

CONJURING ANCESTORS: MORAVIAN FOLKLORE IN THE URBAN AVANT-GARDE

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In the present paper, I will write from multiple points of view: as a musician, as an ethnomusicologist researching traditional Moravian song, and as a product of the Czech diaspora. I am going to discuss the concert that I presented at Folkové prázdniny in Náměšť nad Oslavou, Czech Republic, on Monday night, July 25, 2016, as an auto-ethnographic case study. I would like to further propose that my performance work with traditional Moravian song can function as a research methodology in its own right. Public responses to my performance work are varied and many, and they reveal diverging beliefs about the way in which Moravian song currently functions in society. In other words, how do people who consider Moravian traditional song as their cultural and genetic heritage react when an outsider with Czech roots experiments with traditional materials?

Furthermore, this case study reveals three things that are perhaps relevant to the study of folk music in the modern world: First, it provides a data sample concerning the outcomes and ramifications of preservation and the use of transcription and textually documented traditional materials when oral tradition is lost. Secondly, it opens up a dialogue between diaspora and homeland, one in which questions of origin, continuity, authenticity, cultural and political identity, and hybridity must be negotiated. The studied “Other,” or etic/emic divide is changing and reversible. And thirdly, it can be considered as a point in the continually evolving relationship between tradition and experimentation, and even tradition and the avant-garde.

I must also stress that this is the very beginning of my research, and what I am presenting to you today are the reflections of my first period of fieldwork here in Moravia, which began in June 2016. My observations are quasi-scientific and largely based upon conversations I have had about local responses to my artistic work

with traditional song. If these ideas continue to refine and evolve, I will look for ways to better quantify and frame the information.

At the concert in Náměšť nad Oslavou my husband, guitarist Aram Bajakian and I presented *Dálava*¹, a musical experiment which draws upon traditional Moravian folk songs from Slovácko that were collected by my great-grandfather Dr. Vladimír Úlehla during the end of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. In his book *Živá píseň (Living Song)* (1949), Dr. Úlehla used his expertise in the biological sciences to perform an in-depth and novel study of folk songs from the town of Strážnice, and he considered the songs to be living organisms that were intimately related to their vital environs. Inspired by his ideas of living song, but cut off from the tradition, I tried to grow these songs inside the cultural environment of New York City, where we were living at the time we made our first record and began the project. Along with musicians from the Downtown avant-garde musical community, I created musical microcosms around the song transcriptions, in an effort to re-animate, re-contextualize, and re-oral-ize the printed song materials into sound and body.

My father left Czechoslovakia in 1968, believing that he could never return. He eventually found his way to Texas, where he met and married my mother who is American of French, Welsh and Cherokee descent. We never spoke Czech at home, but ever since I was five years old, we have been making trips every year to visit my grandparents, uncle and cousins in the surroundings of Brno, Moravia. I was familiar with the musical traditions of Slovácko only from hearing my father sing along to recordings by Martin Hrbáč² at home, or my grandparents when we visited.

1. See <<http://www.dalavamusic.com>>.

2. Martin Hrbáč (b. 1939), a musician and singer who has been leading his own cimbalom band (The Martin Hrbáč Horňácko Cimbalom Band) since 1966. As a singer and primáš, he was a frequent guest of radio ensembles: The Brno Radio Folk Instruments Ensemble, and the Technik Cimbalom Band of Ostrava. Hrbáč is one of the most well known performers of folk songs from the Horňácko region (Trachtulec 1997).

I began the *Dálava* project as a singer, not as a researcher of traditional music. It began as a conversation between myself and a book of song transcriptions, which then changed into a philosophical dialogue between myself and my ancestor, and then began to include my husband as musical and creative collaborator. It widened to include other musicians from avant-garde musical communities in New York and eventually Vancouver, and then it became the focus of doctoral research in ethnomusicology. Finally, it has brought me to Moravia, into contact with the carriers of the tradition and the physical place in which this music has lived for hundreds of years.

The musical results of this project provide an example of what happens when oral tradition is absent and textual documentation (in other words transcriptions) serves as the sole stimulus for musical creation. Musicians from Slovácko who are working with traditional song in hybrid and world music contexts continually stress the extent to which we have pushed the tradition outside of its conventions. They have also spoken of pressures upon them to preserve and conform, something that I didn't consider as I was creating this music, but that becomes a steadily growing presence as I move closer to the work of my great-grandfather and closer to the people and place who work to maintain the traditions. Someone told me he thought our music is what Moravian folk music will sound like in 100 years. I share these stories to suggest that the musical outcomes of a situation such as this can be used to explore and hopefully articulate the pressures of musicians working with local traditions within local contexts, and the freedom that physical separation and a printed page affords.

