

THE CELTS AND THE BOEMI

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I was once invited to a meeting of the Czech Celts to present some music samples and speak about them. I was introduced with these words: "...and now Jiří Moravčík will introduce Celtic music in all its scope." I responded with, "I'm sorry, I have no Celtic music with me and have never even owned any." Everybody in the hall was puzzled at that moment. Finally, one of the people broke the silence and asked, "So what are you going to present? We have come to listen to Celtic music." I said, "I will present music from Ireland, Scotland, Brittany, Cape Breton, Wales and Galicia, and," I added quickly, "I know that such music has been called Celtic since the times of Alan Stivell, because journalists of the 1960s were looking for an ideal name for the newly emerging movement in music. But if you ask musicians of those countries whether they like to play Celtic music, they will be annoyed with you."

So the ice was broken and the audience calmed down, but I had to explain many things for the next two hours. I especially had to avoid answering the question to what extent our local bands which perform Irish and Scottish music follow in the footsteps of our Celtic ancestors, as many of them present themselves as such publicly, adding: "There is Celtic blood in our veins; we are descendants of the Bohemians."

On such an occasion, you could not fail to recall the statement of Michal Šenbauer of the *České srdce* (Czech Heart) band: "We don't even know how to play other music. We don't play Celtic music for program reasons. We've got it inside. We *are* Celts."

It is interesting that all we know about the Celts are assumptions and reconstructions which result from archaeological findings and the records of the Greeks and Romans like Tacit, Caesar, and Herodotus. There are no Celtic written records left at all; nevertheless, the lack of

physical evidence did not prevent many people from creating hypotheses which surely even they could not believe.

So we have to be grateful to the Celts for almost everything. In a recent popular Venetian exhibition of the early 1990s called “The Celtic Age of Iron as a Predecessor of the European Union”, there are comments on the alleged intricate organization of Celtic social classes that covered the conquered lands. Among other ideas presented, Celtic women supposedly wore very short skirts and invented sausages, and Celtic men invented beer; Celtic priests – Druids – were able to prolong people’s lives to any length, Celtic hospitals employed qualified staff only; they had to be supplied with fresh water and could have no debts.

I also really like the seriously presented study about the assistance of Druids at a public copulation between a man and animal. A white mare awaited the future Celtic king, and then the witnesses present ate its boiled flesh. This is what some Celtologists say, and not just a few of them. In the Czech lands, Jiří Waldhauser mocked them quite often, commenting, “Do you really believe that archaeologists can see? They cannot see; they just presume!”

His English colleague Dr. Simon James went even further, that is, tired of such gibberish, he wrote in the *British Museum Journal*: “In spite of the glitter of gold jewellery and bronze armaments, more and more archaeologists have come to the conclusion that the ancient Celts, as they are generally perceived, have never existed!” What an idea! And that’s only in terms of the everyday life of the Celts. Now imagine what happens when musicians and writers add to the debate.

“By no means does interest in Celtic culture have a short history; it is definitely a long-term affair. It allows many people to define themselves in opposition to anything which they don’t like in the society they live in,” says Ian Trefler, violin player of the Oysterband, in his excellent essay on Celtomania.

In the last century, many historians with good intentions, dreamers, and just plain con-artists have contributed to the definition of

Celtomania, suggesting that Celtishness has not been subject to gravity. They all share one thing: they have never heard the music of the Celts, and as far as I know, nobody before them has either. There is one exception – the sound of the war trumpet called the *carnyx*, which is somewhat similar to a Tibetan horn. They all just presume. There were no notation sheets alongside the bone whistles in the Latten or Celtic graves.

The Irish, who are virtually considered the embodiment of the Celts, have adopted a common-sense position in issues concerning the Celts. The authors of the book *Irish Music* ask a basic question right at the beginning: is Irish music Celtic music? Their answer:

“Apart from archaeological excavations, living mythology, and the Irish language, nothing has been preserved from the culture of our Celtic ancestors who lived in the area of today’s Ireland from approximately 5000 years BC up to the coming of Christianity in the 4th century, let alone music notation. We also know as little about musical instruments, so it is misleading to speak of Irish music as Celtic music. Furthermore, Irish music, which has just recently attained its contemporary form, includes imported dance features and instruments, showing the extent to which Irish musical form is determined by the process of playing and absorbing new elements, rather than its ancient origins.”

