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The Context and Content of Czech-language Liturgical Music in the 17th Century: Some Questions

Introduction

The Czech lands are widely recognised for the historical use of vernacular liturgy with a venerable tradition dating back to the missions of Cyril and Methodius, sent to the region in by Patriarch Photius in 863 AD. In the era following the execution Jan Hus (c. 1369–1415) volumes of Czech Christian songs and hymns grew in popularity (in books called *kancionály*), many of which were used in conjunction with the Mass in both Czech and Latin—the vernacular Mass being most prevalent amongst the Utraquists in particular.¹ Rather than being eradicated, some of these traditions were transformed during the Counter-Reformation. It is hoped that the patterns and examples discussed in this paper shed some light on the use Czech singing at Mass during the decades following the Thirty Years War and perhaps pursue new avenues of enquiry.²

In the period before the Thirty Years War, some powerful Roman-Catholics in Bohemia and Moravia had shown a spirit of accommodation with some of their non-conformist compatriots.³ Some of the pre-war toleration continued in order to incorporate

¹ For the Utraquist Mass see Barry Graham, “The Evolution of the Utraquist Mass 1420–1620,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 92, no. 4 (2006): 553–73.

² For the sake of space I am not dealing with use of German here. However, the German-speaking members of the Bohemian Brethren, for example, have a parallel tradition to the Czech speakers up to the Thirty Years War, including translations of Czech *kancionály*. Moreover, there are signs that German speakers in Bohemia and Moravia continued to sing some liturgical music in the vernacular long after re-Catholicisation of the region—a fascinating phenomenon perhaps related to the Czech-language tradition, but still awaiting a comprehensive study.

³ Even the archbishop of Prague, Antonín Brus (1518–80), who chaired the censorship committee, made no attempts to enforce severe prohibitions. R. J. W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy, 1550–1700: An Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 18. Jiří Sehnal, “Český zpěv při mši,” *Hudební věda* 1 (1992), 4.

those non-conformist traditions that could be tolerated by the new regime. Examples of this continuity can be seen in the musical traditions associated with the literary brotherhoods [*literati*] that had flowered during the Reformation. In the turbulent era after 1620, some of the Catholic brotherhoods maintained earlier customs such as the singing parts of the liturgy in the vernacular. Some of the leaders of these brotherhoods were also *regens chori* or associated with the literary choirs of prominent chapels (many of them private) or churches and thus the context for the performance the many Czech-language liturgical music and spiritual songs is open to question.⁴ Were these settings sung as part of the liturgy with a presiding priest, or were they part the private devotions of the literary brotherhoods or other groups? Some sources suggest that, at least on some occasions, Czech settings were sung at Mass.

Before White Mountain

Before 1620, singing in Czech at Mass was not uncommon—the most basic pattern being that the Catholics only sang in Czech for non-liturgical songs, whilst the non-conformists (especially the Utraquists) might use the vernacular for both congregational singing as well as the Mass itself.⁵ The patterns of vernacular singing at Mass are not uniform and represent a gap in current research and understanding. The most common vehicle of Czech singing are the sacred songs and hymns sung by the congregation disseminated in *kancionalý*. More than merely the Czech equivalent of hymnals, they embodied the ethos of the Czech Protestants with their focus on correct use of language in high-literary style and congregational participation. The collections of the Utraquists are more closely associated with the literary brotherhoods and the vernacular liturgy; these collections remained mostly in manuscript form.⁶ In the spirit of the Counter-Reformation, Catholics also created their own *kancionalý* on a grand scale and these were modelled on their Protestant precursors, with a fair amount of overlapping repertoire.

Fraternitas Litteratorum

Literary brotherhoods rose to prominence in Bohemia and Moravia during the Renaissance and reached their apotheosis in the decades leading up to the Thirty Years

⁴ Paul Nettl, "The Czechs in Eighteenth-Century Music," *Music & Letters* 21, no. 4 (1940), 363.

