

# The harpsichordist who survived the Holocaust

**Zuzana Ruzicková, 89, talks to Neil Fisher about how her love of Bach was a salvation during her suffering at the hands of the Nazis and communists**

**I**t's more than five decades since Zuzana Ruzicková began the Herculean task of recording Bach's complete works for keyboard. And now that those landmark albums are being reissued for her 90th birthday, in January, she finds it, she admits, "a little bit frightening".

Why frightening? "Because, after 50 years... how will the audience be?" Ruzicková lights a cigarette, takes a long, contemplative drag and thinks. If she were beginning all over again with Bach now, she would approach it completely differently. "You never play the same. You change as a person. And when you go on stage you have to be strictly truthful. You cannot be somebody two years ago. You have to be yourself again."

Bach is the constant in Ruzicková's life, while the rest has been turmoil. When, growing up in Pilsen, Czechoslovakia, she discovered the composer, it was "something like déjà vu — I felt at home". Bach was also there when Ruzicková was crammed into a cattle truck and sent to Auschwitz, because she had written down a snatch of his G Minor English suite on a scrap of paper and kept it as a talisman. A gust of wind snatched the paper away — and her mother found it and knew that she was alive.

Later, after the war, Ruzicková would play Bach's music to former high-ranking Nazis. Bach would win Ruzicková an international reputation as a virtuoso, yet it would also incite the ire of her communist gatekeepers.

Bach brought her to the Wigmore Hall in London, where *The Times's* critic

admired her "huge vitality and momentum" in a 1968 review, while also finding "a touch of wantonness in her treatment of the music". (I suspect both these comments would please her equally.)

Now Ruzicková is retired, but she is a mentor to a new generation, including the "harpsichord ninja", the Iranian-born whizz Mahan Esfahani, who regularly comes to Ruzicková's Prague apartment for wisdom (and cigarettes). Esfahani has been the driving force behind the reissued albums. He was supposed to visit today, but is nursing a hangover instead. "The 'ninja' thing," Ruzicková says with a sigh, "is not so good for him."

We're talking over coffee and biscuits in Ruzicková's flat, a 15-minute underground ride from the centre of

Prague. It's the same apartment she has lived in since the 1940s and, apart from the fact that eventually Ruzicková and her composer husband, Viktor Kalabis (he died in 2006) were able to buy the adjoining apartment and knock the space through, it hasn't changed much. When the couple lived in half the space — just two rooms — they also had to accommodate Ruzicková's mother. She slept in one room and the couple slept in the other — "under the grand piano", explains Ruzicková, as if this were normal.



Ruzicková with her husband, Viktor Kalabis, in the 1960s. Below: aged about 13

by Zuzana Ruzicková is released on Friday on Erato

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Somebody from  
the party said:  
‘You are working  
with religion’



Photos used in **The Times**

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Ruzicková at home in Prague with her harpsichord

Ruzicková insists that we “begin at the beginning”. So we do. It’s Pilsen in the 1930s. Ruzicková grows up in a prosperous Czech-Jewish family. She is nine years old and an only child. She has recovered from tuberculosis and as a reward for getting better she asks for piano lessons. Presented with a fast-learning pupil, Ruzicková’s teacher knew that she would get more from Bach on a harpsichord. She encouraged her to go to Paris to study with the world’s top harpsichordist, Wanda Landowska.

Yet the Führer had other ideas. “I had no experience with antisemitism until Hitler came,” Ruzicková says.

“But I was so flabbergasted by being something ‘different’ that I immediately started to read everything about Zionism. I would argue with my father’s friends — assimilation is not possible!” She and her parents were among the first to be deported to Terezin concentration camp. She was 15.

Ruzicková’s father died of disease in Terezin, as did tens of thousands of Jews. She doesn’t want to talk about

the privations there, however. Instead she talks about her first boyfriend, Hans. “We both wanted to study Hebrew and Latin and a very famous professor from Vienna agreed to teach us for half a bread ration each.”

She practised on an old piano. She sang in the children’s opera *Brundibár*, composed by Hans Krása before he and most of the performers were sent to Auschwitz and gassed. Her Latin and Hebrew developed so “by the time I went to Auschwitz I had already read the book of Samuel and Caesar’s *Gallic Wars*”.

There was a grim rhythm to the transports to Auschwitz. Ruzicková and her mother were sent to a so-called family camp in Birkenau

in December 1943. In March 1944 those who had been sent in September 1943 were gassed, exactly six months after they arrived. “And of course we knew we would go the same way.”

Instead in July 1944 she and her mother were chosen (in a “*selektion*”

by Dr Josef Mengele) to join 1,000 healthy women sent to Hamburg to repair damage caused by the Allied bombings. Music remained an accompaniment throughout.

