

# CLARINETTIST MILAN KOSTOHRYZ

## HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD OF RECONSTRUCTION OF HISTORICAL INSTRUMENTS AND HIS INNOVATIVE PROMOTION OF NEW INSTRUMENTS

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### Abstract

My dissertation at the Department of Music Education and Culture at the University of West Bohemia is entitled “Milan Kostohryz. His contribution to music interpretation and pedagogy.” The dissertation focuses on an extraordinary musician, Milan Kostohryz (1911–1998), who had a significant impact on both the Czech and worldwide music community. He was highly professional, passionate, and meticulous, which was reflected in the wide scope of his activities. He was a reliable and sought-after player (in opera orchestras, chamber ensembles and as a soloist); a respected and successful teacher (almost all his students were successful in the field); an exceptional methodologist (he wrote a number of methodical articles and papers, which are relevant to this day); a researcher in the field of music history (he investigated the development of wind instruments in Czechia and revised dozens of old compositions). Many contemporary composers wrote works specifically for him, which he then premiered.

Thanks to his extensive correspondence with dozens of music personalities all over the world, he contributed to several specialized international publications and was regularly invited to music conferences abroad (e.g. USA, Germany).

His niche specialisation included official reviews of the quality of instruments (clarinets and saxophones) and mouthpieces available on the market at that time. He took part in the reconstruction of “Mozart’s basset clarinet” based on period sketches and built a working quarter-tone clarinet. His extensive interest in his field sets him apart from his contemporaries, many of whom were “just players”, rather than researchers.

This dissertation is concerned mainly with his above-mentioned research.

The principal resource for the research is an extensive written estate, with which I have been entrusted. It is currently deposited in the Czech museum of music in Prague (CMM). There are very few printed resources, as M. Kostohryz was not permitted to make substantial publications due to political reasons (see Bibliography).

### Key words

Clarinet – music – quarter-tone music – music pedagogy – 20<sup>th</sup> century music – contemporary music – correspondence – inheritance – reconstruction of musical instruments – advancement of musical instruments – modernisation of musical instruments – new music – Milan Kostohryz – Rudolf Trejbal – Alois Hába – Artur Holas – Jiří Kratochvíl – Prague Conservatoire

## Biography of Milan Kostohryz

Milan Kostohryz was born on 1<sup>st</sup> June 1911 in Kostelec nad Orlicí in East Bohemia. He was the fourth child of Anastázie (born Bartůňková) and František Kostohryz. The family came from South Bohemia (the town of Bojenice u Bernartic) and a significant part of the Kostohryz lineage had an artistic background (painters, musicians, poets – e.g. famous poet and translator Josef Kostohryz (1907–1987), who was persecuted in the 1950s by the communist regime and judged in the same trial as resistance fighter Růžena Vacková).

His father was a secondary school teacher, a respected specialist in fine arts and a passionate singer and an amateur clarinetist. It might have been thanks to his father that young Milan developed an interest in music.

He began his music education at the age of seven, first on violin (in Pilsen, taught by Václav Mottl and Václav Kalík), and piano, which was an obligatory social skill. At the age of 11, he switched to the clarinet and stuck to it for the rest of his life.

His dutiful father, a schoolmaster, decided that his son Milan must have a secure livelihood, and thus sent him to study at grammar school in Pilsen. He originally registered in Kostelec nad Orlicí, but did not enrol, as the family moved to West Bohemia. He obtained his school diploma in 1929 at the grammar school in Prague in Hellichova street, as the family had moved again.

Between 1932 and 1933 he underwent compulsory military service. He requested to join the Military Orchestra of the T. G. Masaryk 5<sup>th</sup> infantry regiment. As described in his memoirs, it was there where he “received plenty of help with his initial training in orchestral playing”<sup>1</sup>

He went on to study at the Faculty of Agriculture at the Czech Technical University (CTU), where he earned a doctorate in the field of biology in 1938, his dissertation title being “Geometric representation of the bone pelvis of domestic animals”. To pursue his multiple talents, he also took lessons at the conservatoire with renowned clarinet teacher, Artur Holas.

