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Eighteenth Century Folk Music in the Czech Lands: Comments on the State of Research

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The relationship between folk music and art music is one of the great bugaboos in our field. Indeed, one might argue that the popularity of Czech music outside Czechoslovakia (and also, sometimes, within it) results from the perception of its “folkness.” Even those of us who should know better are sometimes seduced by an illusion which equates the folk quotient of a work with its value: the more folklike, the more Czech; the more Czech the better.

Zdeňka Pilková has been an active scholar in this area for decades. She has written extensive studies on early Czech music, Mozart and Haydn, and in this essay she cautions us against making facile generalizations about folk music by pointing out the vagueness of a range of terms associated with the very word “folk”. She also warns us of the dangers of asserting that this or that composer employs “Czech themes” before we fully understand our methods of coming to such a conclusion and the preconceptions we bring to endeavour.

If there is a link between Janáček and the eighteenth century, it may be found in the realm of folk music. That is why, as a specialist in the music of the eighteenth century, I have chosen this topic for my study.

The music of the lower social classes has been a part of musical development from the earliest beginnings to the present day. Since folk music is for the most part orally transmitted, written notations have been preserved for later periods only at random. However, a variety of documents and objects relating to a folk culture give more information about it. In Czechoslovakia folk music has been more or less systematically recorded since 1819. A number of collections were already in existence before Janáček began his own collecting activity, and at present the files of ethnographic institutes in Prague and Brno contain written records of more than thirty thousand folk songs. As we go further into the past, however, direct sources decrease in number. For the eighteenth century there are only a few incidental records in the Czech Lands, and in addition several little hand-written song books which were written down by some musicians for their own use, especially for providing dance music.¹ It is evident that this orally transmitted folk music and composed art music interacted on numerous levels and involved a wide variety of contacts. In doing research on art music the music historian meets with a number of questions which require a more detailed knowledge of the spontaneously created

¹ These oldest small collections are discussed in more detail in the book/edition by Jaroslav Maršl. *Nejstarší sbírky českých lidových písní* (The Oldest Collections of Czech Folk Songs). (Prague: 1987).

music of the time. However, there are usually no direct sources, and the indirect ones produce only hypotheses.

My reflections were inspired by such difficulties in the course of research involving Czech art music of the eighteenth century. Here I would like to inquire into the state of research on the musical folklore of our country, and into the current terminology employed in musicology when such problems are approached. My reflections are based on the music folklore materials of Bohemia and the western regions of Moravia, which form a certain, though rather differentiated cultural historical whole. Materials relating to the eastern regions of Moravia and Slovakia are thoroughly different in structure and belong to quite another cultural historical sphere.

There is a very clearly defined boundary between these two spheres of folk music in our country. It divides Moravia into two parts from south to north. Musical ethnographers have been able to determine this boundary precisely, nearly village by village. The eastern style, with which Janáček was associated is asymmetrical, with modal elements and vocal “recitative” style in the melody. The western type about which I will speak, is more symmetrically organized, though not in terms of phrase length: periods of five, six and seven measures are very typical. This type we might call more “instrumental.”

We all use terms such as “folk song,” “folk dance,” “folk music.” I will use them too, since they do facilitate communication. But these terms are very inaccurate and ambiguous, as I will try to prove.

Comment No. 1: On the term “folk”

The reason for the inaccuracy of terms like “folk song” and “folk dance” lies in the very term “folk.” The question, however, is very complicated and would provide more than enough material for an enormous interdisciplinary symposium. The way this term has been handed down in Czech musical historiography until recently is very significant: the implications of the term have their roots in a rather idealized conception of the peasantry and of its role in society, which originated in the period of the Enlightenment. It was then taken over during the Revivalist period and by Romanticism, which were initially represented most importantly by F. L. Čelakovský in the Czech Lands).² At earlier stages the expression “folk” denoted large sections of rural population without any further specification. In fact, however, this term comprised heterogeneous groups with wide social differences. For this reason, historians are now using much more precise terms (e.g. “rural subservient sections,” “unprivileged rural and urban sections,” “the section of urban craftsmen and retail dealers,” etc.).