Ruzicková would sing opera arias to other female prisoners — “I’d tell them what the operas were about and sing, and they felt it helped them.”

Hired as slave labour for one private company, she remembers eating soup in their canteen and hearing Chopin on the radio. “I fainted. It was so fantastic that somewhere in the world somebody was playing Chopin.”

Her language skills — she spoke English, French and German — got her through the last, most desperate

stage when, in February 1945, the Hamburg prisoners were sent to Bergen-Belsen. Ruzicková clung on until the British Army liberated the camp in April. “There were about 30,000 dead when the English came and most of us were infected by plague.” She was able to get medical attention for her mother and spent some weeks interpreting for the British Army.

When she finally made it home, her old music teacher saw the 18-year-old’s hands, damaged by years of hauling bricks. “She started to weep. Then she said, ‘Well, anyway, you’re back, you’re wonderful with languages, so back to high school and university.’ But I said, ‘I can’t live without music.’”

She got hold of an upright piano (appropriated from an ethnic German family who had fled Czechoslovakia) and practised, Ruzicková says, 12 hours a day to make up for lost time. She went back to music school and sat in

a classroom with teenagers. “But every three months I went up a year. It went rather quickly.”

Finally, in 1947, at the age of 20, she was admitted to the Academy of the Performing Arts, and in her third year had the option to take a course in the harpsichord. At last she had got her hands on the instrument that could let Bach sing. At the same time she met

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Kalabis, whom she married in 1952.

Ruzicková still had plenty of hurdles to get over. Many scoffed when she would try to introduce the harpsichord into her piano recitals. "One of the leading critics in Prague said it was like using a *fiaker* [horse and carriage] when I could have a car."

She was able to enter the ARD International Music Competition in Munich in 1956. Disaster struck when the Czech conductor Rafael Kubelík, who was a political exile in Germany, refused to conduct the Bavarian Radio Symphony in the final if there was a Czech artist representing communist

Czechoslovakia. "So I gave my last ten Deutschmarks to the porter of the hall, he let me in at six in the morning and I learnt the orchestral part of the first two movements of my concerto." Playing both the solo and orchestral passages of Benda's concerto for keyboard, she won the top prize.

Now at least she could have an international career. An early fixture was the Bach festival in Ansbach in Bavaria, but she debated whether she could cope with a return to Germany. "I was afraid. I was afraid of meeting someone from the camps, from the SS." These fears would be realised when she read a newspaper report of her recital saying that Rudolf Hess had attended. "I shuddered," she remembers. Yet Kalabis told her she had a duty to play in Germany. "He said, 'Play Bach to make them realise that there is another Germany, that Hitler didn't destroy all the great culture.'"

Greatness is an important part of Ruzicková's musical outlook. The effect of the Nazi atrocities, she argues, was that musicians became afraid of big gestures or of emotionally freighted performances, particularly if

the titans of German culture were involved: Bach, Beethoven, Schubert. "The whole early music movement was actually trying to avoid the pathos of Beethoven, to reduce it, to original, small orchestras. We are still afraid of believing in something 'great.'"

Ruzicková has influenced

generations of early music practitioners, but don't look to her recordings for authenticity. Informed as much by Bach's intellectual world and by his larger-scale works, her performances — many played on modern harpsichords, not "replicas" of historical instruments — interrogate the music with vibrant changes of register, her colouristic choices bold and, yes, a little wanton.

Ruzicková has never stopped arguing about Bach. Sometimes it's good-natured debate. There have also been less pleasant rows with communists who felt that Bach was inappropriate for the working man. "Somebody from the party came and said, 'You are working with Passions, with Christ, with religion.' They said the harpsichord was a feudal instrument and asked how I could teach young people without having had a Marxist education."

She shot back that Bach was an employee of the city of Leipzig, and if he were an employee of the city of Prague, perhaps he would have written cantatas about Lenin instead. "The man didn't know what to say — he couldn't say yes, he couldn't say no. So he let me go."

Ruzicková officially retired the same year that Kalabis died. "Better for people to say it's a pity that she doesn't play any more than it's a pity she still plays," she quips. In January a documentary about Ruzicková, *Zuzana: Music is Life*, will also be released, although she doesn't think she will be well enough to promote it abroad. She has had treatment for cancer, "and it makes my hands and feet very unsure".

Many coffees and cigarettes later, we finish where we started, with Bach and the 20 CDs worth of music that are available again. She's not used to hearing her own recordings. So when she listens to one now she's quite critical. "I think sometimes I'm too heavy. It's funny, because when you get old you normally get heavier; but I would get lighter." There's another puff and a conspiratorial smile. "I would be more frivolous."

***Bach: The Complete Keyboard Works***