My second point concerns the ways in which this performance practice and subsequent research into traditional Moravian song can open up a dialogue between diaspora and homeland, one in which questions of origin, continuity, authenticity, cultural and political identity, and hybridity must be negotiated. The position of who is researcher and who is the object of study, in this case, is quite complicated, and I might even suggest that by publicly

performing, the power dynamics of researcher and researched are reversed, as what I have done is under observation and scrutiny, just as I observe and scrutinize in the process of conducting fieldwork here. The studied “Other,” or etic/emic divide is changing and reversible. Because I am a product of diaspora, because I have a distinguished ancestor deeply connected with traditional music, because my father escaped Communist Czechoslovakia and chose to live abroad, and because I have in some ways transgressed upon the tradition, this project serves as a crucible in which notions of “Other” are exposed, where a version of a “Self” in the New World, or in my case “Self” in the Old World can be imagined. Music and performance practice become the lens through which values, priorities, and their attendant aesthetics are perceived.

In virtually every encounter that I have had during this field stay in Moravia, I am asked when my father left Czechoslovakia, and why. Depending on the source, it is estimated that during the Communist regime, anywhere between 200,000 to one million people left Czechoslovakia, and again, virtually everyone I have met has family or friends who live abroad. As I spend more time here, I wonder how life would be different if I was born here instead of Tennessee. And how would the music I make reflect that change of environment?

Dálava began with a similar question: What effect does environment have on cultural materials such as song? Can the effects be perceived and documented?

It has continued to inspire new questions and points of inquiry, for example: What is the relationship between tradition and experimentation? Do bearers of tradition and experimenters with tradition have different concerns, priorities, and creative processes, and can they be in dialogue with one another? What are the markers of authenticity? Can an experimental artistic practice based on tradition serve as a research methodology in its own right? Can it uncover notions of culturally specific aesthetics and cultural ownership, and reveal the many roles that traditional music plays in modern life?

As a quasi-outside observer looking in, I have the impression that many people in Moravia acutely feel their folk music as cultural heritage, although they engage with it in varying degrees and according to their age (which also affects their thoughts on its use by the Communist regime), their locality, and how they vector their identities within local, regional, national, and even international communities. However, everyone has an opinion about Moravian traditional music, and thus everyone has an opinion about what I have done with it. I will share a few responses that I have had since presenting this work in the Czech Republic:

“What has she done with our music?”

“You need to work on your pronunciation.”

“Why do you bother with this music? Opera suits you much better. This is the lowest form of music, it is just for my friends at the pub after they are completely drunk.”

“Why don’t you translate the words to English? You should think about your audience and how to have universal appeal.”

“I have a big crisis. Someone asked me to design a museum for traditional Moravian culture. If it was in Hungary, I would never go. If it was in America, I would never go. I just don’t care about traditional culture. Only Janáček or Martinů were able to take the folk elements and make them relevant on a universal and international level.” (In other words, unless you are exceptional, don’t bother creating with traditional materials if you want to have international impact.)

“When you sing I have the impression that something that is below the earth’s surface, below the country of the Czech Republic and below the United States is reached. Something that is at the source of being human.”

“You found a new, full expression of national music.”

Also, people often speak of physical responses to performances, such as crying, having goose bumps, or feeling their hearts or their stomachs. But the two most frequent comments are “You need to work on your pronunciation” and “You made me cry.”

So what does this all mean? It means that it means many things for many different people. It shows that the nuances of the Czech language and South Moravian dialect are extremely significant to many people, perhaps even above and beyond musical content. It shows that it is possible to access something that can be communicated across culture lines, but that it is not universally perceived. It suggests that the beholders of culture, audiences in other words, are able to perceive many layers simultaneously, all of which are billowing around and through one another, and which continuously change in a hierarchy of perception. At times the layer of linguistic content is on the top, at others a sensitivity to the precise proportions of phonemic rhythm and nuances of phrasing, at others the musical structure, or the timbre or vocal vibration, a fleeting memory, or a distraction like a hungry stomach. The diverse range of reactions speaks to the various ways in which people vector themselves in the world, from local to international milieus, and the space that traditional culture is allotted in that vectoring.

