

As countries go, the Czech Republic is small, roughly the size of Virginia. Through much of its history, it was called Bohemia. (Somewhat confusing, as Bohemia is also a region in the Czech Republic.) Sited in a historically turbulent region, Bohemia had the chronic misfortune of subjugation by its more aggressive and powerful neighbors. It didn't help that it also was a convenient battleground, even when the belligerents weren't really at war with Bohemia. But throughout the strife, it's also been a hotbed of imposing composers. Antonín Dvořák, Leoš Janáček, Gustav Mahler, Bohuslav Martinů, and Bedřich Smetana all are familiar names on concert programs today. Eventually, as if fed up with war and occupation, the Czech people shook off their chains in the 1989 Velvet Revolution. There was the first democratic election in a former Communist country after the fall of the Soviet Union. The first President Václav Havel—renowned author, poet and playwright—hinted that Czech citizens had chosen a new path. Today the arts flourish in the Czech Republic, and it consistently ranks among the safest and most peaceful of nations.

**Ludvík Dietrich z Dietrich** (1803-1858) got off to a good start in life. His father, a successful lawyer, owned a small but imposing estate, and also funded a musical ensemble. So it was inevitable for his son to become a skilled musician. While the good times lasted, the younger Dietrich studied hard, including music lessons with Gottfried Rieger, a respected composer, teacher, and director of the Brno Theater Orchestra. Tragically, an economic crisis wiped out the family fortune. To make ends meet, Dietrich eked out a living as a music teacher and managed to keep up his music studies. A virtuoso guitarist, much of his compositional output is for the guitar. His musical style foreshadows that of the now better known (among guitarists) Johann Kaspar Mertz. Indeed, Mertz himself performed Dietrich's music as part of an 1841 recital. Dietrich was also a prolific song writer—his patriotic song “Moravo, Moravo” became an unofficial national anthem. For all his artistic success, he died in poverty.

While Dietrich began rich and ended poor, **Václav Tomáš Matějka** (1773–1830) managed to avoid a similar fate. Though his father was a teacher's assistant, his extended family was musical, with sufficient connections to ensure a good education. Matějka's varied skill set stood him well. Moving to Vienna in his early 20s, he at first got by as a lawyer and accountant. By the early 1800s, he could support himself entirely as a music teacher, and later assumed directorship of various church choirs. While he played both piano and guitar, he preferred the guitar. (If this seems improbable now, recall that the early 1800s were a golden age for the guitar.) The dedications of his published works read like a “Who's Who” of Vienna's music highbrows. A measure of Matějka's success spilled into the 20th century. His Nocturne in G major, Op. 21, slightly reworked by Franz Schubert, was for decades assumed to be by Schubert. It's high praise when your work can be mistaken for that of a musical immortal.

To hear composer **Michal Hromek** (b. 1958) tell it, his early brush with music wasn't auspicious. Though he took violin and guitar lessons as a child, he apparently was a music teacher's nightmare. “I learned absolutely nothing, and for several years didn't care for music at all.” But later he was intrigued by the music emanating from his older brother's reel-to-reel tape deck: The Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, Donovan, The Beach Boys, and the Bee Gees. “I got interested. Apart from that, the sound of guitar in all its forms started to fascinate me.” Influenced by indigenous folk music, he soon drifted into composing music that fuses classical, folk, and early music. His 2020 St. Wenceslas Suite, composed for Petra Poláčková, is itself based on the 12th century Saint Wenceslas Chorale, one of the oldest known Czech melodies. Its subject, the 10th century Duke Wenceslas, was assassinated by his younger brother. Soon

after, tales of miracles at his tomb unnerved his murderous sibling, who had the body relocated to the Church of Saint Vitus. Wenceslas was venerated as a martyr. A 12th century chronicler wrote: “No one doubts that, rising every night from his noble bed, with bare feet and only one chamberlain, he went around to God’s churches and gave alms generously to widows, orphans, those in prison and afflicted by every difficulty, so much so that he was considered, not a prince, but the father of all the wretched.”

Sinister events shaped the early life of composer **Peter Eben** (1929-2007). Though his family was Catholic, his father was a Jew—in 1943 Nazi occupied territory, this was little short of a death sentence. Eben later described a harrowing experience at the Buchenwald concentration camp. With his older brother, he was taken to a “shower room.” He knew what that could mean, and gripped his brother’s hand, awaiting the lethal gas from the spray heads. Instead, harmless water emerged. The terror of that close call understandably suffused the rest of Eben’s life. Writing about one of his works, he said: “It is a remembrance of the dead in the mass graves, and a testimony to the wonderful faith of human beings. Faith and hope cannot be killed, the spirit cannot be defeated by external events.”

**Štěpán Rak** (b. 1945) was born late enough to avoid Bohemia’s Nazi occupation. But he was still close enough to endure its lingering consequences. His birth mother Cilja Slivka fled her native country when it was occupied by Hungary. She was imprisoned in USSR, and joined the Czechoslovak Army in 1944. 31 During this turmoil, young Štěpán, then living in Ukraine, was adopted by Marie and Josef Rak. On his later return to his homeland, other children, thinking he was Russian, taunted him with: “Russian, Russian, you came with them on a tank, you Russian!” Recalled Rak, “I was twelve years old at the time, an age where every insult cuts like a knife. Since then I have never really known who I am.” Outsider or not, Rak emerged as one of the most engaging and innovative of guitarists and composers. “I can’t imagine writing music without a picture. Whether abstract or concrete, I must see pictures when I compose.”

A closing thought. It’s tempting to hear Czech music as exotically foreign. But perhaps we shouldn’t. The origin of the word “Čech” harks back to an old Slavic root similar to the Czech word “člověk.” Roughly translated, it means “person.” So calling someone or something “Czech” is encompassing, not excluding. It’s an outlook we do well to embrace.

### **About the Artist**

Classical guitarist Petra Poláčková (Czech Republic) has received “sustained international acclaim” (The American Federation of Musicians), travelling the world to perform and teach. Her performances on her I and mark debut CD Weiss have garnered wide praise for their elegant phrasing, tonal beauty, and emotional intensity. Petra Poláčková has been co-organizer of Guitar Festival Mikulov, Czech Republic, since 2010 and most recently in 2022 was appointed Honorary Professor at the Royal Academy of Music Aarhus/Aalborg, Denmark. Ms. Poláčková obtained her Bachelor and Master Degrees under Prof. Paolo Pegoraro at Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Graz, Austria. Artist’s Website: [petrapolackova.com/en/](http://petrapolackova.com/en/) 30