This seemingly theoretical speculation has practical consequences in relation to the musical activity and repertory of the eighteenth century. Among statements

² František Ladislav Čelakovský, *Slovanské národní písně* (Slavic National Songs), 3 vols., (Prague: 1822-27).

frequently used in journalism, as well as in musicological literature, we find, for example, “the people in the church sang religious folk songs.” To whom does the word “people” actually refer? We know that in certain rural districts, where there was the residence of estate management, but without a special manor church (e.g. at Dolní Lukavice, where Joseph Haydn was engaged for some time), both the peasantry, the employees from the castle, and nobility of the manor gathered for worship in the same church on Sundays and feast days. They all sang, for example, the same repertory of Marian songs. Can this gathering be called the “folk”? Did they sing religious “folk” songs? As for the latter, this term is now beginning to be replaced by more factually accurate terms, for it is clear that these songs belong to the realm of composed music, even though many are anonymous, and large sections of the population appropriated them from printed hymn books for their own purposes. This is why hymnologists now prefer to use the term “strophic song of religious content.”

Yet another question concerns the village schoolmaster - who usually represented a sort of personal link between music in the manor-house, where he used to help with music or teaching children, music in the choir, where he was often engaged as *regenschori*, and music in the pub, where he used to play with other musicians for dances. Was this schoolmaster the representative of “the folk”? And can the music he produced with his band on Sundays be regarded as “folk music”? In this case, musicology could draw inspiration from the terminology and results of an allied field, ethnomusicology. Scholars in this field draw a subtle distinction between “authentic” or “rustic” village bands and more advanced schoolmasters’ bands.³ Although the latter type of band did not use such traditional folk instruments as bagpipes and cymbals, they were the real embodiment of rural musicality in the second half of the eighteenth century. Both of these examples, and a host of others that could be drawn, make the commonly used term “folk” fairly inexact and vague from the point of view of the music itself.

Comment No. 2: On the terms “folk song” and “folk music”

Naturally there is extensive specialized literature concerning this theme, and individual authors have different interpretations of the term “folk music.” The broadest conception in foreign literature was recently supported by Herman Strobach,⁴ who uses the phrase to describe the entire vocal repertory of large sections of the population, from Gregorian chant to the music produced by amateur ensembles in the present. In current Czech musicological practice and, above all, in

³ Ludvík Kunz, “Historical Accounts of the Horn in the Folk Instrumental Music of the 18th and 19th Centuries in the Czech Lands,” in *Das Waldhorn in der Geschichte und Gegenwart der tschechischen Musik* (Prague: 1983), pp. 128-137; Jaroslav Markl, “Mundstückinstrumente in der Musikfolklore Böhmens,” *Ibid*, pp. 105-122.

⁴ Herman Strobach, *Deutsches Volkslied in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Berlin: 1981).

musical journalism, the term “folk music” denotes the mythical creativity of subservient sections of rural population before the period of industrialization, but not as a whole. This term covers only a certain part of their musical activity, namely secular folk songs employing Czech texts and instrumental music.

When considered in terms of later compilations, our earliest collections of folk songs, originating under the influence of the Enlightenment, reflected the state of folk music in a relatively objective manner. They include small song books of the eighteenth century, the collection of Jan Jeník of Bratřice,⁵ and especially the so-called “Gubernatorial Collecting,” which was organized by Austrian authorities and started in 1819. Many collectors, primarily teachers and priests, took part in it. B. D. Weber then compiled a part of this material into the *Kolovraty Manuscript* (1323). Another part of the Gubernatorial Collecting was edited by J. Rittersberg as *České národní písně* (Czech National Songs, 1824).⁶ These collections have recorded not only folk songs, but also ballads and various kinds of very unsophisticated tunes. We also find that the texts were written down, almost entirely without moralistic censorship. Later collection (from Čelakovský on) skewed the selection process so that the finished product would fit with their romantic conceptions of “the people” and conform to their own aesthetic tastes. This resulted in considerable intervention in the choice of songs, texts and even resulted in modifications of musical structure in collections with printed tunes. By now, ethnographers have worked out methods (on the basis of musical and textual analysis) which enable us to distinguish different types of songs in the wider repertory as they were originally written down: authentic folk-songs, semi-authentic folk songs, and songs which had been accepted as folk songs from various sources. The results of this research are of great importance for musicologists involved in eighteenth-century art music.

