

# ON THE SUBJECT OF CZECH MUSICAL FOLKLORISTIC STUDIES

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At the beginning of the 21st century it is outdated to denote the subject of folkloristic music research just as a song. Although music folkloristics is only a one-hundred-year-old science, it has changed markedly since its beginnings. When the discipline was established and scientists defined its subject of research, the conditions of society differed from what would come in, say, ten years. Take the first world war for example: it was a big change. Another breakthrough came with mass-produced and mass-distributed music, especially commercial music: it marked not only the urban singing repertoire where the sources were very close, but also the rural environment; the growth in the means of communication reached the country as well.

Think about another great divide within attitudes to music – broadcasting. Commercial radio began in the mid-1920s. Now it is quite natural to listen to music on the radio all day long, both at home and at work, both for pleasure and background noise. In the beginning, broadcasting must have been a real revolution in thinking about and attitude toward musical manifestations.

It was not as revolutionary in folk music as it was in artistic and commercial music, because listeners from the country knew folk music from everyday contact, workdays and feasts alike. For most listeners, this was something completely new and unheard of. No wonder that radio production strongly marked the singing repertoire. And the effect was even stronger when sound was combined with a visual impression when movies were first introduced.

Folk singing as a subject of music folkloristics can be studied first in music of older periods, that is, in the 17th and 18th centuries. The

contrast there is between sacred and secular, rather than between folk and artistic. During the period of enlightenment, with a newly born interest in the music of the folk, or lower, classes, one can see the first attempts to formulate the issues dividing folk from artistic music. This is evident in the results of the oldest collecting efforts, the collections of Jan Jeník from Bratřice, and the gubernatorial collection.

Jan Jeník from Bratřice managed to gather one of the oldest collections of Czech folk songs. He was not a collector, but a Czech patriot with a deep affection for folk culture. He was a professional soldier, not a professional collector. Nevertheless, he had a special sense which allowed him to distinguish between folk production and period commercial production in his song collections. He was perhaps influenced by a deep knowledge of the environment in which he lived and learnt folk songs in their primary functions.

The gubernatorial collection effort, which was launched in 1819, soon after Jeník's collections, and lasted till 1823, had a different character and different results. Civil servants and clerks were asked to record everything that the folk sang. It was required that the songs were recorded with both the lyrics and melody (notation), which was quite a progressive requirement considering the period. The effort took place at a slightly different time from that of Jan Jeník. The gubernatorial collection gathered and recorded various forms of folk, artificial and commercial music, including popular hits from folk operas and *Singspiels*. It managed to gather a real reflection of singing activities that came from various cultural influences.

As a result, the gubernatorial collection has included sets of both folk and artificial origin. It was not the primary aim; those who collected and recorded were not professionals: they were teachers, musicians, especially directors of choral ensembles in churches; their activity was directed by clerks. A certain measure of non-professionalism became an advantage in the end; the collectors did not distinguish between folk and artificial songs, they did not look primarily for folk songs, as was

common in later collections. Inspecting the songs today (for example the Moravian-Silesian part of the manuscript which was published by K. Vetterl a O. Hrabalová in 1995) it is amazing how many songs of origin other than folk were recorded.

Today we view these circumstances as an advantage. Such an attitude has developed with views on the study of music folkloristics. It was Bedřich Václavek in the 1920s, a short time after music folkloristics was established as an independent science, who broadened the interest of folkloristics to include more than just folk production. His theory of the supportive sources of folk songs studies, in which he focused on broadside ballads, popular and social songs, clearly outlined the scope of studies and in many views exceeded the prior common research of folklorists. Václavek was also instrumental in developing theory and methodology. The application and expansion of the environmental method, which focuses on individual phenomena as well as the environment in which they existed, lead to the studies of bearers. Everything the narrators offered during the research was recorded. The same was necessary with singers and musicians; everything the performer or informer knew, sang, liked and performed was recorded, including what he/she knew in only a passive way. Quite naturally, it became necessary also to follow songs of origin other than folk, to look for their roots and the way in which they entered into the folk repertoire, for their popularity, and for their later development in the course of being picked up and passed along.

