

TLC Showcase

JANET SAVIN

Introduction to the manuscript	2
Extract from <i>Music for Three in a Prelude to Revolution</i>	4
About the Writer	8

Introduction to *Music for Three in a Prelude to Revolution*

I had been living in Prague two years at the time of the Velvet Revolution. I was fluent in Czech and had been following the politicisation of the studio theatres, many on the margins of official culture. Besides the unforgettable euphoria of the demonstrations, the way the theatres took the lead in the democratic movement was fascinating.

A couple decades later, that story resurfaced as a novel. After researching and writing for several years, I felt ready for a critique. The TLC Chapter and Verse mentoring programme seemed ideal, and I signed on with Frankie Bailey.

The manuscript was my first work of long fiction, and the copious historical explanations, habits from academia and journalism, clearly required cutting down. But I didn't imagine the quantity of what Frankie called 'weight and freight' that needed not only cutting, but re-imagining through the characters.

She was incredibly generous and combined a sharp critical eye with sensitive intuition. I'd thought the story quite complete, but as we worked, it kept growing. We both recognised that it needed to 'breathe' and began imagining two books.

I self-published the resulting two-volume novel with Whitefox in the spring of 2022. The first, *Music for Three in a Prelude to Revolution*, follows Katherine Angelis, a piano prodigy at a crossroads about her future, on a gap year in Prague – a city her family fled following the 1948 Communist coup d'état. In the second volume, *Music for Three in a Time of Revolution*, we accompany Katherine and her friends through the euphoria of the revolution and the challenging aftermath.

In *Prelude to Revolution*, characters live with the suspense that permeates life in a totalitarian society: knowing you're constantly watched, wondering if a new encounter is a set-up. In *A Time of Revolution*, the suspense around mass demonstrations is heightened by tricks of the Communist leadership and later, by the persistence of the secret police after 1989.

Yet this novel is about transformation, and so, is necessarily reflective too. Attempts at political and social change and efforts at inner change mirror each other. The characters face knotty emotional questions and ethical ones as well: what kinds of balances between conforming and resisting can a person find in a totalitarian society? Following the revolution, can justice be done to Communist criminals and for victims of political persecution? How to make peace with a strange new world?

Extract from *Music for Three in a Prelude to Revolution*

by Janet Savin

RETURN

Katherine walks the few blocks to the Old Town Square. She can scarcely believe that she is really standing here again, gazing up at the prismatic medieval towers and gold-tipped spires of the Týn Church and the Old Town Hall tower which have defined this square for six centuries. They give the city a face that foreign occupiers could never paper over. She wants to go and sit by the river, breathe in the beauty of the city and celebrate her return, which feels like the wishes magically granted in fairy tales. Joy wells up at the thought of twelve whole months stretching before her.

Katherine threads through the narrow streets that she loves to Husova and takes it to the Bethlehem Chapel in a trance, barely conscious of passers-by. From there to the embankment the shops and houses thin out, and the sun is warm on her face, the air ripe with the tang of leaves turning. She settles on a bench in the park looking across the river to Malá strana. The Gothic footbridge and tower, the baroque domes of the Counter Reformation, the spires of St Vitus rising from the Renaissance castle complex on the hill – she can see them all with just one glance. She hears Jarek's voice: 'Many layers . . . Fire, rebuilding. Uprising, rebuilding . . .'

Taking in centuries of civilization – and destruction – in a single gaze is heart-stopping. It's so intimate. Katherine's parents and grandparents beheld this very view and walked the little streets winding among its churches and townhouses. It is enormous at the same time. The layers go back and back, generation after generation. How many? How far? That bridge, those domes, the spires, they almost make the centuries visible, evoke the multitudes of men and women and children and their lives – like the underpainting of the Italian masters whose countrymen later built the coloured baroque palaces and churches that give Malá strana its face.

Katherine's gaze moves along the castle complex. From that royal seat enlightened leaders, Charles IV and Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, bettered many lives. Less fortunate

men struggled there, Emperor Rudolf II, with his demons. Edvard Beneš, co-founder of an independent state, caught between Hitler and Stalin. Stalin's puppet Gottwald drank and signed death warrants there. Alexander Dubček led the nation through a brief, bright spring, Petřín hill swathed in white blossoms. And who walks the castle halls now? Gustáv Husák. Tortured and sentenced to life imprisonment for 'Slovak Bourgeois Nationalism' under Gottwald, rehabilitated by Novotný to re-impose . . . 'Stalinism with a human face', people said.

Petřín hill is now a palette of ambers and olive greens set above the tile roofs of Malá strana. Downstream, a patchwork of coloured houses and trees crowns the high embankment all the way to where that colossus of Stalin stood. Stalin. Gottwald. Husák. Their imprints were inescapable. And yet, the russet and coral and ochre architecture, which echoes the tones of the changing trees, makes a greater picture of human presence in harmony with nature. And so it seems to Katherine that the whole world could turn, not just the leaves.

She rises, follows the embankment downstream to the National Theatre, whose golden roof always inspires her, and starts across the bridge. The energy of her steps pleases her; she's already invigorated by this interlude from four years of intensive piano study, by planning it in this city at this time of her life. Yet wariness sets in as she nears the left bank and enters the fibres of a powerful landscape which resonate somehow with the fibres of her own being. 'Remember what Grandpa and I have told you.' Papa's parting words.

