

# *Comenius at 350*

*A Celebration*

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## Abstract

This report describes the creation of *Comenius at 350*, a virtual play performed by students in an introductory Czech language at Harvard University in the fall of 2020. The essay provides an overview of the life and works of Jan Amos Comenius. It also discusses the origins and development of the concept of the play, how Comenius's works were adapted for the play, the production process itself, and how students overcame the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to develop this celebration of Comenius's life and works.

## Article

Although 2020 was a year of many disappointments due to the outbreak of COVID-19, it was also the 350th anniversary of the death of Jan Amos Comenius, a true cause for the celebration of his many achievements as poet, pedagogue, and philosopher. Born on March 28, 1592, in Nivnice, Moravia, Comenius set early precedents for modern ideas in education that included learning in the vernacular instead of Latin, starting education at an early age, and creating equal opportunities for children of all different backgrounds, as well as pedagogical methods that emphasized hands-on learning as opposed to rote memorization. These ideas were revolutionary for their time, but today appear as common sense, which is a testament to their significance and resilience throughout 350 years of dramatic change. To mark the 350th anniversary of Comenius's death in November 2020, we set out to celebrate the accomplishments of Comenius despite the turmoil that plagued his life and Europe and despite our own limitations imposed by remote learning.

## **Bringing Comenius Out of the Library**

A virtual semester created numerous challenges for all students at Harvard due to COVID-19. Events that were previously taken for granted, such as studying at a library or simply being inside one, became coveted by all students. Our Harvard introductory Czech class under the direction of Professor Veronika Tuckerova was able to find ways to circumvent these limitations. With the help of the Houghton Library curators, key elements of what would be a library visit were brought to our rooms scattered across the United States, from the East Coast all the way to Alaska, and to Berlin. Harvard's Houghton Library boasts an impressive collection of books and manuscripts dating back to the classical period, including early editions of Comenius's writings. In lieu of an in-person tour, assistant curators Christine Jacobson and Sara Powell showed our class the many aspects of Comenius's life that contributed to his impressive reputation in an online workshop. We saw a range of items from Houghton Library collection, as well as other libraries, that

highlighted Comenius's life, from his humble beginnings in Moravia to his leadership as a religious clergyman and his travels around Europe and, most importantly, his calling as an educator.<sup>1</sup> Our class had the privilege of seeing several original printed items, many produced throughout his lifetime: a map of Moravia that Comenius created in 1627,<sup>2</sup> a depiction of Labyrinth from Comenius's allegorical work the *Labyrinth of the World* (*Labyrint světa a ráj srdce*), a 1576 hymnal used by the Bohemian Brethren—a precursor to the Unity of Brethren for which Comenius served as a bishop—and *The Ecclesiastical History of New-England* by Cotton Mather from 1702, which details an offer that Comenius received to become the President of Harvard College.<sup>3</sup>

After the virtual tour of the library, our class was able to examine several digitized rare materials that helped elaborate on the impact Comenius had on education throughout Europe and later the world. Comparing two of Comenius's works revealed details about life in Europe of his time. The first, published in Prague in 1669, was *The Door of Languages Unlocked* (*Janua Linguarum Reserata Aurea*), a language textbook first published in 1632 and produced when Comenius was still alive. Our edition had corresponding textual columns in Czech, German, and Latin. Before examining the contents of the book, we paid attention to the binding and cover that provided a glimpse into its owners and the weight this book carried. The plain and well-worn cover bore evidence to the use of this book by not only the high classes of Europe. We do not have any direct evidence for it, but the plain binding and excessive wear suggest that the book passed also through the hands of those in a lower economic status. The worn state of its binding showed that the book was well used. *The Door of Languages Unlocked* was one of the most popular books in Europe at the time, second only to the Bible. It was originally published with corresponding texts in Latin, Czech, and German. Other editions had the text in Latin, English, French; Latin, Greek, French; and more. The pages within the book displayed information in three languages—Czech, German, and Latin—on animals and life. Our class was delighted that we were able to comprehend the Czech text with our basic Czech language skills, and we could see how easily it would be to learn the other two languages from it. The Czech language of 1669 presented unique challenges: different characters were used and syntax differed slightly, but nonetheless our semester of Czech proved to be enough for us to translate the sections.