Comment No. 3: On the problem of so-called “urban folklore”

Today it is clear that folk music was not only the music of rural communities, but that there was also urban folklore, which must be differentiated in another manner. While so-called “rural folklore” varied primarily according to the individual regions (the songs and dances of one region formed sometimes by only a cluster of several small localities, had characteristic features different from those of other regions), urban folklore reflected the qualities of social groups corresponding to the varied stratification of the urban population. The ranks of craftsmen, for example, had their own repertory, as did groups such as students, soldiers, etc.

These spheres of the music repertory were not, of course, strictly separated, and were no doubt rather interwoven, as for example in the pub. In addition, urban

⁵ Jaroslav Markl. “Rozmarné písničky (Humorous Songs) Jana Jeníka z Bratřic” (Prague: 1959). (a critical edition of this collection)

⁶ Complete critical editions of the *Kolovraty Manuscript*, Rittersberg’s publication and other smaller collections are contained in Markl, *Nejstarší sbírky*.

folklore was influenced by music that people heard at church, at various ceremonies, and at military marches through the town; and by ballad songs and contemporary “hits” from operas and singspiels, which often arrived in smaller towns in the form of religious compositions.⁷

As a matter of fact, the musical folklore of the rural population was also influenced by religious music, ballads and other phenomena, which may have included the repertory created and brought home by students of various schools and convents. Thus this music of “spontaneous creativity” was influenced in numerous ways, which does not, however, make it less valuable. The process through which various kinds of music were adapted in the sphere of rural and urban folklore was, as ethnographers emphasize nowadays, a creative process in itself, and therefore the thesis about so-called “decayed” music is not only old-fashioned but entirely false as well.

The problem of identifying the musical repertory of the rural and urban populations is also complicated by certain historical events, primarily the Josephinian reforms of the 1780s, which caused a population drift: the sections of rural population of lower social standing moved to the towns, especially to those in which the fast-growing textile industries provided opportunities to make a living. In addition to other tunes, these country folk certainly sang tunes they had brought from their native region and adapted them to their new surroundings. Unfortunately, very little is known about this interesting process in which the original songs changed under the influence of urban folklore, and vice-versa.⁸ In any case, the complexity of all these phenomena and processes makes it rather tenuous for the music historian to estimate what might have been taken over into art music. Therefore, we must be very careful about our judgements.

Comment No. 4: On the term “Czech folk music” and the traditional point of view

While this term is still commonly used by musicologists, ethnographers prefer the terms “folk music of Bohemia” and “folk music of Moravia.” All these problems with terminology have historical roots, which date back to the Revivalist period and derive from the specific position under the control of the Habsburg monarchy in which the Czech Lands found themselves after 1620. Until recently Czech scholars were concerned only with songs to Czech texts, although a population of both Czech

⁷ Ballad songs (“kramářské písně”) may be described as follows: a man (or a pair of men) came to the marketplace with a large sheet of paper containing pictures referring to a “terrible story” (e.g. an assassination, but there were also songs about the lives of saints, and about newly imported fruits, etc.). He sang the song and simultaneously showed the story in pictures. Afterwards, people could buy the text of this song on a small print (of one or two sheets). As (or the melody, at the bottom of the page there was usually a remark such as “it ought to be sung like ...” followed by a text incipit from a well-known folk song. Ballad songs were a kind of contemporary newspaper.