Katherine decides to cross Kampa and revels in its grassy expanse, held between the roar of the Vltava on her right side and the stillness of Petřín hill on the other. A couple is picnicking near a stand of trees, and farther on, another, with a white tablecloth. It brings back the way Jarek laid the table for their last dinner. The John Lennon Wall is ahead, and Katherine traces in reverse the route they took the evening he showed it to her, melancholy beginning to shadow her contentment. At Mostenská, she glances down the street at her bakery: a coffee and kolache would be such a fitting way to celebrate. But beneath the energy, a little shelf of fatigue is beginning to claim her attention. Better be practical today and save the bakery for tomorrow or the weekend.

Tram 22 runs by the *Malostranská kavárna*, and soon she is watching the expanse of tile roofs, punctuated by the majestic towers of Týn Church and the Town Hall, spread out as the tram climbs towards the castle district of Hradčany. It passes the leafy environs of the old stag moat, the graceful arches of the Belvedere, the cathedral spires of the castle complex, worlds away from the skyscrapers of Manhattan.

As it continues along a tree-lined street with turn-of-the-century houses, a well-dressed woman, whose elegant bearing sets her apart from the tired figures on either side, rises to get off. As she steps down, a gentleman with a white moustache removes his hat and offers his arm. Katherine gives a little start. Her grandparents seem to have materialized before her very eyes. She gazes after the couple as they walk towards a fashionable-looking restaurant, until the tram turns and she loses sight of them. A fortuitous beginning to her stay in Prague?

Two stops later, she prepares to get off herself. As she approaches the multi-storey modern building, she halts at the black letters over the central entrance: Vladimir Lenin Residence Hall. She has grown up with the work of Karel Čapek, Jaroslav Seifert, František Kupka and other writers and artists of the First Republic and the interwar avant-garde. Her short week here with Jarek was an idyll, and she has given little thought to living with the Communist face laid over Prague since her family's escape. A mask, Jarek called it.

A mask of statues, plaques and street signs, a public web, thick with names that speak of violence and deceit: Lenin, Gottwald, Victorious February, concealing those of Masaryk, Beneš and Čapek. Now for an entire year Katherine is going to eat and sleep and work in that web. Play in it too? This dream year in Prague is beginning to seem a little more complicated than she has imagined.

Registration is right in tune with these gloomy thoughts. When she rings the bell marked Concierge, the little window in the foyer wall flies open, assailing her nose with the hot stench of cooking onions. She places her passport, invitation and Foreign Relations House confirmation on the ledge. They are swept under the grille by an unseen force, and the window bangs shut.

The stench gradually gives way to smells of chemical cleaner and petroleum rising

from the vinyl flooring. There are no chairs in the foyer and no plants. The only decorations are mass-produced prints of Husák and Lenin. Katherine tries to recover some good humour, imagining how she'll make a haven of her room – in vain. The documents are finally shoved back with a room key, a roll of toilet paper and a telephone message scrawled on cheap paper. The window slams down, sending the residence confirmation floating to the floor.

As she picks it up, Katherine's eyes alight on the Foreign Relations House stamp. The double-tailed Czech lion rampant, arms of the kingdom of Bohemia, of the First and Second Czechoslovak Republics, is missing the crown that he wore for . . . For eight hundred years. In its place is a red star. Angry heat mounts in her chest. Yes, this is going to be more complicated than she had imagined.

She pops out of the elevator, strides down the hall, eyes her luggage outside number 703 and unlocks the door, ready to find fault with everything. Large windows overlook a little park, and next to them sits a desk with bookshelves mounted on the wall. Opposite, a studio couch doubles as a bed, and its base contains storage compartments. The prospect of working at the desk with a view of the park is pleasant enough. Is that the rim of a fishpond visible through the foliage? Anticipation begins to nudge her anger aside.

The windows and the arrangement give the room a spacious feeling. A feast of music and architecture awaits her, and so does the sheer beauty of the city that has brought her back. Little more than a year ago, she had declared to Jarek that she wanted to see the scores of Smetana and Dvořák in their own hands. Now, she's going to be studying the autograph of Dvořák's Piano Suite in A major, pages and pages in his hand, at the Museum of Czech Music. Hardly the Lenin Museum. Not everything has been co-opted by those two figures whose portraits hang in the foyer.

About the Writer

Janet Savin is an author and former college teacher and freelance journalist. She grew up in a bibliophile family in the United States, did a Masters in English literature, with theatre history specialisation, at Northwestern University and taught Renaissance and modern English literature in Chicago as a young adult.



In the 1980s, she moved to France, earned a degree in Czech and Czech civilisation in Paris and then lived in Prague from 1987 to 1992. She initially went to Prague on a grant to study theatre history, but soon began translating, and then teaching and writing on contemporary Czech, Soviet and French theatre – after 1989, much of it for the Czech press.

Janet has published short fiction, non-fiction and, as a journalist, pieces on theatre and dance. *Music for Three* is her first novel, and it's a three-fold attempt to familiarise readers with some of the lesser-known riches of Czech culture, to tell the story of how everyday resistance to injustice made intelligent use of the Communist system against itself and to counteract the fairy tale trope of the Velvet Revolution by dramatising an inside view of risks taken by the democratic movement and so many ordinary citizens who joined it.

For the last sixteen years, Janet has made her home in Southern France but has returned often to the Czech Republic.

You can learn more about her on Twitter: [@janet_savin](https://twitter.com/janet_savin) and on her website: <https://janetsavin.com/>