⁵ There is not enough space to discuss such a massive subject in the detail it requires. The standard (though ageing) work is Zdeněk Nejedlý, *Počátky Husitského zpěvu* (Prague: 1907). Older still (though very useful) is Karel Konrad, *Dějiny posvátného zpěvu staročeského* (Prague: Cyrillo-Methoděské Kněhhtiskárny, 1881). Some of Nejedlý's claims about Hus and congregational singing are challenged in Jan Kouba, "Jan Hus und das gesitliche Lied: ein Literaturbericht," *JbLH* 14 (1969): 190–96.

⁶ Barry Graham, "The Evolution of the Utraquist Mass 1420–1620." There are even Czech-language *contrafacta* of works by Josquin discussed in Jitka Snižková, "Josquin in Czech Sources," in *Josquin des Prez* (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

War.⁷ They were a product of humanism and part of their endeavours usually included (or even focussed on) singing polyphonic music in the vernacular and this latter aspect made them unique amongst humanistic fraternities.⁸ Much early Czech polyphony is attributed to such groups (there were at least 100 in Bohemia alone and at least 55 in Moravia).⁹ The members of the brotherhoods were usually well-educated and well-situated men of the town, often lawyers, wealthy merchants, burghers, and so on. The groups were also well-organised and well-funded, either from within the group or from aristocratic patronage. They aimed to reflect both their humanist ideals and their non-conformist traditions. Considering the influential positions of many members of the *literati*, the use of vernacular singing may also be construed as a statement of social-political values in addition to theological ones. The brotherhoods were also often connected with a specific church or order where they would hold their devotions and more pertinently, they would train singers and cantors.¹⁰ What is not completely understood are the implications for the connections between the *literati* and the cantors and choir members of the church—especially after 1620. The singing of the *literati* was not merely an act of private devotion, but some of them also participated in liturgical music making such as singing of morning Mass and at certain feast days and funerals.¹¹ The combination of the brotherhood's activities made important connections between their humanist thinking, theology and Czech culture and language. In at least one case (St Havel in Prague) the Czech liturgical music manuscripts of the *literati* were used again by the church after re-Catholicisation following the Thirty Years War.¹² These connections between the literary brotherhoods and the *regens chori* are not always clear, but the small amount of evidence is too tantalising to ignore.

The careers of some musicians associated with the *literati* straddle the pivotal Battle of White Mountain and might serve as examples to help shed some light on this transitional period. One such example is the Utraquist intellectual and composer Jan Campanus–Vodňanský (1572–1622) who was associated (directly and indirectly) with

⁷ The brotherhoods have traditionally been most strongly associated with Bohemia, but recent research reveals that they were more common in Moravia than previously thought. See Vladimír Mañas, “Hudební aktivity náboženských korporací na Moravě v raném novověku” (Filozofická fakulta Masarykovy univerzity v Brně, 2008).

⁸ An excellent and recent study of the polyphonic repertoire of the brotherhoods in Bohemia before 1620 is Martin Horyna, “Vícehlasá hudba v Čechách v 15. a 16. století a její interpreti,” *Hudební věda* 43, no. 2 (2006): 117–34.

⁹ Vladimír Mañas, “Hudební aktivity náboženských korporací,” *passim*. Until the work of Mañas there were only around thirty literary brotherhoods known in Moravia before 1620.

¹⁰ Christine Covert Barrows, “The Music of the Bohemian Literary Brotherhoods as preserved in Prague, Národní knihovna Manuscript PragU XVII B 19” (University of Ottawa, 1996), 125. Barrows' study focusses on a fascinating manuscript associated with the literary brotherhood at St Havel in Prague's old town.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

¹² *Ibid.*, 128.

several literary brotherhoods in Prague and elsewhere.¹³ The next level of connections of the *literati* to consider is with networks of schools. Campanus himself had been superintendent at the school of St Henry [Jindřich] in Prague, whose *literati* were also known to sing Czech liturgical music. After leaving, Campanus became head of the school at St James [Jakub] in Kutná Hora.¹⁴ Some of the possible connections remain conjecture, but the children of these schools did learn to sing polyphony and probably came into contact with Czech-language singing either directly through their schooling or through the members of the *literati* who were attached to the church. Campanus 'converted' to the Roman-Catholic church in 1622 with the intention of preserving the Utraquist traditions of Prague University which had been handed over to the Jesuits, but died within the year following serious mental disorders.¹⁵ Examples such as Campanus beg the question: to what extent did Utraquist-cum-Catholics succeed in preserving the pre-war musical traditions? The short answer is that we do not know, exactly. However, the choir masters of the Utraquist churches were often connected to the literary brotherhoods and many of those who converted after 1620 continued to worship as crypto-Utraquists.¹⁶

