

Art & Culture

Czech Film

Few countries have a cinematic history as rich as the Czech Republic (Czechoslovakia until 1992), which is a considerable achievement given that the region had been in political turmoil for a good part of the last century. Nevertheless, the Czechs have maintained a consistent output of films stretching from the silent era to today.

Feature-length films came with the advent of **Barrandov Studios**, which was constructed in the early 1930's and still remains active as a major international studio. The earliest successes were also some of the most controversial: director **Gustav Machaty's Erotikon** (1929) featured the first nude scene in Czechoslovakian cinema; his next film, **Ekstase** (1933), caused even more of an uproar with its frank presentation of sexuality and an amorous **Hedy Lamarr** (then Hedy Kiesler). The famed comedy duo of **Jan Werich** and **Jiří (George) Voskovec**, a popular act that followed in the footsteps of silent comedians like Chaplin and Keaton, only made a few features together, among them **Money or Life (Peníze nebo život)**, 1931) and **Hej Rup** (1934). Both actors went on to international acclaim in their later years.

During World War II, German forces overtook Czechoslovakia, and Czech productions came to an artistic standstill as the Nazis commandeered Barrandov Studios. The communist coup in 1948 brought a new set of leaders. At first, oppression was just as strong as it was under Nazi rule. By the end of the 1950's, however, things were beginning to ease up, and a period of artistic richness known as Prague Spring was about to envelop the country.

The Czech New Wave

The Czech New Wave, which lasted from the early to late 1960's, was the country's most important time for cinema. Czechoslovakia was nominated for the Best Foreign Film Oscar for four straight years from 1966-1969. Twice they won.

Directed by **Ján Kadar** and **Elmar Klos**, **The Shop on Main Street (Obchod na korze)**, 1965) is about an old Jewish widow and her "Aryan controller", a coward who is given jurisdiction over her button shop during the early years of Nazi occupation. All the hallmarks of the Czech New Wave are here: humor mixed with tragedy, humanity, and an almost urgent sense of realism. It's a masterpiece that demands to be seen. Kadar and Klos made one more film together: **Adrift (Touha zvaná Anada)**, 1969), during which production was disrupted by Soviet occupation. Afterwards, Kadar emigrated to America, directing a couple minor Hollywood efforts before his death. Klos faded into obscurity: it was after twenty years of communist rule before he directed another film.

The following year brought **Closely Observed Trains (Ostře sledované vlaky)**, 1966), directed by **Jiří Menzel**, which is often pointed to as the pinnacle of Czech cinematic achievement, and also brought home the Academy Award. Menzel is an acquired taste, sometimes referred to as a Czech Woody Allen. His **Capricious Summer (Rozmarné léto)**, 1968) is another eccentric classic, continuing to play in Prague cinemas during the summer months almost forty years after it was made. Menzel is one of the few directors to enjoy continued success in Czechoslovakia during the Soviet occupation, though his films received less international recognition. Still, **The End of the Good Old Days (Konec starých časů)**, 1989) is a great absurdist comedy, and a fitting cinematic footnote to the end of communism in Czechoslovakia.

Everyone knows **Miloš Forman**. After the little-seen **Black Peter (Černý Petr)**, 1964) came **Loves of a Blonde (Lásky jedné plavovlásky)**, 1965) and **The Fireman's Ball (Hoří, má panenko)**, 1967), both nominated

for Academy Awards. Forman achieved his greatest success after emigration to America, however – modern classics like **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest** and **Amadeus** (which was shot in Prague), along with the consistent quality of his films, have made him one of the most respected directors in Hollywood. Forman's crew on his early Czech films also deserves special mention. Cinematographer **Miroslav Ondříček** went on to work with British surrealist **Lindsay Anderson**, then to Hollywood; some of his work, especially in Anderson's **O Lucky Man**, is among the best put to celluloid. Writer **Ivan Passer** also emigrated to America, where he directed some excellent but unfortunately little-seen 'B' films, including **Born to Win** with George Segal and **Cutter's Way** with Jeff Bridges.

Surrealism also flourished during the Czech New Wave, especially under directors **Věra Chytilová**, **Juraj Herz**, and **Jaromil Jireš**. Chytilová's **Daisies (Sedmikrásky)**, 1966) is gleefully subversive, an anarchic masterpiece, and one of the most experimental films of its time. Herz's **The Cremator (Spalovač mrtvol)**, 1968) is another masterpiece, a terrifying, unforgettable account of a disturbed cremator during the Holocaust. Jireš may not have made such lofty classics, but **The Joke (Žert)**, 1969) is one of the better adaptations of a Milan Kundera novel and **Valerie and her Week of Wonders (Valerie a týden divů)**, 1970) is a sumptuous, erotic, beautiful fairy tale. All three directors remained in Czechoslovakia during Soviet occupation, and continued to direct.

