

# THE INNOVATION OF TRADITION: MALE FOLK CHOIRS IN THE SLOVÁCKO REGION AND THEIR BEGINNINGS

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Differentiating authentic from inauthentic expressions or performance material has become a subject of intense interest within folkloristics and ethnology, although the viewpoint taken, terminology, and evaluation of specific activities and communication structures (particularly music, dance, verbal and dramatic expression, tangible artefacts, etc.) have been evolving. Authenticity has been associated with traditional folk culture, particularly with documented ‘first-existence’ folk expressions—those recorded within the original framework comprising space, time, and meaning (featuring the original/primary functions)<sup>1</sup>, and involving the original/authentic bearers anchored in the traditional community.<sup>2</sup> Note here that differentiating ‘traditional’(pre-industrial) societies from ‘modern’ (industrial)

1. Martina Pavlicova and I have focused on this topic in our paper entitled “Mimo svůj čas, prostor i význam – lidové tradice na jevišti” [Out of Their Time, Space and Meaning: Folk Traditions on Stage] presented at the most recent run of the Náměšť colloquy. In: *Od folkloru k world music: Na scéně a mimo scénu [From Folklore to World Music: On and Off Stage]*, edited by Irena Přibyllová and Lucie Uhlíková, 9–24. Náměšť nad Oslavou: Městské kulturní středisko, 2015.
2. The ethnology literature in the Czech Republic understands this environment as the traditional village or rural area. This is a more precise designation since—based upon their size—many sites are actually small towns. From the sociological point of view, a “rural area” may be defined as “a populated area outside city boundaries with a lower population density and traditional focus on agriculture, along with a different way of life—usually connected to nature—and a different social structure, compared to that of urban areas. [...] Sociology considers the village community (or rural community) a typical feature of rural areas. Such a community is usually defined in contrast to urban community in terms of the following characteristics: 1) higher degree of mutual social dependency; 2) less variability of professional opportunities; 3) less social differentiation and more narrow space for social mobility; 4) stronger ties to tradition and weaker tendency towards social change; 5) stronger determination by the natural environment” (Hudečková 1996: 1380).

societies, particularly as is done in social sciences, is ill-advised: sociologist and historian Eric Hobsbawm, for instance, in *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), showed that mass production of tradition in Europe is tied directly to the origin of modern society and nationalism.<sup>3</sup> Even setting aside the hierarchy this implies, think, for example, of national, political, religious, or military traditions, along with those related to voluntary associations.

Hobsbawm refers to some newly reconstructed traditions as *invented traditions*. He deciphers their origin and functions against the backdrop of nationalism and the origin of nationstates. These new traditions have substantial ties to notions of being deeply anchored in time and continuity: Hobsbawm bases their constructs on the illusion of ancientness (examples include the invented traditions of the Scottish Highlands and Wales, British imperial traditions in India and Africa, and, in the Czech context, the notable Cyril and Methodius tradition of Moravia). These constructs represent a search for support for newly originating structures within society, for new institutions and new authorities, and legitimise their demands. Although these newly constructed traditions take little space in the lives of individuals or social groups, their importance in public life has been considerable.

In the present paper, however, I would like to focus on folk traditions, those that Hobsbawm classifies as “true”. Even though the degree to which these “true” traditions are ancient may vary, they have been continuously maintained, revived and modified to fit the **contemporary cultural system**. This is because tradition—as a specific mechanism for transferring information that is perceived by the receiver as establishing voluntary ties with

3. “Among other factors, the sharp differentiation between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies was introduced into the social sciences by misreading the German sociologist Max Weber and, under examination in light of the above categorisation, turns out to be illusory.” Cf. “Zemřel britský historik Eric Hobsbawm.” *Britské listy* [online] 1. 10. 2012 [accessed July 12. 2016]. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/oct/01/eric-hobsbawm-died-aged-95?newsfeed=true>>. The imprecise classification into ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ societies, and therefore cultures, was also the focus of Kandert, Josef. 1999. “Poznámky k výzkumu a chápání „tradice“.” *Český lid* 86: 197–213.

the past—always includes an interpretative aspect (Pavlicová – Uhlíková 2008a: 52–53). Simply put, the bearers of tradition must confront whatever they transfer with the time in which they live—that is, with the present—as well as with the culture in which they live and of which they have been a part.