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<sup>1</sup> There are some digital materials related to Comenius that are publicly available. For a map designed by Comenius, see Johann Amos Comenius, Abraham Goos, and Claes Jansz Visscher, *Moraviae nova et post omnes priores accuratissima delineatio* [c. 1627], <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2111131>, accessed October 10, 2021. For the *Hymnal of the Bohemian Brethren* in Czech, see *Pjsně duchownj ewangelistské* (Tiskárna Jednoty bratrské, 1576), [https://books.google.com/books?id=kB1fAAAAcAAJ&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.com/books?id=kB1fAAAAcAAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s), accessed October 10, 2021. For the Czech version of the *Labyrinth Mundi*, see Johann Amos Comenius, *Labirynt swęta a ráj srdce* (v Frantisska Seřábka, 1809), [https://books.google.com/books?id=GyAoAAAAyAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=GyAoAAAAyAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false), accessed October 10, 2021. For *Labyrinth Mundi* with the Czech and English side by side, see “Komenský - Labyrint světa a ráj srdce,” Czech and Slovak Resources, University of Oxford, <https://czech.mml.ox.ac.uk/labyrint>, accessed October 10, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> This map is at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, <https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2111131>, accessed October 11, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> The full title is *Magnalia Christi Americana, or, The ecclesiastical history of New-England: from its first planting in the year 1620, unto the year of Our Lord, 1698, in seven books*.

It was easy to understand why Comenius's book acquired such fame and the beauty of Comenius's new idea that a language must be taught in relation to the aspects of life familiar to its reader. While we ourselves did not walk away with fluent German or Latin, seeing Czech in relation to a language that influenced it and a language of a neighboring country was enriching.

The second Comenius book that we inspected was his children's book from 1658, *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (or *Orbis Pictus*; *Svět v obrazech*; *Visible World in Pictures*), the first picture book ever written for children. The edition we viewed was published in 1793 in St. Petersburg and contained texts in Russian, French, German, and Latin. The cover was plain, and its appearance indicated that it was also well used. Once opened, the principles of Comenius's teachings were easily seen. The pages were vivid with pictures that captured each topic; subjects were grouped in ways that increased comprehension. From farm and wild animals (the unicorn was an unexpected addition) to kitchen tools, the rooms of a house, trades, social strata, academic subjects, university, and library, the textbook captured all basic matters of life in a way friendly towards its users. Comparing the two works, it was insightful to see the similarities (both books contained concise information on the topics at hand), but even more so the differences, such as the use of illustrations in *Orbis Pictus*, which improved the ease of studying for all students.

### **The Script for Comenius at 350**

Every year, Harvard's Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures performs a Czech play, but celebrating Comenius for his 350th anniversary in the form of a play posed just one small problem: Comenius is famous for his pedagogical, philosophical, and didactical works, for his books *Orbis pictus* and *Labyrinth of the World*, rather than for his plays. The solution to this obstacle was a creative one. Professor Veronika Tuckerova and Gulia Dossi, a doctoral student in Harvard's Slavic Department, wrote a script that consisted of a frame narrative, an overview of Comenius's life that was interspersed with excerpts from *Labyrinth of the World* and *Orbis Pictus*.

Comenius's life during the Thirty Years' War was intriguing; he not only lost his family during an epidemic of the plague but was forced into exile following the Catholic victory and wandered around Europe, never returning to the Czech lands. His response to his situation came in the form of the philosophical consolation found in *Labyrinth of the World*. The Pilgrim in *Labyrinth of the World*, who serves as a stand-in for Comenius, and the allegorical nature of the work lent itself well as a frame for celebrating Comenius's life. *Orbis Pictus*, on the other hand, is a fascinating artifact; its innovative didactic approach along with its combination of word and image appealed to us because of our own focus on education and learning.

The play begins with a dialogue between a teacher (played by Sam Dvorak) and his student (Sam Trotter), an appropriate start given that Comenius is remembered, among other things, for his hands-on pedagogical ideas that led to his creation of *Orbis Pictus*. The play then transitions to Comenius (Geordie Kenyon) who begins to walk us through his life. His chronological narrative forms a frame for the entire play; the story of Comenius's life is interspersed with excerpts from *Orbis Pictus* that explain basic everyday objects,

institutions, and processes such as schools, travelers, and bread making. Comenius's narrative is quite detailed. While there are debates about his exact birthplace, the play begins by putting the question of where he was born to rest, stating his place of birth was the village of Nivnice. He eventually became the headmaster at the Přerov school which would influence his pedagogical methods because he disliked how students were taught in schools. His first Czech encyclopedic work, *The Theatre of the Universe (Divadlo Veškerenstva Věcí)*, reflected his beliefs that learning about things in the world in a student's vernacular language was more important than learning grammar. He wrote *Labyrinth of the World* at a time that was very difficult for him personally. He had just lost his wife and sons during the plague and was forced into hiding in Eastern Bohemia, because as a Protestant, he was persecuted following the Battle of White Mountain in 1620. As Comenius concludes this section of his life, telling his audience that *Labyrinth of the World* is an allegory of his own spiritual journey, the play transitions into a retelling of *Labyrinth of the World*.

