

LETTER FROM ENGLAND

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I'm back safely from the (very enjoyable) 15th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies in Prague, and I would write about it straightaway, were I not being taken tomorrow by a friend to a Dog Show in Darlington. I'm wondering if I might be able to find some points of comparison between academic conferences and dog shows, so long as I can avoid being offensive to either. I aired this proposal with an academic colleague in the Netherlands, who replied with an unexpected email, which I hope he will not mind if I quote:

'You won't believe this but I love dog shows – more than most academic conferences. I consider this one of my major aberrations. The other day I came across a South Asianist (name withheld) who looks exactly like a Basenji, including the frown (please say hello to them if they are on show).'

I'll certainly keep my eyes skinned tomorrow for similar correspondences, and report back in my next column.

The biennial European Conference meets in a different city each time. The last one was in Copenhagen, and the next one will be in Edinburgh. I was particularly excited at visiting Prague, not just for its architectural glories and picture galleries, but for its rich musical tradition. Music is what I want to write about here, but first I must congratulate the Czechs on the enormous amount of restoration they have done to the old city. During a boat trip down the Vltava river, I asked the guide how much restoration had been done during the Communist years. 'Only the castle,' she said, 'because that's where the government people lived.' Now, almost the whole of the Staré Město (the old part of Prague) looks so perfect that my first impression was of over-restoration: it was like walking through a gigantic stage-set. That was partly because it was full of tourists. But on my last day, I walked though it early in the morning: the Old Town Square was empty, rainy and windswept, and the beauty and variety of its buildings brought tears to my eyes.

Considering the turbulence of Czech history, it's remarkable that so little has ever been damaged. Perhaps that's because of a unique Czech tradition of dealing with religious and political enemies by throwing them out of windows. As I read through the potted history in the guide book, dim memories of my history studies at school came back to me: the Protestant reformer Jan Hus (whose massive statue graces the Old Town Square); the First Defenestration of Prague (1419) which led to the Hussite Wars between the reformers and the Papacy; the Second Defenestration (1618) that started the Thirty Years' War; and the Battle of the White Mountain, in which the Protestants were routed. Other than those events, my knowledge of Czech history is limited to more recent times, especially the Prague Spring of 1968 under Alexander Dubcek, and the Warsaw Pact Invasion that brought the reform movement to a brutal end. The venue for the Conference (the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University) reminded us daily of the passions of those times: we entered from a square named after Jan Palach, the student who protested against the Invasion by burning himself to death.

1968 is forever associated in my mind with a musical event in London. I wasn't present at it myself, but I read about it, and I recalled it in one of the short poems in my book *The Retreat*:

*On the day of the Prague Invasion,
Rostropovich played the Dvorak concerto in London,
Weeping throughout with shame and pity and passion,
Weaving thereby a mesh of association –
Russia, Rostropovich, Czechoslovakia, the Albert Hall, the Dvorak concerto –
Frenzied and soulful, soulful and frenzied notes on the cello.**

Mstislav Rostropovich is Russian, an exile from from the USSR for much of his career, and generally regarded as the world's finest cellist. Dvorák's cello concerto is a great piece of Czech music. By an extraordinary irony, Rostropovich was booked to play it in the Albert Hall on the day of the Invasion. The critics wrote of how he played it with tears streaming down his

* From *The Retreat: Poems 1984-88*(University Press Ltd., Dhaka, 1994).

cheeks.

Music, more than any other art, can express the soul of a nation, particularly a nation's suffering soul. Perhaps you have to be Czech to appreciate fully the great Czech composers – Dvorák, Smetana, Janáček; but it is also possible for foreigners to feel emotionally close to a nation through its music. When I listen to Chopin, I feel close to Poland; when I hear Verdi or Puccini I feel close to Italy; when I hear Rabindrasangit or Nazrul-giti, I feel especially close to Bengal!

I was eager to hear some Czech music in Prague, and of the two concerts I went to, I particularly enjoyed Dvorák 's Slavonic Dances for Piano Duet at the National Museum. The piano was placed half way up a grand marble staircase in the entrance hall, and the audience sat on red cushions on the stairs. Piano duet is a peculiarly intimate medium, and in the nineteenth century gave notorious opportunities to courting couples. I know from experience how difficult it is to avoid elbow, shoulder and finger contact while playing, so the two pianists should know each other well. There also has to be a deep musical rapport between them: the piano being essentially a percussive instrument, it is difficult for two players to strike a chord at exactly the same time, especially at the very beginning of a piece. The two ladies who played were in perfect synchrony: not a single note was out of place, and they played with tremendous verve and feeling.

