

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 4. 8. 2025

William Bukový

Playful family film *Do You Keep a Lion at Home?* (Máte doma lva?, 1963) by Pavel Hobeľ follows the urban adventures of two friends, little boys Pepík and Honzík. Their kindergarten is closed due to illness. The planned trip does not take place. So they set off on a walk around Prague, during which reality mixes with fantasy. They wander into a museum where they watch a dog orchestra perform for a while. It is not random barking of a few dogs, as it might seem, but a piece composed especially for the film by William Bukový. The Slovakian composer, who has used the most diverse voices and instruments during his short but varied career, managed to do a great work even with the barking of dogs.

Bukový (1932–1968) came from a Jewish family that had to hide from the Nazis since 1942. All the members changed their surnames from Brühl to Bukový immediately after the war. The future composer's birthplace was the town of Lučenec where he also graduated from high school in 1951. At the same time he studied music with private teachers. His musical talent brought him to Prague where he studied teaching music at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University from 1952 to 1956. However, he taught himself to compose music. His role models were modern composers such as Leoš Janáček, Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, and Arthur Honegger. He would later hang a portrait of Beethoven above his desk.

Bukový first got into film while still a student, when he got a supporting role as a guitarist in the musical comedy *Music from Mars* (Hudba z Marsu, 1955) by Ján Kadár and Elmar Klos. After finishing school, he stayed in Prague and began composing primarily film and stage music. He began with various commercials, animations and documentaries, made for example by Václav Táborský, Vlasta Janečková (*The Tale of the Magic Flute* [Pohádka o kouzelné píšťalce]) or Břetislav Pojar (*The Lion and the Song* [Lev a písnička], *How to Furnish an Apartment* [Jak zařídit byt?]). His music can also be heard in some episodes of *Little Mole's Adventures* (Krtkova dobrodružství)

and in the popular animated series *Hey, Mister, let's play* (Pojďte pane, budeme si hrát).

Since the 1960s, Bukový composed music and wrote songs for feature films. He collaborated with Vladimír Sís (*Here in Mechov* [U nás v Mechově, 1960]), Jiří Sequens (*Love without Words* [Kolik slov stačí lásce?, 1961]), Hynek Bočan (*Nobody Gets the Last Laugh* [Nikdo se se nebude smát, 1965]) and Juraj Jakubisko (*The Prime of Life* [Kristové roky, 1967]). For the few minutes of music for the drama *The Boxer and Death* (Boxer a smrt, 1963) by Peter Solan, he won the Darius Milhaud Award at the San Francisco Film Festival. Many well-known names can also be found among the performers of Bukový's dance songs, chansons and cantatas: Rudolf Cortés, Hana Hegerová, Eva Pilarová, Rudolf Pellar, Josef Zíma, Vlasta Chramostová.

Along with Vladimír Šrámek, Ladislav Simon and Evžen Illín, Bukový was one of the first composers to experiment with electronic equipment in Czechoslovakia. Properly equipped sound studios did not exist in the country at that time. Bukový therefore set up his own technical laboratory at home. His interest in new technologies was also evident in his composition of ballet music. The electronic ballet *Faust* which he wrote to his own libretto, premiered in New York in 1966. He also electronically reworked the music for the ballet *Hiroshima* (Hirošima) whose protagonist is the pilot who dropped the first atomic bomb. After the Brno premiere, the performance was staged at the National Theatre under the title *Conscience* (Svědomí). In addition to generators, tape recorders and filters, Bukový also used elements of musique concrète or traditional instruments.

For the co-production film *Operation Kalimantan* (Akce Kalimantan, 1962) by Vladimír Sís, Bukový went to Indonesia where the story takes place and spent a month studying the local musical tradition. The main musical motif of the adventure film *Death in the Sugar Island* (Smrt na Cukrovém ostrově, 1961), set on a fictional tropical island of Port Phillippe, is a rhythmic carnival melody made up of drums, saxophone and wooden instruments. Beyond the music he composed, however, William Bukovský's career was multinational as well.

When the French playwright and filmmaker Armand Gatti, who wanted to film Kafka's *The Castle* in Czechoslovakia, visited Prague, he agreed with Bukový on cooperation.

The result was the music for the theatre productions *Le Poisson noir* (The Black Fish) and *Chant public devant deux chaises électriques* (Public Canto Before Two Electric Chairs), performed at the Théâtre national populaire in Paris. In France, Bukový wrote *Man 713*, a ballet which was never performed. Back in Prague, Bukový also met the Algerian director Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina, who, after studying at FAMU, worked in the Barrandov film studios. He would later win the Palme d'Or at Cannes for *Ahdat sanawovach el-djamr* (Chronicle of the Years of Fire, 1975). Bukový composed the music for his short film *Le temps d'une image* (The Time of an Image, 1965).

“If we wanted to express the most characteristic feature of Bukový’s work in four words, we would have to say: the pursuit of modernity,” says Jan Pilát in the introduction to a contemporary interview with Bukový for the *Kino* magazine. His film music is usually not only original, but also light and melodic, yet complex. It does not merely form an atmospheric backdrop to images, as was long required from film music in Czechoslovakia, but comes to the fore, helping to tell the story and flesh out the characters. The effort to equate the visual and sound components was based on Bukový’s close relationship to the visual arts. The images he surrounded himself with and studied inspired him to consider how visual perceptions could be expressed acoustically.

In 1965, Roman Berger became the artistic director of the Czechoslovak Television’s Sound Department and gathered several talented composers around him, including Ladislav Kupkovič, Ján Dolák, Jozef Malovec, and William Bukovský. In the second half of the 1960s, Bukovský was one of the most sought-after authors of film music in the Czech Republic, thanks to his fresh sound dramaturgy and striving for modernity in expression and content. However, the composer with an extraordinary memory and ear (as Ivan Stadruker remembered him) was struck down by a serious illness at the peak of his career.

William Bukový died in July 1968, aged just thirty-six. We can therefore only speculate whether he would have remained in Czechoslovakia after the August invasion of the Soviet forces, or whether he would have successfully established himself abroad thanks to his contacts and achieved the worldwide fame his talent predestined him for.

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