He initially took private lessons with him, as Holas was his neighbour in the Prague 5 – Košíře district. In 1932 he successfully auditioned to the conservatoire. Having inherited his father’s all-round musicality, he also attended two years of lessons in classical singing with Hilbert Vávra (though, originally, he was going to study with Egon Fuchs, the famous opera singer and publicist) and also studied composition with Alois Hába.

Eventually, he decided to focus on clarinet playing, and performed several times as a soloist with the conservatoire symphony orchestra, earning acclaim in the press:

“In Mozart’s clarinet Concerto in A major, Milan Kostohryz, a graduate of the conservatoire, developed a sonorous tone, melodic interpretation and a mature technical command of his instrument.”<sup>2</sup>

As time went on, he earned further recognition in the press, such as: “Milan Kostohryz, a clarinetist popular in Prague, gave an excellent performance in the concert...”<sup>3</sup>

During the Nazi occupation, he decided to leave his secure office job and began to focus on performing and artistic activities. Apparently, he felt his work in the patent office, where

<sup>1</sup> Kostohryz’s memoirs, typed, p. 6; provided by Eva Uchalová.

<sup>2</sup> *Národní politika*, 25. 11. 1937.

<sup>3</sup> *Lidové noviny*, 25. 6. 1941.

he had been employed since 15.3.1937, was lacking in prospects. Paradoxically, it was there that he gained valuable practical experience which would be of use in the future. The main reason for his leaving was, in his own words, that the German management at the office began to be suspicious of him due to his music activities.<sup>4</sup>

It seems appropriate to include the following quotations from the press of that time:

“Dr. Milan Kostohryz has chosen to express his love of music through the clarinet, instrument of a sweet, yet dreamy and melancholic quality, but also of a brilliant technique. He managed to establish himself amongst our foremost artists of this instrument.”<sup>5</sup>

Or another elaborate review:

“Clarinetist Milan Kostohryz from Prague left his day job and decided to commit himself fully to music, especially his favourite instrument, the clarinet. He has amazing dispositions for that. He plays with his whole body, every little vein, with a high level of musicality and a superb technical command. His tone in Mozart's Concerto in A major was pristine, with a palette of colours and dynamics, secure in the dangerous skips between low and high range, and preciously melodic throughout. The low end of Kostohryz's clarinet playing sounded reminiscent of the colours of the bassoon, and his high notes sounded like the oboe. The artist is well knowledgeable about the style, as his Mozart was in some places playful in a rococo idiom and lightly airy. Truly stylistically idiomatic, and thanks to his finger technique and breath facility, a genuine master of his instrument.”<sup>6</sup>

After the liberation in 1945 he took on a position in the opera orchestra of the Smetana Theatre, started teaching at the conservatoire and later also at the newly established Academy of Arts. He was active not only as a soloist, but also as a chamber musician, event organiser, commentator, jury member, critic, radio performer, researcher, developer of instruments, scientist ...

It is practically impossible to name all of Kostohryz's activities. His influence on Czech culture is highly significant, as much as his international involvement. Of the above, I have chosen to focus on two activities of similar content: constructing a replica of Mozart's basset clarinet, and reconstructing the quarter-tone clarinet. Both made a major contribution to the development of instruments and their modifications. It is important to bear in mind this took place at a time when the clarinet was nothing like as popular as it is nowadays. I dare say that Milan Kostohryz had a significant impact in the field of clarinet study and music in general, thanks to his immense interest and passion.

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<sup>4</sup> As indicated in private documents of his family, M. Kostohryz worked between 1935 and 1937 as an assistant for the Institute of Anatomy and Physiology of Domestic Animals at the CTU in Prague, and since 1937 at the patent office as a typist, and since 1940 as a ministry commissioner there as well.

<sup>5</sup> *Lidové noviny*, 19. 5. 1943.

<sup>6</sup> *Lidové noviny*, 10. 2. 1944.