Jan Němec also thrived during the period, and though he may not be as famous as some of the other directors of the time, he was responsible for **Oratorio for Prague** (1968), the famous and widely-seen record of the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968. He also directed **Diamonds of the Night (Démanty noci)**, 1964) a compelling, nearly dialogue-less film that follows two young Jewish men as they run from their Nazi oppressors.

Oldřich Lipský isn't usually associated with the Czech New Wave, but he made some of his best and most renowned comedies during the period, including **Lemonade Joe (Limonádový Joe)**, 1964), a great Western parody, and **Happy End** (1966). The master puppeteer **Jiří Trnka** normally isn't associated with the Wave either, but his film **The Hand (Ruka)**, 1965) is a powerful short tackling the subjects of oppression and freedom of expression. It was eventually banned under communist rule.

In 1970, director **Karel Kachyňa** made one of the last gasps of the Czech New Wave. **The Ear (Ucho)** is a masterful film about political paranoia, concerning a bureaucrat who comes home one night to find a bug (wiretap) in his home. Or does he? The film is a thinly-veiled criticism of the communist regime now in full control of the country, and it was immediately banned, unseen until the fall of the regime in 1989. With the end of Prague Spring, Soviet control now stifling the arts, and many of the talented filmmakers fleeing the country, the Czech New Wave was officially over.

Cinema under Soviet Rule

During the 1970's and 80's, Czech film was dominated by fairy tales and light comedy. **Václav Vorlíček's Three Nuts for Cinderella (Tři oříšky pro Popelku)**, 1973) is a highly regarded Christmas classic, and the creators of **Cimrman**, writer **Zdeněk Svěrák** and director **Ladislav Smoljak**, brought us enjoyable satirical comedies such as **Waiter, Run for It! (Vrchní, prchni)**, 1981). Gone, however, were the serious, challenging films and eclectic auteurs of the Czech New Wave; vanished, quite literally, overnight.

Surrealism, strangely enough, managed to survive; the aforementioned surrealists continued to make films in the Czech Republic, albeit without the success they had experienced before. However, a shining star emerged during this time: **Jan Švankmajer** directed mostly short films during the 1970's and 80's, but his unique animations (stop-motion claymation, meat-mation, and other non-traditional forms) mixed with horror and perversity gained



international acclaim. To this day, Švankmajer remains a huge influence on animators around the world; his more recent feature-length films – such as *Alice (Něco z Alenky, 1988)*, *Conspirators of Pleasure (Spiklenci slasti, 1996)*, and *Lucacy (Šílení, 2005)* – have only added to his reputation as one of the greatest surrealists and animators in history.

Current Czech Film

Modern Czech cinema is almost directly based on the styles and techniques that were used from 1964-68; harsh realism mixed with comedy, a good dose of humanity, and usually a focus on a larger cast as opposed to a single main character. The political agenda and dark satire of the Czech New Wave, however, is often sorely missed.

Among the more popular of today's Czech directors are **Jan Hřebejk**, who gave us *Cosy Dens (Pelišky, 1999)* and the excellent *Divided We Fall (Musíme si pomáhat, 2000)*; **David Ondříček** – son of Miroslav – who directed *Loners (Samotáři, 2000)* and *Grandhotel (2006)*; and the immensely popular **Jan Svěrák** – son of Zdeněk – who, with his father serving as writer and star, brought home the Oscar with *Kolja* (1996).

Czech Poetry

The first poetry written in what is now the Czech Republic dates back to the 9th century, when manuscripts containing hymns and devotional poems began to appear across Eastern Europe. This early Czech poetry was written in Old Church Slavonic – a language developed by saints **Methodius** and **Cyril** as a way of fighting against Frankish (German) influence, although by the 11th century Latin had taken root. The first poems composed strictly in Czech, the *Legends of King Wenceslas* and *Hospodine, pomiluj ny* (Lord Have Mercy On Us), both date back to the 10th century. By the 13th and 14th centuries, Czech had become an accepted language for literature (*kunstsprache*), and scribes composed in Czech at the courts of the Přemyslid kings. During this period, prose was rare in Europe, and even works such as scientific treatises, almanacs, and building manuals were generally written in verse. The Czech lands were no exception, and before prose began to take hold in around 1350 there was a great deal of Czech poetry written on every subject.