The definition of folk culture both in the Czech Republic and in Europe is actually an artificial construct, one which relates to the composition of the nation and which is built upon a search for cultural differences; still, there are traditions referred to as “folk traditions”.<sup>4</sup> Within the Czech and Moravian environments, these folk traditions have been maintained especially as part of the folk revival movement, that is, as part of an organized, institutionalised platform for conscientiously preserving the **cultural heritage**. In some senses, UNESCO legal documents, among others, define cultural heritage as closed off, definitive content: it is passed on to be maintained by “heirs”— successors or descendants. In contrast, tradition may be perceived as an open structure without definitive content. It continues to develop through interpretation (it always *makes* its subject *present* – cf. Scruton 2005: 20) and is continuously created and innovated. Folk traditions, particularly those related to song and dance, are much more than a stage presentation of the folk revival movement. They have been part of **everyday culture** and have served as a platform for fulfilling the needs of individuals and groups alike. In contrast to the local communities of times past, characterized as they were by fairly high levels of cultural homogeneity, the region which is our focus here is significantly segmented. Folk culture traditions have frequently been maintained exclusively by individuals, families or associations. During a particular festivity, the number of people who maintain the traditions or at least observe them differs but practically never involves the entire village.

4. Because of the focus of the colloquy, “folk traditions” refer to, in particular, display of music and dance. Music and dance presentation goes hand in hand with the development of folk costumes to date, reconstruction of original costumes and issues related with stage costumes.

## Male voice choirs in the Slovácko region

The issues above serve as an important springboard for grasping and evaluating the phenomenon of male voice folk choirs, which have seen an unprecedented boom over the past twenty years, particularly in the Slovácko region but in others as well: the Brno region, for instance, has been strongly inspired by some Slovácko folk culture elements.<sup>5</sup> It is only a slight exaggeration to say that choirs exist in almost every Slovácko village today: during my field work, I registered up to 120 choirs in the Slovácko region as of this year, and their numbers continue to grow.<sup>6</sup> Based upon available information, the first independent male voice choir originated in Velká nad Veličkou in 1957.<sup>7</sup> However, until the establishment of the Velička folk ensemble in 1968, singers also functioned as dancers during public performances. Other male voice choirs were recorded in Kudlovice and Kyjov by 1964. A slowly growing number of male voice choirs in the Slovácko region was apparent until 1989, when Czech society as a whole underwent significant changes. In the decade that followed, though, the number of choirs doubled (from 20 to approximately 40), and, in the subsequent decade, doubled again (by 2010 there were approximately 80 choirs). The reasons for the boom have not been explored sufficiently to allow me to focus on them at this point.

Briefly summarising my three-year field research (Pavlicová – Uhlíková 2014; Uhlíková 2015), choirs are usually comprised of middle-aged or elderly married men. (The average age may be misleading, since the ages of the youngest and oldest members may span forty years or more.) The greatest motivation behind the

5. The Brno shift towards Slovácko traditions has been apparent over a long-term. It may be perceived as an expansion of Slovácko at the expense of the Brno region in view of the definition of these ethnographic regions in ethnographic articles in which the individual elements of traditional culture were used: livelihood, architecture, costumes, folk traditions, dialect, etc.
6. Similar attention could also be paid to female choirs, but the author has not focused on them yet.
7. For more information on the history of the origin and operation of this choir, cf. Šalé, František – Šaléová, Věra (eds.) 2012: *Hore Velká... Hornácký mužský sbor z Velké nad Veličkou*. Boskovice: Albert.

origin and functioning of these groups is the need these men feel to **sing a repertoire referring to general**—and frequently highly illusory—**ideas the public have about folk traditions** and to do so in an **organized** fashion, along with the need to present their singing in **public** wearing the **folk costume**. Therefore, the choirs are not about the mere maintenance of the local singing tradition, nor are they simply a conscious revival and cultivation of the folk heritage; rather, they are also about public representation of a particular group, with an emphasis on its local identity manifested through clothing. This is because the folk costume is an important differentiation marker, in particular during folk song festivals and encounters involving individual ensembles. Their members may thus immediately discern where others come from: here, the folk costume takes on one of its primary functions—that of differentiation.<sup>8</sup>

Successful work by an ensemble is predicated upon finding a person both willing and capable of leading it; the membership of individual singers is based upon their willingness to take part in rehearsals and sing together. The performance quality of individual singers is important only in choirs with high artistic ambitions, something related to the character of their leader, his or her demands and goals. However, if good singers prevail in the choir, the ensemble's objectives may be an expression of the singers' collective opinion.