## Building instruments and reviews of clarinet mouthpieces

Kostohryz was repeatedly praised for his dedicated work in the field of developing new instruments and accessories in the Czechoslovakian national company Amati Kraslice. He directly contributed to the development of B-flat clarinets of the “Luxus” and “Maestro” series, which were of high quality and much in demand. His collaboration involved not only practical advice on tone quality, but also on intonation and dynamic attributes of the clarinet. The goal was to create a universal and durable instrument, which was definitely achieved, considering these models are still widely used amongst players to this day.

Kostohryz’s abundant experience gained in the instrument workshop of Rudolf Trejbal in Prague was also relevant in serial manufacturing. His passion for the clarinet, not just from the point of view of interpretation, was truly all-round.

In his estate, there were quite a few resources documenting how he meticulously trialed and reviewed new models of clarinet mouthpieces, which were sent to him by makers from all over the world. Here is a citation from one of his reviews of this kind:

“A review of clarinet mouthpiece S6 manufactured by Amati Kraslice: The mouthpiece is made of high-quality ebonite. The surface is very well treated. The external shape fulfils expectations of aesthetics, as well as of comfort for the player’s teeth position. The beak of the mouthpiece, which supports the top incisors when playing, is elegantly shaped, so the mouthpiece sits in the lips securely. The position and side rails of the mouthpiece, the shape and size of the window and the inner structure of the mouthpiece give the mouthpiece required qualities, such as a bright and full sound, clear and light attack, a good balance across the range, a quality tone in the lowest and highest register, and a flexibility concerning the choice of reeds. I play on this mouthpiece, and I prefer it over Selmer C85 and Vandoren 5RV Lyre, which I had played on previously.”<sup>7</sup>

Kostohryz also wrote similar reviews for many other mouthpieces manufactured at that time. In 1961, he reviewed foreign products for a company called Ligna in Vodičkova street in Prague:

“Mouthpiece Brillhart Personaline, reviewed from the point of view of manufacturing, is a product made of black plastic, which is easy to polish. The surface that meets the reed is shaped utilising a machine. The beak, which serves to support the top incisors while playing, is fitted with a round insert made of white plastic – apparently harder than the material the mouthpiece is made of. As for its sound qualities, it is a very good mouthpiece concerning tone colour, attack, and balance of registers. Compared to glass mouthpieces (such as Bucchi and Pomarico makes), its tone is “shorter” – it does not ring on and is not as rich in the upper harmonic series.

Julton 4 mouthpiece is also a model made of synthetic resin, the colour of ivory. The beak, which supports the top incisors, is fitted with an insert made of firm black rubber. The ligature holding the reed on this mouthpiece is not so convenient, we still prefer using ligatures with two tightening screws. The protective cap is beautifully

<sup>7</sup>CMM, Review of clarinet mouthpiece Amati S6, undated manuscript.

and purposefully built. The surface that meets the reed is also shaped utilising a machine. Overall, one could say that this make of mouthpiece is processed more thoroughly than the Brillhart mouthpiece. As for the sound qualities, both makes are pretty similar. They are both good quality standard products, which ought to be sold for a friendly price, considering the inexpensive manufacturing process. If that is the case I am happy to recommend them both. However, the ideal choice for symphonic and opera players with high expectations is either a glass mouthpiece produced in Italy or a hard rubber mouthpiece produced in France.”<sup>8</sup>

Today, as the market is saturated with products, performers often do not take such references into account. However, in the 1960s, when Kostohryz was asked to provide these reviews, his opinion had a significant impact on the sales of different products.

## Constructing new instruments

Instrument making, particularly reconstructing old clarinets and basset horns and their modifications, was significantly influenced by the collaboration of the talented instrument maker Rudolf Trejbal and three clarinet enthusiasts: Milan Kostohryz, Jiří Kratochvíl and Josef Janouš.

Milan Kostohryz was nominated as a member of several panels “for the conception and development of instruments” at the Amati Kraslice company. At the time, the political and economic propaganda proclaimed it was necessary for Czechoslovakia to be completely independent concerning the development of musical instruments, and even ought to use the instrument makers’ skills to gain foreign currency. Therefore, the production of new instruments was encouraged, and active musicians were often invited to participate. Kostohryz spent several years privately researching and constructing two models of modified clarinets, which subsequently earned him an invitation to collaborate with the national company.