In the 15th century, the religious controversies sparked by reformer **Jan Hus**, and the Catholic Church's weakening hold on Bohemia (in particular), led to a spate of religious satires and verse treatises (polemic poems) arguing one side of the religious debate. Early on, Bohemia showed signs of being influenced by the Italian Renaissance, not least due to the visit to Charles IV's court by **Petrarch**, the poet, scholar and godfather of 14th-century humanism. The closest thing to a Renaissance poet writing in Czech in this period was King Jiří's son **Hynek z Poděbrad**, who is credited with several texts including the poem *A Dream of May*, a semi-symbolic depiction of an erotic experience, and translations from the Italian poet Boccaccio.

A number of works appeared in the 16th century that were to shape the way Czech literature developed, including the writings of lexicographer **Daniel Adam z Velešlavina**, who extended and enriched the vocabulary of Czech, and the *Unitas Fratrum scholars'* translation of the Bible into Czech (*The Kralice Bible*, completed in 1593). The language of this Bible would later become the model for classical and literary Czech. However, in 1620, native Czech literature was dealt a blow by the Battle of White Mountain, in which the Austrian Habsburg army defeated the Bohemian Protestants. A new, non-Czech upper class was installed and the Czech language, now primarily used by the peasantry, came to be considered unsuitable for literature. However, the Czech émigrés who had fled the Habsburgs (most famously **Jan Amos Komenský**) kept Czech alive as a literary language, and within Bohemia and Moravia there was a blossoming of Catholic poetry in Latin, including works by the talented Classicist **Bohuslav Balbín**.

When the Romantic period dawned in the late 18th Century, Czechs were at the forefront. After two centuries of austere rule by foreign aristocrats, Romanticism's celebration of nationalism, local tradition, and peasant culture appealed to Czech poets. The so-called National

Revival began under the influence of writers like **Josef Jungmann**, whose translations into Czech and his monumental Czech-German dictionary were designed to prove the richness and adaptability of the Czech language. The Slovak poet **Ján Kollár**, who wrote in Czech, created the best of the early Romantic works, *Slávy dcera* – an allegorical sonnet sequence in which the narrator's love for an idealized woman is transformed into patriotic love for his homeland. Another talented poet came in the surprising guise of a literary forger, **Václav Hanka**. Hanka counterfeited two manuscripts supposedly written in Medieval Czech, which are in themselves great pieces of Czech Romantic literature.

However, the greatest of the Czech Romantic poets was **Karel Hynek Mácha**. His most famous work, *Máj* (May), is made up of four songs and two intermezzos describing the doomed love of a bandit, Vláďm, for Jarmila, a young woman who has been seduced by his father. The poem caused a scandal on publication, but has come to be seen as one of the most original and important works in Czech literature. *Máj* was particularly revolutionary because Mácha used iambic meter, a rhythm in which one unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable in an alternating pattern – a startling innovation in Czech poetry. Mácha's influence on later verse was so strong that the next generation of Czech writers was named the *Máj Group* in his honor. Poets belonging to this group included **Vítězslav Hálek** and the brilliant **Jan Neruda**, whose name was later borrowed by a fan of his work, the Chilean poet **Pablo Neruda**. In the late 19th Century, writers split into two opposing camps: in one were those involved with the journal *Lumír* (such as the masterly **Jaroslav Vrchlický**), who held that Czech literature needed to become more cosmopolitan and European; in the other those who sided with its competitor *Ruch* (such as the satirist **Svatopluk Čech**), and supported literature that followed native Czech traditions. At the end of the 19th century, new trends began to appear in the work of poets like **Otokar Březina** and **Petr Bezruč**. Březina in particular was a highly gifted poet whose subtle tone and skilful metrical structures (including free rhythms) had a strong influence on 20th-century Czech poetry.

After the establishment in 1918 of an independent Czechoslovak state, Czech literature thrived. While **Čapek** and **Langer** were revolutionizing Czech drama and **Hašek**, **Čapek**, and **Vancura** were changing the face of the Czech novel, poetry did not lag behind. Between 1918 and 1945 poets like **František Halas**, **Vítězslav Nezval**, and **Jaroslav Seifert** (later awarded a Nobel Prize for literature) were writing in a wide range of poetic genres to a very high standard. However, after the end of World War II the communist regime clamped down on free literary activity, and Czech literature suffered a steep decline. Drab social realism became the standard in both prose and poetry. Yet when political controls loosened in the 1960s, poetry underwent another temporary renaissance. Among this new generation were the poets **Jiří Sotola**, **Miroslav Florian**, **Miroslav Holub** and **Karel Šiktanc**, who aimed to create a new 'poetry of the everyday', and drew on the writings of **Jacques Prevert** and Italian Neorealist film. After the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968, conditions again became harsh for writers. Many emigrated, others stayed and wrote for the underground samizdat press or had their manuscripts smuggled to the West.