These issues largely entered the program of folkloristic studies after 1945, when permanent institutions focusing on folk culture were established.

The research of folklore and folk song usually considers a broader scope than is generally thought of. At the same time, the subject of such studies has been quite variable. People have ever been singing, it is just the specific form and content that change. That is why we claim to study spontaneous singing. This includes the area of folk songs, popular songs

of various genres, novelty songs, hits, in short everything that people sing.

Nevertheless, there is a certain contradiction: there is a difference between what folkloristics presents to the public and what it really explores. The presentation of results includes collections, programs, and performances at festivals. Another area is much broader: it includes the archived results of field collections, as well as the analysis of and further research into such collections. Each area of music production has its own specific means of presentation, with traditional methods and manifestations. This means, for instance, that cymbalom bands cannot perform popular hits – such an activity would present a large target for critics. On the other hand, spontaneous singing and playing allows this activity without any problem; cymbalom bands can play modern dance music at wedding feasts and celebrations.

Nevertheless, contemporary folkloristics cannot stick to traditional manifestations only, simply because now they exist in a different way, in different forms, functions, and connections. The present day research is based on a prognosis made by Václavek. According to him, folk song will not perish, as Bartoš pessimistically foretold in the introduction to his first collection of folk songs in 1882. Bartoš said: “Folk songs will perish with this generation at the latest”. According to Václavek, they will not perish, they will only change.

The development of song proves that Václavek was right, but the progress is no longer limited to folk songs. Some time ago, a New Year’s Eve television programme presented folk songs from Moravia, followed immediately by a song by singer-songwriter Jan Nedvěd from Prague, using the same accompaniment. The continuity was so natural that no one recognized the shift from one genre to another, from anonymous authorship to popular songwriter, from one song to another one, making a leap in time over several decades, perhaps as much as a century. That is why Nedvěd’s compositions fit so easily into the repertoire of spontaneous singing. They are, like traditional folk songs, easy to

remember and reproduce. On the other hand, it has often been discussed that folk songs are particularly appropriate for early, preschool aged children to sing; tutors have explained it and life has proved it.

The two kinds of composition have the equal importance in spontaneous, multilevel singing. Both anonymous and authored songs are suitable.

The interest of researchers today is to record everything people sing at the present time, to capture it before it vanishes. The research in ethnology or, to be more specific, in ethnomusicology, is focused on new objects: music in churches, in streets, in sport stadiums, as well as singing in the shower.

This attitude is conscious, but not new. I have already mentioned the early 19th century singing in connection with the gubernatorial collection. This development went further, for example into research of social singing, which means the singing of Czech citizens. The focus was on popular songs (their beginnings go back to 1848), which lived on through active spontaneous singing until almost the middle of the 20th century. Later on, other cultural influences were instrumental. This pattern of development has been ongoing, which is why the subject of study has been changing and expanding as it progresses.

Ethnomusicology must explore all, at least with the help of probing: the singing of the young and of the elders, in villages and cities, within various professional groups. One can sense a permanent debt growing to the study of minorities and ethnic groups. I might even say that we are entering another period of collection, similar to that in which the field of the science was being constituted and the need for a material basis felt. We need to collect materials today as well, both the music itself, and enough information about the various musical activities.

The contemporary science also feels the importance of making accessible the old, earlier collections, and preparing new editions. During the past several decades such activities were strictly limited. The present interest in the search for identity and roots is highly demanding in

ethnomusicology: numerous communities and towns address us in their search for music materials to supplement their books on history. While responding to their demands, there is less time left for new explorations. It is certainly a paradox: the rich field of folklore and the development of spontaneous singing in the Czech lands, which have been at the centre of interest for researchers, and have been permanently cared for, are in a way a kind of impediment to introducing modern, newly viewed explorations; such explorations have been carried out more easily by our western neighbours.

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