Patterns of Education after 1620

After 1620 the Habsburg authorities handed control of many influential schools (and Prague's university) to control of the Jesuits, who are well-known for adapting local customs and conventions to follow Roman-Catholic dogma. Especially popular with locals was the practice of making *contrafacta* of existing folk songs to teach and spread the Roman faith—an evangelical tool of both the Jesuits and the Dominicans. In the Czech lands the Jesuits were hugely successful in adapting the Czech singing traditions of Protestants. The Catholic authorities faced a number of challenges in terms of music and devotion in the Czech lands: they were faced with a culture of communal singing, worship and general involvement in devotional matters and so sought to appropriate some of these ancient customs and liturgical peculiarities rather than strive for a uniformity that would have been impossible to impose.¹⁷

¹³ Jan Racek, and Jitka Snižková, eds. *Jan Campanus–Vodňanský, Carmina Festiva*, vol. 9, *Musica Antiqua Bohemica* (Prague: Supraphon, 1978), xiii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii. Snižková points out that the pomp of the funeral given by the Jesuits provides a cruelly ironic conclusion to the life of Campanus.

¹⁶ Even in the late eighteenth century foreigners noted the survival of Protestant sects and practices in the Czech lands. The German traveller Reisbeck commented in 1783 that the 'Hussites are still very numerous in the country. Some think that a fourth part of the inhabitants are of this sect, which has also spread widely in Moravia.' Johann Kaspar Riesbeck, *Travels Through Germany in a Series of Letters*, trans. Rev. Maty, 2 vols., vol. II (Zurich: T. Cadell, 1787), 127.

¹⁷ Mark Germer, "The Austro-Bohemian Pastorella and Pastoral Mass to c. 1720" (Ph. D, New York University, 1989), 50–51.

The Catholic Transformation of the *Kancionál*

The Jesuit's first and probably most outwardly visible and hugely symbolic sign of this transformation was in the publication of Václav Adam Michna's *Česká Mariánská Muzika*. Published in Prague in 1647, *Česká Mariánská Muzika* bore a title page that would have been familiar to almost every literate Czech. Michna (or more likely his Jesuit publishers) modified the engraved title page from the most successful and popular of all Protestant *kancionály* to date—Jan Roh's *Písň chval božských* (Prague, 1541)—and replaced the contents with his own compositions dedicated to the Virgin Mary. This bold move (the title page even retained a representation of Jan Hus!) parallels another highly symbolic transformation that took place very near to the Jesuit's printing press in Prague. After the twenty seven Protestant leaders were executed on Prague's main square in 1621, the Roman-Catholic victors undertook a symbolic act intended serve as a warning. They melted down the golden chalice that sat in a recess between the two towers of the Týn church and transformed into a statue of the Virgin Mary. The chalice was a powerful symbol for the Utraquist cause which maintained that communion should be given to the laity in 'both kinds' [*sub utraque specie*]. The most obvious level of symbolism was the victory of the Roman Catholics over the Protestants; but the recasting of the chalice also echoed the obsession of the Habsburg elites with alchemy, magic and the transformation of base materials.¹⁸ In both political and musical senses, the *kancionál* had entered a new era. Michna's collection was the most original and up-to-date *kancionál* published at the time. Not only did all of the newly composed songs have notation, they were also printed in parts (four and five voices) with a figured bass and instructions on how instruments might also be used with them in performance.¹⁹ Moreover, Michna also penned the excellent devotional poetry himself. Michna played a vital role in the Catholic transformation of the *kancionál* tradition, but the connections with pre-war society did not stop there.

