

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN FOLKLORE AND WORLD MUSIC

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The theme of this seminar are the genres of music ranging from *folklore to world music*. Somewhere between these two poles we find an almost historically closed chapter of *folk music*. This term has many interpretations, and there remain many unanswered questions in connection with both folklore and world music. For example, focusing on folklore: What are the relations between “folklore”, “folklorism”, and “folk music”? Was the folk song revival one of the forms of the folklorism? A more political one? Or was it only an American type of folklorism? A more commercial one? And in reverse: could songwriting be considered the folklore of our times?

Focusing on world music we may ask: Isn't world music only an expanded continuation, geographically or otherwise, of folk music? Wasn't the entire genre of folk music conversely swallowed up by the much wider concept of world music? What are the differences concerning ideologies behind *folk music* and *world music*? Is world music revealing things that folk music has overlooked or just wasn't ready for? Is it finally fulfilling the idea that “every song is a folk song, because no horses sing them”? Sometimes it appears so: finding a Russian diskjockey on the Rudolstadt Tanz & Folk Fest program, one asks if there is any music left over which is not *world music*.

In a way, the folk music revival, which was the original term for the whole issue, had failed. The insiders of the folk music tradition, the “folk”, in the 19th century sense of the word synonymous with “people”, are no longer singing old songs nor composing new ones. Only a handful of revivalists and songwriters do that, while village folks are mostly just watching TV. On the other hand, the American – and British – *folk music*

revival was very succesful in arousing a really active interest in traditional folk music in the outer circles, which means playing folk instruments, using folk music playing techniques, singing and collecting folk songs, searching for old musicians, or at least for information on them, recording old musicians, and reediting their old recordings. This part of history is now a subject of serious works, memoirs, even movie parodies.

Of course we don't need another repetition of the old story of how John' discovered Huddie', how Alan' recorded Muddy', and how Bobby' found Woody' in a hospital. However, we need to understand why there were in our Czech and Moravian folk scene no Huddies, Muddies, Woodies, Harry Smith's Anthologies; nothing like the Library of Congress recordings; no rediscovered legends, Newport Folk Festival, nor *Sing Out!* magazine. If the original folk music revival failed, what could then be said about our folk music? It is obvious that the term folk music was differently understood in various countries, as were its interpretation and the final output. After almost forty years, one could sum up all the suceses and losses of our folk music scene and evaluate the role it played in the revitalization of Czech traditional music culture in the first place. We have some really good folklore ensembles, and we even had some interesting homegrown Dylans and Baezes, and now we are searching for our own kind of *Buena Vista Social Club*, but we certainly have almost nothing resembling a folk music revival.

There are some obvious reasons why it didn't work:

In the beginning there was an uncertainty about whether it should be a revival of an Angloamerican music, or rather that of our own Czech, Moravian and Slovak traditions. Pete Seeger', with only a partial success, was trying to put that straight on his visit to Czechoslovakia in 1964.

Around 1970, folklorism was still considered purely a part of the Czech cultural establishment, while singer-songwriters saw themselves as an obvious counterculture issue. This placed them almost automatically into mutual opposition.

On the other hand we didn't have to wait for the American folk boom to learn to compose new folk songs, since that had been mastered one hundred and fifty years ago by Václav Hanka, Josef Jaroslav Langer, and František Ladislav Čelakovský, in some cases even with folk-like tunes that later really were sung by the folk. Moravian field recordings were made a few years before the Lomaxes went South. The traditional folk music festival in Strážnice started fourteen years before Newport. And finally, we really shouldn't be surprised by Robert Johnson's crossroad mystery', since Doctor Faust has been selling his soul to the devil on folk puppet theatre stages for decades.

We also didn't have to wait for anyone to teach us how to play folk instruments. The first bagpipe revivalist played for an upperclass audience in 1871'. At the time of the first Newport Folk Festival there were about one thousand folklore ensembles, with hundreds of bagpipers and fiddlers – mostly pure revivalist – in the Czech lands. Maybe that is why the *revival* of our *folk song* stayed in the hands of folklorists rather than in the hands of the singer-songwriters. There was almost nothing left for them. Had they anything left to offer? Yes, they did. For at least half a century, ensemble folklorism went its own way, gradually losing touch with many of the important traditional principles. When folk music came into question, the problems of our folkloristic scene were obvious: written arrangements, polished techniques, absence of spontaneity, too many instruments and a lack of improvisation in orchestras, superfluous dancing, too little storytelling, narrowed repertoire, etc.

