary society had to manifest themselves in some way, too, in the basic artistic orientation of the modern generations of composers. The art and music of a modern, fully emancipated nation could hold their ground against international (or at least European) competition only if they "considered the supra-personal ideas, the question of international and social order and the problems of humanity" (Czech Modern Music, p. 167). That was according to Helfert an important, and it might be said a social and ethical condition of the dynamic changes of the modern Czech music of our era. It was the art of Ostrčil, Novák and Suk that fulfilled this condition in its own way, leading from romantic mythology, subjective lyricism and symbolism to "the realm of the creative human spirit" governed by "the eternal three ideas: truth, good and beauty" (V. Helfert, Slavnostní řeč při promoci Josefa Suka — Oration at the Graduation Ceremony of Josef Suk, Tempo XIII—1933—4), but this condition was fulfilled in full measure, too, by the art of Janáček, whom Helfert, to be sure rather unorganically, ranged among the founding generation of Smetana but whom he had to call to mind again when he reflected upon the further fortunes of Czech music (see the chapter Cesty za novým stylem — The Roads to New Style, Czech Modern Music, pp. 141ff.). Janáček's artistic example showed Helfert, too, that under certain circumstances the popular, the national, the autochthonous need not be at variance with the modern, the universal, the European, while the eternal constants of the Czech "musical creative genius" need not be at variance with the most contemporary experiments of European music, if they are borne by creative courage and by the capacity to discover new ways of "musical thinking" (Martinů and Hába, who are for Helfert the mark of the "European climax of our music"). This must have been a dynamic and modern standpoint in its time, a standpoint which gave up the romantic category of nation in art and music as an obsolete category, not functional and inadequate

was here evoked by the increasing Czech anti-Habsburg revolt, which culminated during the First World War. Smetana then became the artistic symbol of the Czech political programme (V. Helfert, *Smetana and Dvořák*, Index VI-1934).

from the point of view of the further development of modern Czech music²⁵).

Modern Czech music as a concept originated in the national renaissance period, all the thought and actions of which were gradually mastered by the romantic idea of nation as a spiritual form of its political, cultural and social existence. Therefore the representatives of the Czech nation entered modern history with the resolution of proving its full rights by corresponding cultural and artistic acts. Both greater and lesser spirits were captivated by this noble revivalist idea and interpreted it accordingly: many a time as a naïve belief in the self-redemptory character of the nation's own creative power and again as a stubborn will to equal other more mature nations in everything. Both these approaches implied a certain danger for music, which was atoned for by the creative genius of Smetana and Dvořák in artistic syntheses uniting the national with the human, the traditional with the modern, the popular with the professional. Modern Czech music thus attained a European standard on the very threshold of its development. It was the historical merit of Otakar Hostinský that he clear-sightedly recognized this greatness and dynamism of Smetana as a founder, that he was able to fight for it as the aesthetically-enlightened younger comrade of Smetana, as his contemporary. It is true that Hostinský in his critical work did not entirely succumb to the seductions of the romantic aesthetics of music, but in his basic attitude he in fact did not deny the appurtenance of his generation to the century of culminating romanticism. That is why he did not duly appraise the historical role of Dvořák's artistic orientation towards folk and classical music in all ways, and for this reason he overestimated the romanticist Fibich as well, which later led, in the school of Hostinský, to a number of new misunderstandings.

We have shown that during his Prague period Helfert, together with the other disciples of Hostinský, actively lived as a critic of music through the new mighty wave of Czech national neo-romanticism. Apart from his fundamental discoveries on Smetana and musical history his allegiance to this cultural movement resulted in certain errors in his research, of which the most serious were those which affected the view of modern Czech music and of the Czech "musical creative genius" in general. Under the active influence of Zich's aesthetics, under the new and surprising artistic impressions given by the Brno of Janáček between the two wars and under the influence of the whole specific cultural climate, out of which this musical genius of Moravia grew (with the important characteristic traits of the local development, the virtual absence of romanticism and, on the contrary, a generally perceptible realism), Helfert, however, was able to revise and reassess his former view. This revaluation began

²⁵ The accentuation of music as a component of "the spiritual life of the nation" in the romantic sense caused no small difficulties to Czech musical criticism. Under these devices new struggles against the modern orientation of Czech music were being led in the twenties and thirties. Janáček, Hába, Martinů, and other Czech modernists were, in comparison with the "national" Smetana, Foerster and Ostrčil, designated as its cosmopolitan and decadent wing (see numerous criticisms of Nejedlý, Bělohlávek, and others).