In the course of my research, it became clear that over the past twenty years, the salient motivation for establishing new choirs has been the presence of similar choirs in neighbouring villages. The respondents themselves, though, usually deny emulating their neighbours and point to a random event instead: a funeral, a wedding, a New Year's celebration, preparation for annual feasts, the anniversary of the founding of their village, a meeting of the village diaspora, and so on. Many villages had seen prior

8. Cf. Bogatyrev, Peter 1937: *Funkcie kroja na Moravskom Slovensku*. Turčianský Sv. Martin: Matica slovenská.

unsuccessful attempts to establish a choir. Several were established as part of folk ensembles, from which they later separated; others have remained part of the ensemble's organizational structure, although these are rare. Our original presumption, that male voice choirs are comprised of former members of folk ensembles, was not confirmed. Nevertheless, there are frequently musicians among the choir singers: those who used to or have focused on a very wide range of musical genres, ranging from folk music and brass music to beat music. Most singers were not active in the folk revival movement. But as young people, they did enjoy traditional occasions like the annual feasts and carnival processions. Many came from families where they used to sing at home a lot and where a positive relationship to folk traditions was cultivated. The majority of older choir members show a certain sentiment: singing in the choir generates strong emotions tied to bygone times when they were young, a period of time they naturally idealise (it used to be different, people used to sing and dance more, traditions used to be more cultivated). Interviews carried out with the singers show strong local patriotism, keenly felt especially in choirs in which singers from several villages meet.

Although the activity of male voice choirs, as organized associations focused on the rehearsal and public presentation of folk songs (namely traditional male voice repertoire) falls under folklorism, the choirs provide their members with functions related by ethnology to everyday culture. Rehearsals, as well as other events during which the choir members meet—birthday celebrations, trips or meetings over a glass of wine, during the traditional pig slaughter and so on—provide opportunities for singing together, communicating and sharing information. For instance, in the Ždánice and Kyjov regions, choir members are also winemakers and make use of these get-togethers to consult their work procedures or issues. Taking part in the choir is a form of relaxation that helps people escape their everyday worries and provides self-fulfilment and a meaningful way to spend their leisure time. It is about recognizing one's worth and self-esteem—from a psychological standpoint, about fulfilling basic individual needs.

### **Differences as well as unity: the future of individual choirs**

The fact that these associations operate on the border between an organized folk revival movement and spontaneous everyday culture allows two types of male voice choir to be distinguished, based upon the key motivators of the individual choirs. Some prioritize quality public presentation. They rehearse intensively, have strong leaders, and emphasize quality singing, discouraging poor singers from taking part. These ensembles try to publish their own commercial song books and release their own recordings, and their members attach a high value to singing in the choir.

For others, it is just being in the choir and getting together that provides the motivation. They do perform publicly, but they prefer spontaneous singing, for example in wine cellars. Ensembles of this type include singers of all competencies, and this is reflected in their repertoire and frequency of their rehearsals. Many choirs hold regular meetings only during the festival season, that is, in the months when the weather is conducive to singing in the open air, at folk shows, at meetings of male voice choirs, folk festivals, and various local ethnocultural events.

From the point of view of musical folkloristics, the goal of male voice choirs is to publicly present songs classified as folk songs. But their repertoire frequently includes new songs, either composed as folk song imitations or specific, original works referring to tradition through the motives used in the lyrics, the dialect, or the melodic theme. A genre known as *lidovka*<sup>9</sup> is also a dominant source of inspiration. Its presence is especially felt in those portions of the Slovácko region where brass music, tied to folk traditions, have had a significant influence since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This type of music influenced the aesthetic sensibilities of several generations of people living in rural areas. It offered a pleasant alternative to poetic lyrics and the melodic-harmonic structure of folk songs, and thematically

9. Both the Czech *lidová píseň* and *lidovka* terms share a common etymological root and refer to folk song: the former to traditional folk music whose author is lost to history, and the latter to modern folk songs by known composers released commercially by the mass media. A typical example is “Škoda lásky” by Jaromír Vejvoda, known in English as the “Beer Barrel Polka”.

focused on romantic and nature clichés (Kotek 1998: 102–103). In addition, brass themes were tied to viticulture and winemaking and references to “home”, represented by either Moravia, the Slovácko region or the specific name of a town or village. These songs are of recent vintage—approximately the last 30 years—and have sometimes been composed for the needs of a particular choir. Thus the relationship between the choirs studied and original local or regional song traditions is uneven. Some choirs focus on performing what is taken as genuine folk songs: recorded by collectors in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, or songs from the repertoire of individual choir members.<sup>10</sup> Others have no past to build upon. They operate in villages whose folk culture had vanished before it could be recorded, or where there was no one around to do the recording. There are also some cases in which only a few songs were recorded in the village and its surroundings. Such choirs have to build a repertoire from scratch; they choose songs based upon the taste of their leader or choir members. The repertoire may focus on a particular area or areas of the Slovácko region or on the region as a whole, and even include other ethnographic regions; some choirs also perform classical or spiritual music.