## Development of quarter-tone clarinet

A number of artists were trying to develop quarter-tone instruments. Before Alois Hába, there was also the German composer Viktor Ullmann in 1917. In Czechia, the true representatives of this endeavour and active ambassadors of quarter-tone music were Milan Kostohryz and Jiří Kratochvíl.

They received substantial support from instrument makers from the former company Kohlert & Sons in Kraslice, where experiments with quarter-tone mechanism had taken place already before World War Two. Later, they benefited from collaboration with the Amati Kraslice company, instrument maker Rudolf Trejbal, and many enthusiastic clarinetists from abroad. Their work was based on an existing patent of a quarter-tone clarinet from Germany, which Rudolf Trejbal upgraded with French mechanism commissioned especially from Amati Kraslice.

Milan Kostohryz could utilise his experience with patent law, which he had gained in his old office job. The old pre-war patent of company Kohlert & Sons (Patentschrift nr. 583817,

<sup>8</sup> CMM, Reviews of clarinet mouthpieces, dated 2. 7. 1961.

KI 51c, Gr 2301) was never implemented, and remained purely theoretical. Milan Kostohryz had encountered this particular patent when working at the office.

The original Czech sketch of a functional quarter-tone clarinet was made by instrument maker Jiří Knopf, who was commissioned by Alois Hába in 1923. He based his work on that of German instrument makers Richard H. Stein and Fritz Schüller. His project was not successfully completed due to insufficient funding. In 1927, having managed to obtain some sponsorship, Hába began to compose his opera *Mother*, and eventually the clarinet required for its performance was produced in Kraslice using Knopf's sketches. On that occasion, they only manufactured a single instrument. This innovatory piece was premiered on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1931 in Munich's Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz, where the quarter-tone clarinet with "semi-French" mechanism was played by Professor Artur Holas, a colleague of Hába's from the Prague Conservatoire.

Quarter-tone music did not gain much acclaim as the economic crisis of the 1930s hit, Nazism rose in Europe and World War Two broke out. Artur Holas passed away in 1945 and the only Czech quarter-tone clarinet model went missing after his death.

Milan Kostohryz decided to construct another model, for which he used the aforementioned patent from Germany. Instrument maker Trejbal was able to fit the instrument with a doubled Böhm mechanism, which meant the keys for the little fingers were built in a terraced way, rather than using roller keys from the Albert system. The instrument had thinner tone holes and a more concentrated sound.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1947, Hába's opera *Mother* was performed again in Prague, directed by conductor Karel Ančerl. Milan Kostohryz played the principal clarinet part on the brand-new model of the quarter-tone clarinet.

The model was further developed in collaboration with Jiří Kratochvíl. Instrument maker Trejbal constructed one more model, which included a complementary G sharp key. This enabled the recording of a new quarter-tone piece: a duet for two quarter-tone clarinets, composed by Karel Reiner, which was featured on a disc named *Clarinet in the 20th century*.<sup>9</sup>

In 1948, Milan Kostohryz introduced the quarter-tone clarinet at the Prague Spring festival. He performed *Three Songs from a child's world* for four children's voices and quarter-tone clarinet, featuring lyrics by M. Maralík and Karel Václav Štěpka. The press commented that Kostohryz played with a "pleasant sonority and a natural tone".<sup>10</sup>

Nowadays, the quarter-tone clarinet is not widely used, as contemporary instruments allow for the use of alternative fingerings, or players can combine different breathing and embouchure techniques to create quarter-tone effects. The old models are displayed in expositions at music museums and are a cherished collector's item. At the time of its conception, the quarter-tone clarinet was a sensation, as were those who played them, including Milan Kostohryz.

## Replicas and reconstructions of Mozart's clarinet and basset horn

Almost every clarinet player wishes to try playing an original old instrument, particularly to obtain a better idea of the sound and interpretation of the given period. Before 1877, when the phonograph was invented, there were no recordings which could be used as a reference.