However, the most serious problem was the absence of any usable sources: there were only a handful of sound recordings of authentic folk music and singing. Most of those recordings were – and still are – safely sealed in academic institutions and radio archives. There were not many occasions to hear traditional folk singers and players, whether on radio, television or on stage. Virtually all the information was accessible only within folkloristic circles, which were – and still are – not always exactly open to outsiders. It was that simple: there were no local heroes.

Considering this, the final failure of the music critics who labeled virtually anyone playing unplugged as *folk music* (regardless of his connections to Czech or Moravian folk music) seems marginal. Sometimes one can only wonder what the music we now call folk music is like. Of course, there are some theories of folk music becoming a new folklore, which is something Vladimír Úlehla made clear enough: "To me, it doesn't seem the same when singers replace a one thousand year-old song such as *Vydala máti vydala céru* with *A já si ten kvíteček za čepici dám* or *Na řece keňú mám a jsem v něm sám.*"¹¹ That is exactly what the folk song revival was about: serious values, lost qualities, and vanished beauty.

The short set Jaroslav Hutka played at Strážnice in the mid-1970s was in fact one of the few moments of any close contact. Hutka was successful, not only with introducing Sušil's collection¹² to the young generation, but for a certain time with making it into a cult thing. (Pavel Lohonka, however, was not as successful in his attempt to do the same later with Karel Weiss's work.) There was also Vladimír Merta's movie on Moravian traditional music¹³, and there was a growing interest in a folkloristic scene. Later, when the folksingers of the 1970s Šafrán vanished, part of their audience moved to the Hornácké slavnosti [the Highland Festival], and the albums of Hradišťan and the Slovak field recordings replaced the missing production of exiled singer-songwriters. So the first steps were already taken. However, thirty years later, two festivals, one of which was new, took place in Strážnice only a few weeks apart: the historical traditional folk music festival, and the new one by different organizers, presenting contemporary folk music and singer-songwriters – something really difficult to explain to foreigners.

Maybe the whole problem lies a little bit deeper, not in this series of historical causes, but in the music itself. Sometimes it looks as if one part of the musical globe is predetermined for folkloristic ensembles, another part for singer-songwriters, and yet another for world music buyers, with

possible obvious combinations. Is the traditional music of some countries or regions thus more useful for folklorists and/or singer-songwriters than that of other countries? World music hit parades really look like that; they surely are not as broad as we might wish. Brass bands from the Balkans are in vogue, while brass bands from Bavaria are considered shit – unless they include a bluegrass banjo or South African pennywhistle. Is that really only a question of musical qualities? Or is it just a kind of hype? Ideology?

In a manner similar to world music today, folk music has also been looking upon different musical styles very selectively. Some aspects of tradition were found usable while others were not. Maybe an important aspect of the problems discussed here could be in the nature of Czech, and especially Moravian folk songs, and in the level on which they are acceptable to folk song revival, folklorism, or world music. Let us remember that even Czech and Slovak poets in the first half of the 19th century were not fully satisfied with some aspects of Czech folk poetry.

Therefore, it is not a very big surprise that traditional folk ensembles seem to be most successful in the Czech scene. Despite their natural and in some cases long-enduring roots they have surrounded themselves – often unwittingly – with some folk, jazz, and even rock influences. Some lessons can be learnt about spontaneity, improvisation, informal performance techniques, perhaps even about browsing through old collections, breaking repertoire limits, the qualities of a “dirty” sound, drive, feel, and some other very important but long forgotten things. In the long run, the modest, as well as the distant and indirect traces, of contemporary folk music are finally present here, and we can hear them there. More of the real folk music can thus be found there, rather than in our so-called folk music scene.

Notes:

- 1 American folklorist John Avery Lomax (1867 - 1948).
- 2 Hudson "Leadbelly" Ledbetter (1889 - 1949).
- 3 Ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax (1915 - 2002), son of J. A. Lomax.
- 4 McKinley "Muddy Waters" Morganfield (1915 - 1983).
- 5 Bob Dylan (born 1941).
- 6 Woodrow Wilson Guthrie (1912 - 1967).
- 7 American folk singer Pete Seeger (born 1919).
- 8 Robert Johnson (1911 - 1938), African-American bluesman, who, according to a legend, sold his soul to the devil.
- 9 see Režný, J. *5000 let s dudami*. Manuscript.
- 10 see Úlehla, V. *Živá píseň*. Praha: F. Borový, 1949, p. 178 - 179.
- 11 Sušil, F. *Moravské národní písně s nápěvy do textu vřaděnými*. Brno: K. Winiker, 1853 - 1860.
12. *Opera na vinici* (1981).