Since the end of the communist era, poetry has undergone a leap, in quantitative terms at least. According to the literary critic **Milan Jungmann**, 180 new volumes of Czech poetry were published in the Czech Republic in the first half of 1996 alone. Although many critics complain that modern Czech poetry is overly experimental and abstract, there have been some success stories. The most influential poet of recent years has been the late **Petr Kabeš**, whose poetry attempted to incorporate elements from everyday language by drawing quotation, direct and reported speech into his texts.

Czech Literature

Czechs have always been known as a nation of bibliophiles; for evidence of this, one needn't look any further than the multitude of book sellers on the street, the bookstores and rare book dealers all about the city, and the novels on sale at the newsstand (*tabák*), stacked right next to the daily gossip rags and bubble gum. Scholars quibble over the exact date of the dawn of Czech literature, but one

thing is for certain: no Slavic people began producing literature in their own language before the Czechs.

In the Beginning

Somewhere between the 9th and 10th centuries the legends of St. Wenceslas were composed and written in Old Church Slavonic, the first literary Slavic language. Long before this time, a rich tradition of folk songs and stories existed, and the folklore of the Czech lands continued to flourish alongside its written literature. But Latin trumped Old Church Slavonic around 1100 when Czech literature was mainly comprised of Latin chronicles and Czech hymns. Later on, Czech literature reached an important zenith under the reign of Charles IV (1346–1378). Among many of Charles's bright ideas was the foundation of a university in Prague in 1348. It was here that Jan Hus started tossing out Latin and German loan-words, in essence creating an effective literary language. Also contributing to the stabilization of the language and its literature was the publication of the **Trojan Chronicle** (1468). Two copies of the book exist today and you can view them at the National Library of the Czech Republic and the Library of the National Museum. **The Kralice Bible** (a translation of the bible) was completed in 1594. It is at this point that one can clearly see the birth and development of a distinct Czech literature. Epic compositions written in verse appeared, as did chronicles, lyrical pieces, legends, satires, and fables.

As borders shifted, war broke out, and the populace divided, literature followed suit. After the Battle of White Mountain in 1620, Protestants fled the country seeking safety in exile. The most significant of these exiles was **Jan Ámos Komenský**, a philosopher who led a sojourn to Poland. He published a tome called **Labyrinth of the World** (among 153 other books) that has been compared to **Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress**. Back in the Czech lands, Catholic literature written in Latin reigned supreme while Czech literary works were destroyed and national life was all but extinguished. The Czech lands were now part of the Austrian empire and would remain so until the end of World War I.

The National Revival

During the late 18th century, and spurred on by the ideals of the Enlightenment, a renaissance in Czech literature began. Philologist and historian **Josef Dobrovský**, who takes his place in history as one of the most important figures of the Bohemian national revival, led the charge, resurrecting the Czech language and upholding the importance of the distant past, ordinary life, and the beauty of folk traditions in his work. The second wave of revivalists was led by **Josef Jungmann**, a scholar who was noted for his brilliant translations of Milton as well as his **History of Czech Literature** (1825). In the spirit of the times, stories that evoked a sense of pastoralism and misty-eyed romanticism were in vogue. In 1855, **Božena Němcová** wrote **Babička**, her beloved tale of a young girl who spends her childhood in the Czech countryside with her grandmother. **Jan Neruda** was also a strong voice for patriotism. He wrote his **Tales of the Little Quarter** in 1878. The stories examine daily life in Prague's Malá Strana neighborhood, evoking its streets, shops, and homes through the eyes of a rich cast of characters. Novelist **Alois Jirásek's** work, including **Old Bohemian Legends** (1894) and **Against Everyone** (1893), was imbued with themes of freedom and justice.