My inquiry into traditional culture that began in diaspora and is achieved through printed song transcriptions can be relevant to larger debates, in addition to the meanings and provocations it has in local Slovácko or Moravian milieus. As we witness one of the largest mass migrations of human beings since WWII, as culture in general becomes increasingly de-localized and hybridized, and as the dissemination of oral culture increasingly relies upon recorded and printed media, sometimes with little actual proximal contact, evaluating the experiments of diaspora alongside traditional incarnations, and even situations such as this one in which the two can interact, creates the picture of a multifaceted, dialogic, and evolving artistic practice in which meanings are created and forged in a variety of contexts.

Even Vladimír Úlehla, who was obsessed with preserving the living folk culture that (according to him) was only alive in the countryside through the bearers of tradition, also had ties to the avant-garde, bringing Henry Cowell³ and Jacques Prevert⁴ into the centers of traditional culture in the Slovácko region (Strážnice

and Velká nad Veličkou, and perhaps others). As an artist, I am not looking to recreate tradition, it is something I could never truthfully do, but I am looking to the songs as a kind of spiritual resource, something that gives life and contains secret reservoirs.

Before coming to Moravia for fieldwork this summer, my work with *Dálava* in New York and Vancouver has primarily consisted of trying to become acquainted with this resource through the artifact itself, or in other words, through experiments made embodying the song transcriptions—alone, with a group of women singers, with musicians, and in the presence of audiences. For example, when I began working with these songs, I would sing them by myself for hours, over a period of months, to try and discover how they wanted to be sung. At a certain point, life began to articulate itself, a life that was not a product of conscious choice or design, but rather I arrived to it through a certain state of emptiness. At this point, I brought them to my husband Aram, and we worked to elaborate a sound world for each melody.

But now, in addition to embodied discovery and my own imagination, as I live inside this place and amongst people who themselves embody the tradition, the reservoirs I draw upon include an ever-expanding constellation of concrete events and locations. Forever imprinted into my consciousness is the quietly dignified singing of a man at a funeral in Strážnice, in which his heartache traveled palpably out into the room. I will never forget learning to dance the Danaj at a cimbalom party (*beseda u cimbálu*) at the Slovácky krúžek in Brno, and feeling the force of the men's singing as they began the evening's musicking.

As a test subject, I am a hybridized organism attempting to carry the songs within a new, foreign ecosystem. In other words, from a heterogeneously genetic diaspora position, I am trying to

3. See Úlehla 1949: 61–62, for details, see Drlíková 1995 and Sachs 2012.

4. This I know from the oral history of my grandmother Blanka Úlehlová and from my father Martin Úlehla, as was told to him by Marta Úlehlová, Vladimír's first wife. Also, in my grandmother's archives, a screenplay exists in which Vladimír Úlehla, Jacques Prevert, and Hanns Eisler were engaged to collaborate.

discover the landscape of the song—that is its spatial, temporal, and psychophysical terrain, as well as its liminal and communal possibilities and contexts. The motivations and questions that compel me to follow this inquiry into Slovácko song are simple—to expand my understanding of what it is to be human, to understand how to be in relation to another person, and to take a step towards knowing where and who I come from.

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Summary

This presentation explores the sources, both real and imagined, of a diasporic performance practice/auto-ethnographic research on Moravian folk song. The New York/Vancouver based Dálava project incorporates folk melodies from Slovácko that were transcribed by Vladimír Úlehla in the first half of the 20th century. Úlehla used his expertise in the biological sciences to perform an in-depth and novel study of folk songs from the town of Strážnice, and he considered the songs to be living organisms that were intimately related to their ecological environs. Inspired by his ideas of living song, but confronted with the reality of a deep cultural and familial heritage severed by diaspora, Vladimír’s great-granddaughter Julia Ulehla has taken the seeds of the folk songs and transplanted them into the ecological and cultural environs of her urban North American home. Along with musicians from avant-garde musical communities in these cities, she created musical microcosms around the song transcriptions, in an effort to re-animate, re-contextualize, and re-oral-ize the archival song materials into sound and body. Despite forces of dispersion, obstruction, and hybridization, what of the original source(s) can be made manifest? What is authentic in this case? What is borrowed, stolen, or rightfully owned?

Key words: Traditional Moravian music; diaspora in America; Vladimír Úlehla; hybridity; re-contextualization; authenticity.