The play progresses with several major scenes from *Labyrinth of the World*. The Pilgrim (Tyler Johnston), Comenius's alter ego, is guided by Mr. Ubiquitous (Ashley Morse) and Illusion (Matt Schantz) on a symbolic journey through the world. At the start, Illusion gives him looking glasses that cause him to see the world in a distorted way. During the scenes, vignettes from *Orbis Pictus* are used to explain the various objects being mentioned, such as the looking glasses, city, bookmaking, the four elements, and the human soul. *Labyrinth of the World*, however, does not end happily. As the Pilgrim progresses through the world with his two guides, he becomes more and more disillusioned by humanity, believing that everyone is consumed by vanity.

The play then returns to Comenius who continues to tell his life story. He escaped the enforced conversion to Catholicism after 1620 and settled in the Polish city of Leszno, where he lived for nineteen years. This circumstance gave us an opportunity to include Polish, for the first time, in one of our Czech plays. Professor Aleksandra Kremer from Harvard's Slavic Department gave a brief "mini-lecture" in Polish about the work Comenius conducted while in Leszno, including becoming a teacher and a rector at a local secondary school. He also advanced his ideas on pedagogy, which included teaching youth in their vernacular language and introducing Latin at a higher level.

As described in the play, Comenius was regarded highly by many different people from many different countries for his pedagogical ideas. Among those interested was Harvard's own John Winthrop. A short scene then depicts Mather reading part of *The Ecclesiastical History of New-England* where he states that Winthrop, at one point, invited Comenius to come to New England and serve as a president of Harvard College. Although Comenius declined the offer, it is still an illuminating example of the far reaches of his influence on pedagogy. The play ends with Comenius commenting on the end of his life, when, after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, he was forever unable to return home and remained in Leszno until it was burned by Swedish troops during the Second Northern War in 1656. He then moved to the Netherlands where he died in 1670 at the age of seventy-eight.

Although the play was constructed from various bits of historic facts about Comenius and excerpts from his work, all parts fit seamlessly into a coherent narrative that is at once informative and entertaining. The frame narrative, in particular, was an integral part of this play's success. As will be explained in the following section, this play, different from past productions in many ways, nevertheless continued the tradition of the Czech play at Harvard in a commendable way.

### **Producing *Comenius at 350* during COVID-19**

The annual Czech play is one of the most exciting traditions of Harvard's Slavic Department. Every year, students of all levels come together to stage and perform a work entirely in Czech. For example, in February 2020, the department presented an abridged version of Václav Havel's absurd play *Garden Party* (*Zahradní slavnost*). This production, like the ones preceding it, was produced in a traditional theatrical way. *Garden Party* was performed in a small auditorium in front of a live audience of families and community members.



*Garden Party*, February 2020, Lowell House Screening Room, Harvard University

March 2020 heralded the end of live theatre. *Garden Party* was one of the last live performances before students were sent home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. When the Fall 2020 semester arrived, the students of the Czech program were still spread around the world, and it was impossible to safely gather in the same place. It was far from an ideal situation to present a work of theatre, but there was still a strong desire to continue the tradition of the Czech play. How could this be achieved under such adverse circumstances?

Naturally, a uniquely virtual production was the only solution. Under the direction of Giulia Dossi, we successfully produced *Comenius at 350* entirely remotely. Our production was very distinct from previous Czech play performances and took a unique approach from other virtual productions at Harvard in its visual style. A key point is that *Comenius at 350* was not performed live; rather, it was recorded over Zoom and edited before it was premiered in front of the audience. Here, we'll discuss how various aspects of this

production—including the set, rehearsals, and music—were achieved in the virtual landscape.

**SET:** As none of the performers were in the same place, a traditional sense of space was difficult to achieve. We instead chose to take a more abstract approach that evoked the aesthetic of Comenius's writings. Several performers utilized the virtual background feature of Zoom to change their backgrounds to archival images of Comenius's writings. Others performed in front of a neutral white background found in their own physical space. This similar background lent a sense of visual cohesion to the production. The archival images used included *Orbis pictus* and *Labyrinth of the World*. As seen in the image below, the vivid illustrations and clear-cut text are readily apparent.