Whether the rehearsals and practice techniques of individual choirs differ or not—in terms of using sheet music or practising by ear, being accompanied by a musical instrument or singing *a cappella*, practising voice technique or leaving it out entirely—all choirs have one thing in common: **regular** practice aimed at **unified** and maximally precise, publicly performed singing.<sup>11</sup> At this point, one may ask where male voice choirs came from, what brought them into being, and how they are or are not related to the folk traditions of other areas.

10. Many older singers learnt to sing in their family environment or local communities during traditional festivities. Their knowledge thus serves as a source for building a repertoire of their choir. It is thanks to these singers, that it is possible to talk about continuity of the song tradition.

11. In terms of singing, two-part harmony prevails, something that corresponds to a more recent folk tradition. Three- and four-part harmonies also appear, motivated by church singing and classical choirs focused on other genres (i.e., it is artificial music).

Vocal music for the male voice—sung by both single and married men—played an important role in the folk tradition of the Slovácko region, particularly as relates to dance. But it was also sung by shepherds watching their sheep, by villagers when the grass was scythed, or when single men walked through the village in the evenings.<sup>12</sup> Traditionally, though, common singing by married men had no organized or institutionalized form. The only exception was sacral song, where choristers, burghers and craftsmen joined literate fraternities that existed side by side with church choirs.<sup>13</sup> The church choir, however, had an entirely different function: to sing in church or in the open air to accompany local community religious occasions. Today, male voice choirs meet primarily to rehearse their repertoire for **performance**, i.e., for a public production whose aim is to entertain. In my opinion, **folklorism** provided the necessary basic platform for the origin of male voice choirs. Specifically, the concert and stage presentations of folk traditions were first connected to the groups that bore folk culture—dancers, singers and musicians—assembled for specific occasions, and for folk culture associations whose political programme was promoted through the presentation of folk songs and dances. These associations also represent a connection to another base of male voice choir inspiration, i.e., **choral singing focused on artificial music**, something widespread in the Czech Republic in the past. Folk songs played an important role in the repertoire of these choirs focused on artificial music since as early as the second half of the 19th century, for the same reason that stood behind the presentation of folk traditions: an effort to reinforce patriotism and support national emancipation goals. Subsequently, the two above mentioned organized forms were expanded to include Slovácko Circles: hobbyist groups that fostered the Slovácko folk song and dance tradition, a precursor

12. For more on male voice singing *a cappella* cf. Klusák 1958: 6, 62, 65, 69, 72.

13. Literate fraternities were laymen organizations that used to operate at churches, among others as church choirs. Their development took place namely in the 15th and 16th centuries. In 1783, Joseph II issued a regulation by which they were dissolved. Some of them survived and renewed their operation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with new brotherhoods established at that time. For more information cf. Fukač 1997.

to folk ensembles. Logically, male voice choirs were part of these circles since they aimed at associating individuals with a strong relationship to the folk tradition: first, those who left for Prague and Brno, and later people living right in the Slovácko region (Kyjov 1909, Tvrdonice 1927, Mikulčice 1939, and so on).

### **Between folklorism and the tradition of live singing**

Institutionalized male voice choirs thus clearly originated under folklorism and the study showed that the first independent choirs came into being in this fashion. The boom this phenomenon has experienced in the most recent twenty years, and the manner in which it functions in the Czech Republic, makes us consider the relationship between **folklorism** as an intentional and institutionalized presentation of folk culture, in particular of its archaic level (Leščák – Sirovátka 1982: 254), and **tradition** as a transfer mechanism that is simultaneously a continuously innovative and changing structure. In postmodern and post-post-modern society, live tradition is no longer a norm. To maintain it or not maintain it may be sanctioned by certain communities. But it always reflects our contemporaneity and the cultural values of its bearers: it is up to them alone what features from the past they maintain and what they change or interpret differently in terms of meaning (content) and function (e.g., the mask of a bear in a carnival parade no longer has any magical or fertility meaning, but has been maintained nevertheless; a similar situation applies to the Ride of Kings, etc.). Today, local tradition is a mixture of folk, church, national, association and political traditions that have been influenced in many respects by mass culture.