Unlike most provincial organists, Michna had both money and influence. Moreover, his role in revolutionising the *kancionál* was no coincidence; he was particularly well-placed to continue (and improve on) the pre-war traditions of Czech singing, especially when considering he was an elder of the literary brotherhood in his native town of Jindřichův Hradec. It was through his connections with the *literati* and the Marian Society that Michna met with the man who would become the compiler of the largest baroque *kancionál*, Václav Matěj Šteyer (1630–92).²⁰ Šteyer was a Jesuit who (like many in his order) sought to both preserve and encourage Czech singing in church—his massive *Kancionál Český* (Prague, 1683) bears a dedication to both the

¹⁸ R. J. W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy*, 340–418.

¹⁹ Modern edition: Jiří Sehnal, ed. *Česká mariánská muzyka (1647)* (Prague: Supraphon, 1989).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

literati and cantors. So confident were the Jesuits of their success in transforming such practices from Protestant contexts to Catholic ones that the Catholic *kancionály* not only included many Protestant songs, but sometimes even Hussite ones.²¹ Šteyer not only advocates singing in Czech, but also places value on its historical legitimacy—but note well that he does not mention liturgical contexts.²²

Our ancestors in Bohemia [Czechách] used to have a fine and very commendable custom of gathering all together in the Lord's church on Sundays and feast days, early before Holy Mass and the preaching of God's word, and the of singing sacred songs there, namely at first songs for the early morning and later on those pertaining to specific annual celebrations, or generally, of everyone singing piously together, having instituted choirs for that purpose, in which not only the ordinary townsmen but also the aldermen lords of the town and more prominent person used to sing in Czech together with the commoners and praise the Lord God in a unified voice, reckoning this is a special point of honour. [...] Although this fine tradition of singing Czech songs in church still continues unbroken in certain places, it cannot be denied, however, that the former praiseworthy ardour in singing the Lords' praise has, here and there, cooled down. This is because those who gather for singing in those place are few and arrive late and some prefer to stay home or talk with each other in front of the church about various worldly matters rather to praise the Lord God in the church by means of pious singing.²³

The Mass and Paraphrases

In addition to singing vernacular songs at Mass, there is evidence that part or paraphrases of the Mass were also sung in Czech. The biggest reason for this paraliturgical phenomenon probably has to do with necessity and pastoral care by local clergy. This was more easily facilitated (if not out of necessity) by the fact that such practices were probably confined to small towns and villages, where making Latin accessible was nearly impossible. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Thirty Years War, Catholic preachers were more concerned with conversion and in doing so made allowances for certain local customs. Many post-war publications as well as private manuscripts give some hint of continuity. The *Český Dekakord* (Prague, 1642) contains settings of four parts of the Mass Ordinary in Czech, omitting the *Agnus Dei*—a characteristic

²¹ Perhaps the widest variety is in Václav Holan-Rovenský, *Capella Regia musicalis* (Prague: 1693). A good overview of the collection is Jaroslav Bužga, "Capella regia musicalis Václava Karla Rovenského," *Časopis Národního musea* cxxiv (1955): 154–80.

²² The next major collection was compiled by Jan Josef Božan and published in Hradec Králové in 1719: *Slaviček Rajský na stromě Života, slávu tvorci Svému Prospěvující* [The Nightingale of Paradise on the Tree of Life, Singing Praise to its Creator]. This collection goes further still in including Czech liturgical works, including chants and responses with basso continuo.

²³ According to Germer (1989) this preface only appears in the second (1687) edition of Šteyer's collection first printed in 1683. See Mark Germer, "The Austro-Bohemian Pastorella," 52–54. The above excerpt is a translation of Šteyer's preface as reprinted in Jan Josef Božan, *Slaviček Rajský na stromě Života, slávu tvorci Svému Prospěvující* (Hradec Králové: Tibeli, 1719).

of Utraquist practice.²⁴ By the second half of the seventeenth century the Piarists at Stražnice used Czech singing at Mass, but perhaps only during Advent—a special circumstance.²⁵