⁸ Markl, *Nejstarsí sbírky*, p. 170.

and German nationalities shared one territory. German songs were of great interest only to German authors, who often took a nationalist-chauvinist position between the two World Wars and sometimes even later.⁹ But the results of the Gubernatorial Collecting started in 1819 had already proved that the repertory of the population of the Czech Lands contained songs with both Czech and German (sometimes even bilingual) texts. It is evident that both types of songs were performed not only in the places where both nationalities were intermixed (as in some towns and border areas), but even where they lived separately to some extent (as in areas where one village was Czech and, number German). With the exception of a single study,¹⁰ no Czech musicologist has thus far undertaken a deeper inquiry into the German folk songs in the Czech Lands.

Comment No. 5: On the so-called “specificity” of Czech folk music

This rather complicated issue is closely connected with problems which belong to the field of music historiography. In the eighteenth century, the Czech Lands were not a closed union; the ethnic boundaries coincided with neither the boundaries of the individual countries of the Habsburg monarchy nor the state frontier. Folk music spread to the Czech Lands through various kinds of mechanisms (through the migration of students, soldiers, village fiddlers, etc.) not only from the neighbouring lands, but often even from very distant countries. We know that folklore phenomena (fairy tales, folk stories, etc.) often moved great distances throughout Europe. The same is true of folk music, a particularly suitable means of social entertainment. Under these circumstances the question of the specific identity of Bohemian and Moravian folk music is extremely complicated. Numerous tunes circulated throughout the whole of Central Europe, or at least through the Austrian Lands (e.g. the lullaby “Hushaby, my angel”). In studies published by foreign authors, Czech music historians often happen to find a tune which might be described as a “typical Neopolitan song,” for example, but which is known to them as a Czech folk song. At the same time, apart from such similarities there were also clear differences, and Czech musical folklore does have some characteristic features, which has been proven by ethnographers in a number of studies. However, the problems have not yet been elaborated upon as a whole. A musicologist, trying to distinguish certain specifically Czech melodic or rhythmic idioms from Italianate elements in either religious or secular composed music from the Czech Lands during the eighteenth century, is confronted with a by and large unsolvable task at this time.

⁹ Karl Michael Komma, *Das böhmische Musikantentum* (Kassel: 1960).

¹⁰ Jaroslav Markl, “Deutsche Volkslieder in Böhmen, gesammelt im Jahre 1819,” *Beiträge zur Musikwissenschaft* 1 (1959), pp. 23-27.

Comment No. 6: On the chronologically different layers of the folk repertory

In the eighteenth century repertory of the rural and urban populations, the most varied chronological layers were concurrently in existence; from the residues of Gregorian chant to the latest songs of the period, which originated under the influence of ballad songs of secular as well as religious content. Musical and textual analysis can distinguish these layers to some extent, but only approximately. A more exact location in time has been, with a few exceptional cases, very difficult to determine so far, although it would be of great interest for a music historian in specific cases. Hymnologists are faced with this problem most frequently, but even those who are involved in the study of eighteenth-century art (composed) music often need a more accurate knowledge of the probable time a particular song or group of songs originated. There are many tunes which recall the melodic and metro-rhythmical models of the music of early classicism. The problem of so-called “Mozartisms” in folk music of the Czech Lands is discussed most often. It would be important to know if specific melodies, which are so irresistibly reminiscent of certain melodies by Mozart, appeared as a result of the popularity of his works, or whether they had occurred in the musical repertory of the people even before, and had been, together with other melodies of a similar structure, a reason for the positive reception of Mozart’s works in Bohemia.

From the previous comments it is clear that the stage of research into spontaneous musical creativity in the Czech Lands does not by any means enable us to answer many questions that are posed by historical musicology in connection with the relationship of this kind of music to art (composed) music. It is necessary to wait until the extensive files of records of folk songs and instrumental music, which have been collected for decades, have been explored in a more detailed and systematic manner. Until that time, all statements which appear in both Czech and foreign literature claiming, for example, that “in František Benda’s (or J. V Stamic’s, etc.) works we can find a marked reflection of Czech folk dance, the typical Czech musicality of the rural people...” must be considered as mere observations of an accidental melodic or metro-rhythmic coincidence, which can be thoroughly misleading and, in any case, are not based on profound analysis. To create the conditions for such analysis represents one of the unfulfilled tasks of musicology and musical ethnography in our country.

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