Czech Literature's Finest Hour

The Czech Republic gained independence from Austria in 1918, after which literature broke free of nationalism. The years between 1918 and 1938 were a golden age for Czech literature. Works coming out of the country were considered extremely sophisticated and urbane by a worldwide audience. Here the abstract and hedonistic style that characterizes much of modern Czech literature picked up speed. **Jaroslav Hašek** wrote his classic satire **The Good Soldier Švejk** in 1920; **Franz Kafka**, who wrote in German but was born in Prague and considered Bohemia his homeland, was the darling of literary circles worldwide. Science fiction writer **Karel Čapek** was an international success, nominated for a Nobel Prize in 1936. Čapek paved the way for writers like Orwell and Huxley after him; he even coined the word 'robot' in his play **R.U.R.** (Rossum's Universal Robots). **Vladislav Vančura** was a satirist and humorist whose collection of stories, **End of Old Times** (1934), a bestseller about life in a Bohemian country

chateau, tragically foreshadowed events to come: the writer was executed by the SS in Prague in 1942.

The Price of War

The Nazi occupation of the Czech Republic dealt a cruel blow to the world of arts and letters, with a number of writers felled by the evil regime. Victims of the repression include painter, writer, poet, and brother of **Karel, Josef Čapek** (he died in a concentration camp); prominent journalist **Julius Fučík** who wrote his book **Notes from the Gallows** on cigarette papers that he smuggled out of a Pankrác prison (he was eventually beheaded in Germany); novelist **Karel Poláček** was killed in Auschwitz. **Václav Černý's** book **Memories (Paměti)** bears witness to the period of German occupation.

Dissident Literature

The postwar literature of the Czech Republic could be labeled as such: legal, illegal, and exile. In order to be published in communist Czechoslovakia, writers were restricted to themes that embraced and supported the tenets of socialist realism (i.e. communist propaganda). A period of strict censorship occurred after the Communist Party gained absolute power in February 1948. Avant-garde authors with revolutionary socialist leanings risked persecution and worse. A number of writers fled the country, while others chose to stay and write yet remain unpublished. Toward the end of the 1950's censorship was slightly relaxed and a few poets were allowed to publish again. Prose, however, lagged behind. By the 1960's literature began to transcend the officially approved style. Prose turned inward, rejecting accepted discussions on socialism and exploring themes of a more personal nature. **Milan Kundera's** first novel, **The Joke** appeared in 1967. **Bohumil Hrabal** earned a reputation as one of the most prominent of contemporary authors, weaving his colorful characters into loosely structured, strangely beautiful narratives. The end of the decade saw a return to experimental literature with surrealist, abstract, and Dadaist texts appearing. **Ivan Klíma** and **Josef Škvorecký** gained worldly reputations.

Prague Spring (1968) brought with it a return to severe censorship. Literary magazines and newspapers were shut down and authors who refused to conform were silenced. Kundera fled to France; Škvorecký to Canada where he established Sixty-Eight Publishers in Toronto – he would later publish works by future president of the new republic, poet and playwright **Václav Havel**, and other 'illegal' authors. The publications issued by these small, underground presses were dubbed **samizdat**. By the 1970's hand-published samizdat literature began to take on enormous importance. Havel organized some of the largest editions of samizdat literature and many of the authors included in these publications signed, and were subsequently jailed for signing, the famed **Charter 77** petition, which would become a crucial document in engineering the fall of communism. Also signing the petition was writer **Jáchym Topol**. Topol's brutal, aggressive and vulgar work sparked a new movement in literature; writers began producing rebellious, brutally honest accounts of daily life in Czechoslovakia. Topol also founded the literary magazine **Revolver Revue**, which still exists today.

Contemporary Authors

The fall of communism in 1989 meant the return of artistic freedoms. Works of illegal and exiled authors were finally published and many returned to their home countries, reviving their careers. Some say that contemporary Czech literature has since been marginalized by film, a genre that has remained vibrant and relevant throughout the years following the Velvet Revolution. **Michael Viewegh** is a familiar name in the world of contemporary letters; his work has been compared to Nick Hornby. **Petra Hulová**, one of the Czech Republic's youngest writing stars, has taken the literary scene by storm. **Miloš Urban**, the so-called 'black knight' of Czech literature is the master of modern gothic. To get a taste for contemporary Czech writers, two superb collections exist, compiled by internationally renowned translator Alexandra Buechler. This *Side of Reality*, an anthology of modern Czech literature, and *Allskin and Other Stories*, a collection of women Czech writers, are both essential additions to any library.