Folklorism, in contrast, is perceived as an effort to revive, maintain and present our cultural heritage. The nature of folklorism is such that it does not anticipate any change/transformation of the folk cultural phenomena with which it works. It tends to conserve individual elements of a particular tradition (typically the form, such as dance steps, tune or lyrics). Movement/transformation may be registered in the interpretation, i.e., the tempo, reducing lyrics, working out dance choreography, instruments present in the

band, making use of a specific element or manifestation outside its original function (for instance interpreting a wedding song as part of a performance, i.e., outside a wedding ceremony, etc.). In some ways, however, this is “anaesthetising” any development of the tradition.

As part of mass culture, though, folklorism has a significant impact on how the masses see folk culture. Local communities frequently find it a strong source of inspiration, even those individuals who have never taken part in the folk revival movement. It is a phenomenon, a movement or a trend whose mass presence has been felt for more than a hundred years. As dozens of ethnographic studies have documented, it clearly influences live local tradition, in particular in areas including folk culture residues, i.e., residues of culture tied to pre-industrial society. Not only individuals but entire communities or parts of them reflect the way folk culture traditions are interpreted on stage and in the media. They take on the style or directly adopt the individual manner of excellent performers and some concepts have therefore become the interpretation norm for live tradition as well, i.e. for everyday culture.

This tension arising from the above mentioned interpretation norm determined by folklorism and the local live song tradition is an interesting moment that came to light in the course of the research into male voice choirs. Choir rehearsals frequently include heated discussions of which songs to sing, which set of lyrics or tune is “right”, which tempo, phrasing, second voice lead to choose, what is still part of folk culture, i.e., what is in the tradition and what is not. It may seem humorous, but such a discrepancy of opinion caused the Vacenovice male voice choir to split into two independent ensembles in 2005.

This diametrically different approach to cultural heritage from that practised within the ensemble folk revival movement is also confirmed by answers to questions on whether the way folk songs are recorded in print are respected. Many choirs modify lyrics, in particular based on the dialect of the area, and frequently adjust local substantives and adjectives to fit the name of their location.

They take the same approach to songs discovered online, on audio media or those interpreted by other choirs: if they like the song, they simply adapt it. This gives rise to new song variations that come to being in a very similar fashion to that documented in folk tradition. Meetings of male voice choirs aid the spreading of songs from one individual Slovácko sub-region to another. This goes hand in hand with enriching the repertoires of individual singers who—thanks to the continuous expansion of their choir repertoire—are capable of interpreting dozens and sometimes hundreds of songs.

What to say in conclusion? The study of male voice choirs in the Slovácko region brings a somewhat different view of folk tradition and its current development than might be expected. On the one hand, these groups may clearly be classified as part of the folk revival movement, but on the other hand, they function as significant maintainers of residual folk traditions in many villages (annual feasts, carnival processions, etc.). They also initiate the creation of new activities that refer to the folk tradition: i.e., live nativity scenes, wine cellar opening rituals, plum brandy tastings, grass or grain scything, and, last but not least, choir meetings or presentations, some of which have turned into local folk culture festivals. Among other important factors, the choirs' activity also includes the reinforcement of group togetherness and fulfils the need for song in everyday culture aimed not only at relaxation, but also at expressing emotions, one's relationship to one's home, land, and frequently God. In this respect, male voice choirs represent a truly live and continuously changing tradition.

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## Summary

The focus of this study is on field research into male voice choirs in the Czech Republic, and particularly in the ethnographic area of Slovácko, where folk traditions have partially survived to this day. These choirs operate on the border between the organized folk revival movement (which fosters archaic forms of folk traditions outside their original environment and functions, especially onstage) and spontaneous everyday culture strongly related to a local or regional folklore tradition, whether it be real or constructed. The author explores the context within which that institutionalized, organized form developed and presents the results of fieldwork that investigated the role choirs play in maintaining and transforming folk traditions (such as the annual feast and carnival) and developing new ones. The motivations of the individuals involved was also explored, as was their relationship to the traditions. Opinions and taste were also studied as factors that influence the repertoire of the choirs and its transformation.

**Key words:** Field research of ethnocultural traditions; transformation of tradition; male voice folk choirs; the Slovácko region.