<sup>9</sup> CMM, manuscript memories remembering Alois Hába.

<sup>10</sup> *Lidové noviny*, 25. 5. 1948

After Milan Kostohryz constructed a quarter-tone clarinet, he decided to devote himself to reconstructing historical instruments.

It took several years before Prague-based instrument maker Trejbal managed to construct a fully functional copy of the so-called “Mozart’s basset clarinet”. This was an A-clarinet with an extended bell all the way to low C. Sometimes it was referred to as “Stadler’s clarinet”, after Mozart’s friend, clarinettist Anton Stadler (1753–1812).

Rudolf Trejbal was a very talented and sought-after instrument maker. He studied the craft with master maker Jiří Knopf at his workshop in Žižkov, a district of Prague. Knopf was known, for example, for constructing, along with his colleague Jan Borůvka (1893–1953), a unique instrument called the violinophone or for experimenting with many materials and making a glass clarinet. Many of his contemporaries recall Trejbal’s “copy machine”, which could create replicas of professional foreign clarinet mouthpieces, hardly available on the market during the war and communist times in Czechoslovakia. Trejbal made a few modern basset horns with French mechanism and, in memory of his master teacher, he named the models “Knopf”. Those instruments were used by clarinettists at the Prague Conservatoire until the 1970s in the study of obligatory related instruments. Milan Kostohryz was one of the ambassadors for the use of these instruments, as he encouraged his graduate student Josef Janouš to perform the original version of Clarinet Concerto in A major KV 622 on it.

Dozens of clarinettists and music researchers have concerned themselves with the original sound of Mozart’s famous concerto. One of them was Jiří Kratochvíl, a student of Kostohryz’s, who later became a renowned researcher.<sup>11</sup>

Nowadays, the basset A clarinet is a standard part of the manufacturing programme of the Buffet Crampon company in Paris, the largest clarinet maker today. In the 1950s and 60s that was not the case, and, therefore, the Czech instrument makers had quite a unique product to offer on the market.

This research has also benefited from the work of MUDr. Wilhelm Rey from Donaustauf, who was a passionate German amateur clarinettist. He provided many period sketches of old basset horns and clarinets from German chateau archives, and original manuscripts of pieces for these instruments. Preserved correspondence documents show the fact he also discovered pieces for basset horn by Czech composers Jan and Leopold Koželuh, which is a testimony to his diligent research efforts. These pieces have not been released in print to this day.<sup>12</sup>

The development of the basset clarinet in Trejbal’s workshop was inspired by period sketches and estimates of acoustic and tone possibilities of the extension of the clarinet bell. The process of trial and error paid off and in 1951, Josef Janouš performed Mozart’s famous concerto on this special instrument, whose tone colour range was much wider than that of a common A-clarinet.

Milan Kostohryz wrote about the instrument in one of his papers on the history on clarinet in Czechia:

“The basset clarinet, which was built for me by instrument maker Rudolf Trejbal, is a clarinet with a Böhm mechanism. For its construction, we used the top part of the A-clarinet Henri Selmer (Paris) model. Rudolf Trejbal made a bottom part to fit onto this top part. It was based on the basset horn in F, with 4 keys for the right-hand

<sup>11</sup> *Hudební věda*, 1970, no. 1.

<sup>12</sup> CMM, a letter to W. Rey, dated 19th September 1989.

thumb to play low E-flat, D, C-sharp and C. The barrel is replaced by a metal neck, slightly bent, like that of a basset horn. To allow for the freedom of the right-hand thumb, the instrument is secured with a strap to go round the neck of the player like a saxophone. The mouthpiece is a clarinet model (Vandoren, Selmer nebo Bucchi). The bell used comes from the original Selmer A-clarinet, just like the top part. The instrument was built in 1950 in Prague.