Paddy Moloney of the Chieftains once said, “People speak about Irish and Celtic music as if they were one, but it is not so simple. It always depends on the place you are listening to it.” He knows what he’s talking about; there are few places in the world where he has not been in the search of Irish music or its traces. Yet although he promised me that he would also definitely come to the Czech Republic, he has not managed to so far. I believe from what I know about him (his tact and politeness), that he would praise Czech Celt musicians – at least for their promotion of the music to which he has devoted his whole life.

I wonder what kind of Irish or Scottish music we in the Czech Republic would present to Paddy Moloney. How would we explain its

origins in the Czech lands? Bohemia itself is named after its Celtic ancestors, but all that remains of them are graves, remnants of *oppidums*, and some local names. Slavonic and German tribes and its central European status have forever influenced the land's culture.

I guess that we would be in the same situation as the Germans, Swiss, Belgians, and Japanese, or after the fall of the iron curtain, the Bulgarians, Poles, and Slovaks. Paddy Moloney would see it clearly: the music has arrived with the international wave of Celtomania that is all the rage.

Just recall that in April 1995, many world music charts were surprisingly occupied by Celtic music, sometimes even up to two-thirds of the chart. You couldn't miss The Chieftains and their pop album *The Long Black Veil*, featuring the Rolling Stones, Tom Jones, Sting, and Mark Knopfler. Many listeners, so far untouched by such [Celtic] music, were rushing to buy the albums.

In response to the interest, suddenly out of nowhere, stores were offering various Celtic compilations; CD jackets drew attention with Celtic crosses, menhirs, landscape scenery, and mysterious looking people in Medieval costume. Inside the CD was well-groomed, melodically cloyingly sweet, and assertive Celtic New Age music, obviously exploiting the tradition. At that time, anything labelled Celtic ensured sales in the millions.

It's no wonder that the musicians of a small land, recently rid of its barbed wire, also fell for the Celtic music. Many had the feeling that this would help them to get closer to the outside world or even enter it, while others took it as a form of compensation, because they had felt like Celts for a long time. Unfortunately, most of them just followed the trend. The Czech public supported this, because it responded to Celtomania instantly. Also, folk and tramp musicians who used to perform at the national Porta festival adopted Celtic melodies. Instead of singing their anthem "Vlajka" (The Flag) and standing by it, they suddenly started to erect menhirs.

To each his own. Personally, I have always respected the statement by Vladimír Salač: "If you feel like a Celt, you are a Celt." Nevertheless, many eager Czech musicians who rushed into Irish music took it too seriously right from the very beginning.

Because nobody played the bodhran, bands simply added bass guitar to music which was predominantly in minor scales and rhythmically more inwardly oriented than driving from outside. They also flavoured the music with the melancholy sounds of violins and whistles, but continued as they had been used to in their previous activities. To top it off, they added a thick layer of fairy-tales about Celts and various mysterious creatures. One band sounded just like the next, without distinctiveness, and with a similar repertoire.

Richard Hess of the Prague band Celtic Ray made the point well, "Our musicians are not spontaneous. They tend to play chamber style – that particular kind of Czech modern folk, where there is no need for relaxation. Everything is stiff. There are those shrieking women and young men with classic guitars rending their chords there."

I asked guitar player Michal Hromek if this could be seen as a trend, or whether we should believe that there is a drop of Celtic blood in our veins. Should we believe Michal Šenbauer that people from Wales and Moravian Walachia originally come from the same tribe? Hromek answered, "In my opinion, it all somewhat corresponds with the mythology, history, and geography of Ireland, Brittany, and Scotland, which have been very attractive for tourists these days. Of course, it's a matter of fashion. In regards to music, it's more about sociology than mythology."

I agreed and asked, "What do you think about the assimilation of Irish music in various parts of the world, for instance Germanic Germany?" Hromek responds, "It seems to me that the Germans have been searching for a certain melodic counterpoint in Irish music to their own usually loud music, compensating for something that is missing in their own traditional music."

The reason I mention Germany is that there seems to be a parallel in their enthusiastic acceptance of Irish music and the Czech acceptance of it. In the times when interest in traditional Irish music was declining in Ireland and young listeners were instead becoming fans of global phenomena like Irish pop-rock bands U2, Sinéad O'Connor, and the Hothouse Flowers, many Irish musicians went to Germany to look for jobs. They opened pubs and clubs there, which the Germans just loved and patronized.