Gene Deitch: For The Love of Prague

Hellichova 11a Mala Strana, 118 00 Praha 1
 ☎ +420 728 558 801

www.fortheloveofprague.com genedeitch@yahoo.com

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Czech Music

What do the American National Football League (NFL), Neil Armstrong, and Britain's Hovis Bakery have in common? That would be Czech composer **Antonín Dvořák**. The NFL uses Symphony Number 9 as a 'comeback' theme song in a number of its television specials; Neil Armstrong walked on the moon to New World Symphony; the British bread maker Hovis used the same piece for one of its TV ad campaigns. If these facts still don't clue you into the Czech Republic's international musical importance, maybe Prague's Mozart connection will: the great Austrian composer debuted his opera *Don Giovanni* here in Prague.

Songs for Church

Like most other art forms, early music in the Czech Republic was largely ecclesiastical. Missionaries brought the Christian church service to the Czech lands, introducing choirs at daily liturgies. Liturgical singing evolved in the 11th and 12th centuries as the cult of St. Wenceslas gained popularity – partly thanks to the spiritual song **Svatý Václav** (Saint Wenceslas). By the reign of Charles IV (14th century) the first songwriters appeared; they were archbishop **Jan of Jenštejn** and the Dominican Dominaslav. Schools became important cultural centers, particularly where music was concerned. During this period the polyphonic technique (music for several voices) was lauded throughout Central Europe. Fast forward to the Reformation and you'll find a stall in the development of the country's musicianship until the 15th century when court orchestras became commonplace. The most important genre of the era was the spiritual song, often sung in both Czech and Latin. The stormy Hussite movement launched an abundance of religious songs that preached conversion. The religious war song also became a hit: **Povstaň, povstaň, veliké město Pražské (Arise, Arise, Great City of Prague!)**.

The personal orchestra of Emperor Rudolph was one of the biggest and most important in Europe. The orchestra was a part of church services as St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague Castle's All Saints Church. The Rudolphine court ensemble was considered a specimen of musical perfection throughout the continent. The most memorable name of this period was probably the polyphonic composer **Kryštof Harant of Polčice** (1564–1621) who met a tragic end in the Bohemian Estates revolt of the Thirty Years War. This war would prove detrimental to the development of new music, but some of the most innovative and exciting times in the history of the art form lay just on the horizon.

The Big M

As the country spent the decades after 1648 recovering from the war, a number of new trends in music came to the forefront. Seats of country nobility became important bastions for music, as did monastic seminaries. Toward the end of the 17th century, lute playing came into vogue. **Jan Dismas Zelenka** (1678–1745) was considered a Baroque virtuoso on par with Johann Sebastian Bach. As the 18th century drew to a close, Neopolitan operas, performed by visiting Italian opera societies had a potent influence, as did the music of the working class. Slowly, as the wealth and power of the nobility shifted into decline, the aristocratic orchestras began to disappear and music was returned to the people with public concerts and municipal operas popping up all over Prague. The greatest classical composer of all time, **Wolfgang**

Amadeus Mozart, conducted the world premiere of his *Don Giovanni* on October 29, 1787 at Stavovské Divadlo. Miloš Forman even shot his acclaimed film *Amadeus* here in the early 1980s.

Stars are Born

Perhaps the Czechs were a little too crazy about Mozart as the enthusiasm for his music reached well into the 19th century, arguably slowing any new musical developments. But the 1860's introduced two very powerful musical forces to the world: **Bedřich Smetana** (1824–84) and **Antonín Dvořák** (1841–1904), who would go down in history as not only incomparable maestros in their own country, but as geniuses on an international scale. These composers undoubtedly contributed to the quality of and popular interest in Czech music. As a result, the **Czech Philharmonic** was established in 1896.

Music flourished in 1918 upon the solidification of the Czechoslovak state. In 1920, the **Prague Conservatory's Meisterschule** (an early incarnation of the Academy of Performing Arts) came into being. Recording studios sprang up and people started to buy gramophones. The first radio broadcast was in 1923; new concert halls and opera houses opened frequently. As for the sound of the day, modernism was creeping its way into the musical aesthetic, with artists **Bohuslav Martinů** (1890–1959) and **Alois Hába** (1893–1973) composing works that examined the plight of modern man.

Troubled Times

The Nazi occupation set the scene for bleak times but, for some, music was a beacon of hope. The works of **Smetana**, **Dvořák**, and **Mozart**, were of great symbolic significance to the people of the country – until war was officially declared and music making all but criminalized. Works written in secret during this time debuted to overwhelming praise after the war had ended. **Kabeláč's** cantata *Neustupujme (Do Not Retreat)* was met with a wildly enthusiastic response. **The Academy of Performing Arts** was established in Prague in 1945; a year after that the Syndicate of Czech Composers was organized. 1946 also heralded the first Prague Spring Music Festival, still a popular event today. Unfortunately, the numerous bouts with totalitarianism throughout Czech history would snuff out the creative light of many composers: conformity was the only way to legally create and perform music. Though the 1960's brought a brief relaxation of the rules, the other Prague Spring, the communist takeover of 1968, squelched civic freedoms until 1989.