No. 10 in E minor, 'Allegretto grazioso', from the Second Series (Op. 72), is the piece that for me brings out that deep, inchoate empathy for a nation that only music can produce. As does Smetana's majestic series of tone poems for orchestra, *Má Vlast* ('My Country'). I bought a CD of those too, and the well-informed man in the shop recommended a performance by the Czech Philharmonic conducted by Rafael Kubelík. Like Rostropovich, Kubelík spent most of his career as a refugee from Communism. In 1990 he returned to his homeland to conduct its greatest piece of national music. The recording is of that live performance. On the boat trip down the Vltava, the second tone poem – which evokes the river – was running through my mind; even more so in recollection, now that I have listened to the CD.

In my hotel in Prague, I switched on CNN from time to time, which was even more nauseating than usual, President Clinton's peccadilloes – courtesy

of that prurient puritan Kenneth Starr – being apparently far more earth-shaking than the plight of 30 million people affected by floods in Bangladesh. With music and nationhood in my mind, I also found myself thinking about globalisation and pop music. I grew up with the kind of pop music that has now become standard, so I'm not at all hostile to it. At its best, it can express youth, vitality, tolerance, humour and fun; sometimes anger and satire too, at injustice and hypocrisy. But one thing it cannot do is convey deep national feeling.

For the last three months, a friend of my younger daughter has been lodging with us, prior to starting at Newcastle University. His parents were working in Indonesia, and he had to leave the country in a hurry when Suharto's regime fell. He is a good guitarist, and for quite a lot of the time that he was with us, his singing and playing wafted down the stairs from his room. I asked him if pop music had ever brought tears to his eyes or a lump to his throat. He admitted that it hadn't, whatever its other qualities.

I can think of two reasons for this. One is that it is global: it cannot therefore express the shared sufferings of a particular community or nation. The other reason is that it has its roots in American Jazz, whose essential mood is 'cool': strong emotion is eschewed, however vibrant or intricate the music may be.

The meaning of 'cool' deserves a column in itself. When was the word first used in its colloquial meaning? It's certainly been around throughout my life, and my daughters' generation use it as a general term of approbation. Clothes, personality, venue: anything can be 'cool' if it is relaxed, not too serious or emotional, not too middle-aged either. (I took it as a great compliment, when my elder daughter told me that a schoolfriend of hers thought that I was 'cool'!)

Dvorák, Smetana, Janáček: when their music rises to emotional, nationalistic heights, it is anything but 'cool'. 'Nationalistic' is a tricky word: I don't want to imply anything jingoistic or chauvinist here. The kind of national feeling that can be conveyed by serious music (not, of course, by military marches and the like) is nationalism at its best. It says: 'The world may be becoming more and more the same, but there are things that only we – as speakers of a particular language, heirs of a particular cultural tradition,

participants in a particular historical experience – can know. Foreigners wanting to feel our music must empathise with that separateness, that distinctive identity.’

The effect is particularly strong if one hears one’s native music while away from home. Michael Madhusudan Datta famously expressed this in Book 2 of *Meghnad-badh kabya* (ll. 304-5), when Rati calls her husband Kama and he comes running ‘like an exile when he hears with rapture the music of his native country’. I have felt like that in India, sometimes, when I have suddenly heard a snatch of typically English music.

What music best expresses ‘Englishness’? I can think of lots: from Henry Purcell in the 17th century, through the unique tradition of Anglican Church music, to composers like Benjamin Britten and Vaughan Williams in my own century. But I suspect most music-lovers would put Edward Elgar at the top of the list. Not the Elgar of the patriotic ‘Pomp and Circumstance Marches’ (which he came to detest), but the Elgar of another great cello concerto, perhaps the greatest of all – especially when performed by Jacqueline du Pré, the cellist whose career was tragically terminated by multiple sclerosis. Du Pré has been in the newspapers again recently, as a controversial book about her that was written by her sister and brother has been made into a film. I was lucky enough to hear her play several times. I expressed my feelings about Elgar in another short poem in *The Retreat*. Perhaps it sums up what I have been trying to say today about nationhood and music:

O my hidebound English heart.

O my boxed-in fenced-in barricaded English heart.

O Edward Elgar, how precious the breaking by your music

of my damned-up clammed-up walled-up English heart.

The dart of your art

cleaves it, breaches it, smashes it apart.