After 1989, many Irish and Scottish musicians came to the Czech lands as well, eager to play. That was why many Czech bands could boast Irish or Scottish bagpipers, fiddlers, and whistle players. Some were quite good, some worse. The Czechs were usually just pleased with the fact that their guest musicians were of Irish origin. Nevertheless, these musicians really helped build the foundations of the Czech Celtic scene. What is crucial is that, unlike in Germany, Poland, or Switzerland, the top representatives of the world Celtic music scene did not perform in the Czech lands, so it was hard to compare. Of the two concerts of Allan Stivell, and the practically lost and forgotten visits of Fernhill and Peatbog Faeries, Czech musicians could not get much out of these performances. Consequently, Czech musicians played more or less what they felt like through mediators.

The Czech [Celtic] music scene has always had two great personalities: violinist Jan Hrubý and above-mentioned guitarist Michal Hromek. Paradoxically, both refuse to be labelled Celts. Hrubý told me some time ago, "I play Irish music from time to time – I touch on it from time to time, but I wouldn't dare copy it totally. That's nonsense. I don't want to be a Celt. I also like baroque and Mediaeval music, Smetana, Dvořák, and Moravia." Speaking of Michal Hromek, his album *Keltská kytara* (*Celtic Guitar*) sold tens of thousands of copies both locally and internationally; nevertheless, he was afraid of being called a conjecturer. In his heart, he always felt like an Englishman – an admirer of John Renbourn and Bert Jansch.

What struck me most in Czech musicians was the fact that they had such a minimal knowledge of the scene they were following. When asking them what they liked to listen to most, I got answers like the Chieftains, Enya, Luan La Lubre, and Clannad. From this, I came to the conclusion that their production was aiming at the void, or just skimming the surface. In spite of their great efforts, honest approach, sincerity, and musical skills, they could never hide the sad fact that their music was average campfire fare.

Few Czech bands found the courage to experiment, even after the first enthusiastic wave was over. I suspected that they were afraid of losing their audience. While the young Irishmen, who in the late 1990s were becoming more popular, had no problems incorporating jazz and other influences in their music, the Czech Celts were still dabbling in their old ways. Nevertheless, they did have lots of support from the audience, which was equally uninformed about Celtic music, satisfied with the little that was available, and most importantly, at the same level as all those bands raised on festivals such as Porta and Zahrada. Today, such festivals are more like museums.

To a great extent, music writers supported them in this. They did not know what was happening on the international Celtic scene either. It was as if time had stopped at Stivell and the Chieftains. They had no idea that there were bands like the Afro Celt Sound System. It was enough to hear the sound of the bagpipes, a minor key melody, and whistles, and everything was clear: it was Celtic.

Take for example the last two albums of one of the few interesting Czech bands playing Irish music: Dún and Doras and their excellent singer Katka Garcia. All the promotional materials speak about Irish music, so journalists believe that the band plays predominantly Irish music. If they looked at the CD booklet, they would realize that most of the compositions are of English or Scottish origin. When Katka sings, she can easily be compared to her English counterparts Kate Rusby and Bill Jones. The problem is that the musicians in Katka's band were

allowed to add their own reels and jigs. All the exploration is in vain and the CD is simply labelled as Irish music.

Although I have heard many Czech bands devoted to Irish music and visited many concerts and even festivals, to be honest, I have never liked the scene as a whole. There are some exceptions, of course; there are some great recordings in my collection, and I have also enjoyed pub sessions, where musicians played like it really mattered. What's the use, though, when at recording sessions they simply wilt like flowers?

Still, I am pleased that there are a few bands who remain devoted to Irish music and maintain a high standard. Since the very beginning, it was clear that they had nothing in common with the monstrous fashion-mongers, because they play with their hearts. It's evident in some cases that they too are able to find courage, as did their counterparts in Ireland, Scotland, Brittany, and Wales. The audience has changed as well. They no longer come to see something mysterious, or for snobbish reasons. They come for the music.

Let's not get carried away – it will still take some time. On the other hand, the CD *Ostrovy/The Isles* that has just been released is evidence of something positive. It features bands which played at the festival here in Náměšť nad Oslavou, who take their Irish and Scottish music seriously. However, they don't consider themselves Celts, but musicians. It's in this that I see a solid base and hope for the future.