The popularity of Mass paraphrases not only survives the Thirty Years War, but perhaps even increases. These are paraliturgical sequences of pieces that either start with text incipits of parts of the liturgy, or are intended to compliment the Latin liturgy. This duality is reflected in the presentation of such sequences in *kancionály* where the texts of the Mass are followed by Czech alternatives ‘pro obecní lid’ [for common people]. This practice even extends beyond the typical *kancionál* tradition and is found in pieces with obligato instruments and basso continuo in Václav Holan’s remarkable *Capella Regia musicalis* (Prague, 1693).²⁶ In contrast to some pre-war practices, Czechs now found themselves at a Mass with which they had no real interaction with the priest, but only observed from a distance. Removed both physically, culturally and linguistically from proceedings, rural congregations followed their own proceedings, echoing those of the formal liturgy unfolding before them.²⁷ The Czech paraphrases provided an air of familiarity for rural congregations without directly compromising the integrity of the Latin Mass. But this scenario leaves the possibility of two simultaneous acts of worship—one for the well-educated who understood the Latin Mass and one for those still following some form of the older Czech traditions. The comments in the prefaces of Šteyer in 1687 (and echoed by Božan in 1719) suggest that the physical and linguistic separation of the congregation and the clergy may have led to a decline in participation of some rural congregations.

Further Implications

The evidence of the seventeenth-century efforts to Catholicise Protestant practices eventually bears fruit and the evidence for this is much greater in eighteenth-century sources. One German noble noted in 1734 that ‘the Bohemians have a great many Talents for Music, so that there’s no Village, be it ever so small; but the Mass is sung in

²⁴ Jitka Snižková, “Die kalixtinische Messe gegen Ende des 16. Jahrhunderts,” *Colloquium Musica Bohemica et Europaea* (1972), 91.

²⁵ The records of 24. 12. 1681: ‘Matutinum habulmus simplex sine organista. Pro Responsoriis canebantur bohemicæ cantilenæ. Sacrum cantatum erat ad cantilenas bohemicas’; and the same date the following year: ‘Habulmus matutinum media 12^{ma} post illud sacrum cantatum: sine organo inter versiculos cantionum Bohemicarum’. Cited in Jiří Sehnal, “Hudební inventář stražnických Piaristů z roku 1675,” *Časopis Moravského muzea*, 69 (1984), 127.

²⁶ Although not one of the quasi-liturgical pieces, it is worth noting that Schmelzer made a German-language arrangement of one of Holan’s pieces (*pozdravena bud’*) for Liechtenstein-Castelcorno at Kroměříž.

²⁷ The account of the Piarists at Stražnice in 1681 and 1682 (cited in Sehnal; see above) seems to imply this sort of relationship between Czech singing and the formal liturgy. On these sequences in Catholic *kancionály* see Jiří Sehnal, “Český zpěv při mši,” 10–11.

Concert'.²⁸ Some recent research has unearthed sources that suggest that the school-children at the Jesuit gymnasium in Brno interspersed paraliturgical songs for the entire Latin liturgy, while the priest only sang the responses for administering communion.²⁹ These seventeenth-century patterns gather pace in the following century, where liturgical and paraliturgical pieces in the vernacular increase in number and make allowances for the inclusion of the congregation (the latter cases become specialities for Advent and Christmas) as well as singers and instrumentalists.³⁰ Moreover, the Mass paraphrases also continue to grow in scale and also to grow further from the liturgical texts they once complimented. The extent of this is such that by the time of Ryba's so-called *Česká Vanoční Mše* of 1796, the titles of the Mass Ordinary are reduced to acting as mere headings for the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo*, etc., with the rest of the texts being entirely non-liturgical—only the observations and responses of the 'obecní lid' [common people] remain.

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²⁸ Karl Ludwig Pöllnitz, *The Memoirs of Charles-Lewis, Baron de Pollnitz*, 2 vols., vol. I (London: Brown, 1737), 222.

²⁹ Forthcoming research of Vladimír Mañas, to whom I am grateful for sharing his thoughts and discoveries.

³⁰ As Gluck later testifies: 'in my homeland everyone is musical; music is taught in the schools, and in the tiniest villages the peasants sing and play different instruments during High Mass in their churches'. In "Gluck à Paris en 1774," *La Revue Musicale* (1934), 260.

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