with the separation of Helfert's critical method from the romantic view of music. The whole decisive programmatic article of Helfert *What Is Necessary* (1924) was written in this spirit ("the era of romanticism and of the romantic view of music ends and new values are being created"). In its consequences this attitude led Helfert to the renaissance of the objective methods of the formal school and to his thoroughly thinking them out (with the resulting concepts of "musical thinking" and "musical creative genius" as fundamental categories of musical criticism and aesthetics) and to the criticism and musically historical analysis of the methods of composition and style of modern Czech music (which brought, too, a new view of the role of romanticism in Czech music; for Helfert the only genuine romanticist remaining was Fibich, but neither can his work be fully interpreted by means of the categories of romantic aesthetics). The final and supreme phase of this critical investigation was then Helfert's critical syntheses in his book on modern Czech music and in numerous studies in periodicals in which he presented the first finished aesthetic and historically founded analysis of modern Czech music. Helfert overcame in it his older static and unhistorical view of the Czech "musical creative genius", objectively analysed the dynamism of the motion of Czech "musical thinking" within the currents, the "musical thinking" that gave form to the art of Smetana, Dvořák and their successors, and clear-sightedly grasped the processes and changes of style and thought which took place in the Czech music of the first half of our times in consequence both of the changing view of life, style and feeling and of the new artistic discoveries of the rising generations of composers. Thus Helfert embraced modern Czech music in all the breadth of its development, stylistic variety and dynamism and thus, too, he put an end to the not very fertile controversies in Czech musical criticism, which formerly either overestimated the fictitious or even real ideological programmatic values or, on the other hand, sought for the substance of the musical creative genius only in the external form of music. The topicality of Helfert's view of modern Czech music (with comprehensible errors in isolated questions) can be appreciated especially today, when we regard his critical personality from a distance. Those who did not take his discoveries into account in their own critical attempts or even tried to discredit them in various ways (mostly again only from the positions of artificially constructed "ideological qualities" in music), impoverished themselves and fell into the vicious circle of erroneous assertions and sophisms which had already once been, thanks to Helfert, discredited in Czech musical criticism.

Translated by Lidmila Pantůčková

VLADIMÍR HELFERT JAKO HUDEBNÍ KRITIK

Helfertův názor na novou českou hudbu je obsažen v kritických studiích, úvahách a článcích, které uveřejňoval v pražských, brněnských a zahraničních hudebních a kulturněpolitických časopisech, výjimečně též v samostatných publikacích.

Svou mnohaletou soustavnou kritickou činností projevoval V. Helfert stálý zájem o aktuální hudební problematiku, jež bývá zpravidla předmětem zájmu hudební žurnalistiky a publicistiky. Na rozdíl od ní pěstoval však V. Helfert hudební kritiku jako vědeckou disciplínu. Empiricky získané umělecké soudy a postřehy prověřoval a domýšlel objektivními metodami estetiky a hudební vědy. Ve své první (pražské) periodě se opíral v zásadě o výrazovou estetiku, což negativně ovlivnilo některé jeho estetické soudy o nové české hudbě: právem sice vyzvedal B. Smetanu jako zakladatele moderní české hudby, ale neprávem odmítal A. Dvořáka a mnohé umělecké podněty, které přinášelo jeho dílo dalšímu vývoji české hudby.

Rozhodující zvrát v Helfertově kritickém myšlení a v pohledu na moderní českou hudbu nastal v druhé (brněnské) periodě. Pod přímým vlivem estetiky Zichovy a zčásti i německé hudební fenomenologie (H. Mersmann) přestal někdy uprostřed dvacátých let nahlížet na hudbu z hlediska kategorií romantické estetiky, tzn. v duchu přísné programové ideovosti a Wagnerovy teorie „spojených umění“ (Gesamtkunstwerk). V. Helfert, aniž ve svých kritických soudech podceňuje důležitost mimohudebních prvků a funkcí hudby, opírá své hodnotící soudy především o analýzu hudební struktury, tedy uměleckého artefaktu samotného. Tím také vytváří objektivní předpoklady pro svůj nový názor na moderní českou hudbu, na její jednotlivé zjevy a vývoj. V. Helfert reviduje svůj dřívější negativní postoj ke Dvořákovi a Janáčkoví a řadí oba tyto skladatele k zakladatelské generaci Smetanově. Helfertova revize se dotkla i pohledu na B. Smetanu, kterého nyní chápe jako skladatele klasicoromantické syntézy. V. Helfert také na rozdíl od pražské muzikologické školy, z níž původně vyšel, věcně hodnotí vývojový a umělecký význam Fibichův. Nová estetická východiska umožnila V. Helfertovi, aby plně pochopil a ocenil i umělecké výboje a činy české hudební moderny mezi dvěma válkami. I v tom se lišil od oficiální pražské hudební vědy a kritiky, s jejímiž názory stále častěji polemisoval.

Helfertovo kritické dílo, a z něho především pohled na novou českou hudbu, tvoří osobitou složku jeho muzikologického odkazu: Staví metodologicky na základech, které v české hudební kritice vytvořil O. Hostinský, ale v mnohém, zejména v hodnocení dějinného a uměleckého významu Dvořákova a Fibichova, představuje v české hudební vědě a kritice novou kvalitu. Zásadní přínos znamená pak Helfertův kritický a objektivní pohled na vývoj české hudby doby posmetanovské.