Mozart's Concerto in A major KV 622 in its original form was performed in Prague on the 21<sup>st</sup> June 1951 by Josef Janouš who later became a professor at the Prague Conservatoire. It was performed in the Dvořák Hall of the Rudolfinum Concert Hall. The clarinet part was reconstructed by the composer and researcher Jiří Kratochvíl, a current teacher at the Prague Conservatoire. The soloist was accompanied by the symphony orchestra of the conservatoire, and the performance was conducted by Prof. Alois Klíma, who was the conductor of the Symphony Orchestra of the Czechoslovak Radio. Rudolf Trejbal built one more basset clarinet later, specifically for Dr. Wilhelm Rey. That particular instrument is fitted with German mechanism Oehler. Trejbal also used an original top part, and added a new bottom part with basset keys for E-flat, D, C-sharp and C.<sup>13</sup>

The importance of this endeavour is proved by the great enthusiasm expressed by famous clarinettist Dieter Klöckner. He complimented the instrument and, thanks to him, the rumour of "enthusiastic Czech clarinettists from Prague" reached the worldwide music community. Therefore, Milan Kostohryz and his colleagues may claim first place in the resurrection of this historical instrument.

## Conclusion

Milan Kostohryz's contribution to music research has been neglected, as he was not allowed to publish much during his life due to the political situation. (His brother, poet Josef Kostohryz was persecuted by the communists, and Milan Kostohryz also openly denounced the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.) It is important to shed more light on his work, as his impact on further musical development in Czechia was quite profound.

His extensive written estate, which is now archived in the Czech Museum of Music in Prague, is an extraordinary resource not only for clarinettists, but also for anyone who wants to understand Czech music history and the difficulties musicians had to overcome during the totalitarian regimes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>13</sup> CMM, a type letter for Pamela Lee Poulin, undated.



## Photos



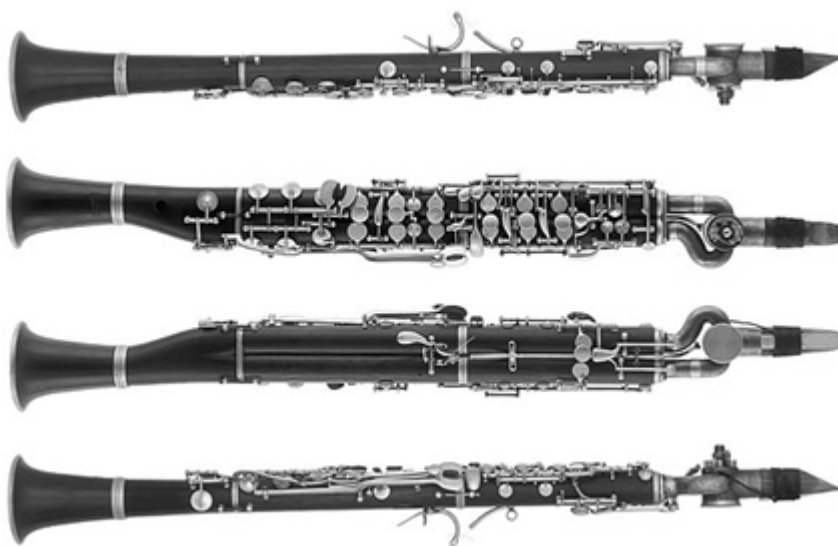
Milan Kostohryz in the year 1980



On the top – Normal "A" clarinet. Bottom – "Mozart 'basset' clarinet"



On the left – Jiří Kratochvíl with alto clarinet  
On the right – Milan Kostohryz with “Mozart ´basset´clarinet”



Quarter-tone clarinet

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## About author

**Radek Žitný** graduated from the Prague Conservatory, majoring in Clarinet and Saxophone; graduated from the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (HAMU), majoring in Clarinet. He is currently studying at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Faculty of Education, Music Theory and Pedagogy (PhD). He works as a music teacher (clarinet and saxophone) and performs in various music ensembles. He published several books on Czech history, a music monograph “Eduard Douša. With a Smile and Music” (2021) and numerous articles in the Encyclopedia of Czech Legal History and Dictionary of Persons and Institutions. He co-works with Czech Radio and National Library of the Czech Republic.

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