**COSTUMES:** To maintain a neutral appearance that did not distract viewers from the text, performers wore solid black clothing. This also helped ensure everyone was visible against the white background. Some special costume items were used, like a pair of sunglasses. As shown in the image below, Geordie Kenyon, who played Comenius in the frame narrative, wore a cap and styled his long hair in such a fashion as to physically resemble Comenius.



*REHEARSALS & STAGING:* Naturally, the rehearsal process for this virtual production was rather different than in a “normal” year. As this was a prerecorded production, there was no need to memorize lines: we could easily read them off our computer screens. Therefore, only one or two recording sessions with Dossi and Professor Tuckerova were needed. These sessions focused on practicing correct pronunciation and overall performance. As many of us were undergraduate students in our first semester of studying Czech, this was a challenge that required some work outside of official rehearsals. Dossi’s staging consisted of consciously designing the layout of the screen. For example, the opening of the play shows the Teacher (Sam Dvorak) and the Student (Sam Trottier) facing each other. This required coordination to ensure the Zoom boxes were in the correct layout and the performers were facing the proper direction. For some scenes, Dossi varied the size of the Zoom window and overlaid it on archival images. Other scenes only included Zoom boxes. Still others involved using the “share screen” function in Zoom to include archival images adjacent to Zoom boxes. Zoom illusions were also utilized, particularly in a moment where Illusion (Matt Schantz) “passes” the pair of sunglasses to the Pilgrim (Tyler Johnston). As shown in the image below, this scene was achieved by Illusion moving his hand with sunglasses out of frame in the direction of the Pilgrim relative to the viewer. The Pilgrim then reached out of frame in the direction of Illusion and picked up a duplicate pair of sunglasses as Illusion discarded his pair.



*RECORDING:* In order to record the performance, Dossi and Professor Tuckerova turned their videos off so only the performers were visible. Dossi then recorded the scene at the end of the rehearsal. Performers simultaneously recorded their dialogue and submitted it to Dossi in case there was an error in screen recording.

*MUSIC AND CREDITS:* Producing a pre-recorded theatrical performance naturally brings the medium closer to film. The use of beginning and end credits reinforce this effect. Music helped to set the tone of the production. Selected for the opening credits was *Soudce všeho světa, Bože* (God, Judge of All the World), a hymn with lyrics by Comenius himself.

*EDITING: Comenius at 350* was edited by Dossi. The majority of the workload was in post-production, since the many recorded clips had to be meticulously pieced together. Transitions were added between scenes. Some special effects were also used. When the sunglasses are worn, the screen is put under a hazy yellow-red filter. English language subtitles were also added to the production, making it accessible to audiences who were not familiar with Czech.

## **Conclusion**

Due to the remote nature in which this project was put together, none of us involved with the performance of it were able to see the finished product until the official release on YouTube on December 4, 2020.<sup>4</sup> While it is certainly disheartening to not be able to see or hear a live audience, the YouTube chat allowed for audience members to respond to the show in real time.<sup>5</sup> This sort of specific live reaction is unattainable in traditional live theatre and was a particularly exciting component of this production. Furthermore, the chat was used for a live question-and-answer session following the performance, during which the cast and production team joined a Zoom call that was funneled into the performance livestream. The performance and Q&A remain on the Harvard Slavic Students YouTube channel and can be viewed on demand. The ability to make theatre projects accessible to a global audience with just the press of a button is truly the silver lining of working remotely.

It is often said that limitations foster creativity. *Comenius at 350* is no exception. Were it not for the pandemic, we would never have been able to create this unique multimedia production, nor would we have dived so deeply into the world and works of Comenius. In his lifetime, Comenius pushed boundaries and redefined what it meant to learn. What better way to honor his life and legacy than by pushing ourselves to learn more about his work, utilize new technologies, and put the knowledge into the world in an accessible way?

We sincerely hope that *Comenius at 350* will both entertain and enrich the curious and bring to light the underappreciated achievements of that fascinating historical character, Jan Amos Comenius.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jan A. Comenius". The script is cursive and elegant, with a large initial 'J' and a long, sweeping underline at the end.

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<sup>4</sup> See "Comenius at 350—Czech Play Video," Harvard Slavic Students, December 4, 2020, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/zkBb34Nk2u4>, accessed October 11, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> See "Comenius at 350—Czech Play Video," Harvard Slavic Students, streamed live on December 4, 2020, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/vtVcl8uQUaw>, accessed October 11, 2021.