Clashing with Communism

And so what was the fate of the modern musician? For a handful, business could continue as usual. During the 1950's and 1960's jazz musicians were safe – they were some of the few melody makers tolerated by the regime. **Karel Gott**, one of the Czech Republic's most beloved singers (he's considered the 'Sinatra of the East'), continued on with his non-threatening pop ditties, as did his female colleague **Helena Vondráčková**. Despite this fact, both remain top-selling acts today. The early days of Czech rock-and-roll were characterized by a sound called 'bigbit' which was mildly tolerated – those bands who threw in the occasional ode to socialism could still get work. But by the 1970's and 1980's tolerance for the outspoken musician was at an all-time low and formerly respected, successful artists (mainly songwriters), were forced to emigrate. Among them: folksinger **Jaroslav Hutka** and celebrated rocker **Ivan Král** who went on to perform with Patti Smith, Iggy Pop, and David Bowie. **The Plastic People of the Universe** (a Frank Zappa/Velvet Underground hybrid) stuck around, refusing to compromise their music, and wound up in jail in 1976. The outcry over their imprisonment manifested itself in the famed Charter 77 petition that would initiate the end of the communist rule in 1989.

Post-Revolt Rock

The Velvet Revolution unleashed an intense interest in previously forbidden music. Almost 20 years later, the Czech Republic, Prague in particular, is home to some of the most unique and innovative sounds in the business. Where to begin? Folkies will appreciate the knowing accord of young singer **Radůza** or the Moravian-influenced band **Cechomor**. Hip-hop lovers should get on board with **Gipsy.cz**, **Oreon**, or **Supercroo**: **Monkey Business** are the country's best-known purveyors of pop – with a dash of funk and disco tossed in – as is their sometime collaborator **Dan Bárta**. **Chinaski** are the ČR's resident

rock stars. **Support Lesbiens** (most of their songs are performed in English) get the indie rock vote. For something harder, **Divokej Bill** has punk leanings. **The Ecstasy of St. Teresa** are an electronic act who have gained critical acclaim abroad. If you love show tunes, adult contemporary, and/or favor a 10 pm bedtime, you'll love **Lucie Bílá**.

Music



Prague Symphony Orchestra

nám. Republiky 5, 110 00 Praha 1

☎ +420 222 002 425

🌐 www.fok.cz ✉ ps@fok.cz



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Nám. Sv. Čecha 14, Prague 10 ☎ +420 728 892 928

Czech Art

Ancient Art and Romanesque

The story of Czech art begins with a woman. Made of clay and ash she is the **Věstonice Venus**, named after the site in Moravia where archaeologists discovered her. It is believed that she is 30,000 years old. The next most important piece on the timeline is the exquisite **Vyšehrad Codex**, a late-11th century illuminated manuscript honoring the coronation of King Vratislav in 1085. Today you can find it at the Czech National Library. The Romanesque tradition that followed appears in the forms of church frescoes – the murals in St. Catherine's rotunda in Znojmo are a fine example of Romanesque work, as is the triptych of St. George's Cloister on the grounds of Prague Castle. Lucky individuals who get the chance to visit the **Chapel of the Holy Cross**, the most important space at Karlštejn Castle, can drink in the 129 gothic panel paintings by **Master Theodoricus**, Charles IV's court painter. The panels depict martyrs, virgins, popes, and other venerable figures. Another court painter who made a mark on Czech art history was Rudolph II's **Giuseppe Arcimboldo** (1532-1593). Considered a Mannerist, his artistic expression tended toward the bizarre: he composed a portrait of the Emperor from flowers and fruit.

Baroque and Classical

Baroque witnessed a shift in sensibilities as painters and sculptors attempted to convincingly depict human emotion. Baroque master **Petr Brandl** (1668-1735) painted large altar pictures that portrayed biblical scenes touched with raw emotion. His contemporary **Jan Kupecký** (1667-1740) was equally adept at capturing character traits. Sculptors **Ferdinand Maxmilian Brokoff** (1688-1731) and **Matthias Bernard Braun** (1684-1738) bestowed the statues on the Charles Bridge with their present-day appearance. Famed classical painter **Antonín Mánes** (1784-1843) was the first artist to take interest in the Old Jewish Cemetery motifs and encouraged his pupils to derive their inspiration from this source.

The National Revival

Students of Czech history are familiar with the surge of patriotism that characterized the literature, music, and art of this time. In the art world the construction of the **National Theater** (1868-83) and the **Rudolfinum** (1885) embodied the renaissance in Czech culture. Artists who contributed to these projects were known as **The National Theater Generation**. They included **Bohumil Schnirch** (triga above the entrance), **Antonín Wagner** (the muses – Goddess of Arts and Science), the founding father of modern Czech sculpture, **Josef Václav Myslbek** (the bronze statue of Music), and many others. Myslbek is alternatively known for sculpting the St. Wenceslas monument on Wenceslas Square. Romanticism played a role in the nationalist fervor as well. Its leading figure was **Josef Mánes** (1820-71) the son of Antonín. He illustrated numerous genre scenes that

included detailed depictions of traditional Czech costumes, and also lent his skilled hand to books of folk songs. His most notable work is the calendar disc of Prague's **Astronomical Clock** (1866).

Impression, Symbolism, and Art Nouveau

The National Theater Generation gave way to a new school of artists who strived to create more modern movements in form and style. They united as **The Mánes Association of Artists**. Their legacy is alive today in the form of Prague's **Mánes House**, one of the most significant works of functionalist architecture in the city, which currently serves as a premiere exhibition space. The Mánes artists splintered into smaller movements. The symbolists appeared in two waves. The early symbolist ideals were manifested in the work of sculptor **František Bílek** (1872-1941) whose statues expressed the tragic nature of existence. His contemporary **Jan Preisler** (1872-1918) painted works of an enigmatic, mysterious, and, ultimately, sad nature. The second wave of symbolism took place just before World War I. Brought to life by **Jan Zrzavý** and **Josef Váchal** (1884-1969), this movement was driven by the artistic recapturing of dreamscapes. Decorative Art Nouveau is where the name **Alfons Mucha** (1860-1939) reverberates loudest. This painter's talents were snapped up by theaters in Paris who commissioned him to design programs and posters for Parisian thespian du jour Sarah Bernhardt.

Modernism

Avant-garde movements were also springing up before and after both wars. Proponents of Picasso's work, painters **Emil Filla** and **Bohumil Kubišta** are among the most interesting figures of the cubist era in Czech painting, as was **Josef Čapek** (1887-1945) and sculptor **Otto Gutfreund** (1889-1927). **František Kupka** (1871-1957) was the pioneer of abstract painting. Painters **Jindřich Štyrský** (1899-1942) and **Toyen** (1902-1980), whose real name was **Marie Cermínová**, led the surrealist movement in the Czech Republic. Štyrský was one of the first artists to tackle color collage, injecting his work with eroticism and black humor. Toyen, famed for her outrageous, cross-dressing ways, used a number of media to express the absurdity of war. Experimental art continued to dominate the scene throughout World War II, with painter **Kamil Lhoták's** Group 42 concerning themselves with the role of the individual in modern civilization.

Contemporary Art

Carrying on the traditions of experimental heavy-hitters that came before them, **David Černý** (1967) and **Jaroslav Rona** (1957) are two contemporary artists who embody the spirit of the postmodern. Prague sculptor Černý's controversial works can be seen in many spots throughout the city. In 1991 he gained notoriety by painting pink a Soviet tank that served as a war memorial in central Prague. Another of Černý's contributions to Prague is **Tower Babies**, a series of black infants ascending **Žižkov Television Tower**. In 2005, Černý created 'Shark', an image of Saddam Hussein in a tank of formaldehyde that lampooned Damien Hirst's similar formaldehyde-soaked installation. 'Horse' is a recreation of St. Václav sitting atop the stomach of his dead horse. Acclaimed sculptor and painter **Rona's** famed Kafka statue that adorns the corner of Dušní and Vězeňská streets is a fitting tribute to the great writer.

SNAPSHOT: CZECH PHOTOGRAPHERS

Internationally renowned Czech photographer **František Drtíkol** (1883- 1961) is known for his characteristically epic photographs, often nudes and portraits, created in his famed studio on Vodičkova Street. He is considered the founder of Czech modern photography. **Josef Sudek** (1896- 1976) was the first photographer to be honored by the Czech government. His haunting and remarkable still lifes reflect his enigmatic personality. **Jan Saudek** (1935) is recognized in the West as one of the Czech Republic's most famous photographers. His work is noted for its eroticism, evocation of childhood, and the ambiguity between man and woman.