

## THE MERGING OF WORLD MUSIC AND COMMERCIAL MUSIC IN THE CZECH MEDIA

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Last week I received a press notice from EMI publishing which went like this:

Last year, the Ukrainian star Ruslana shined at the Eurovision Awards and the World Music Awards in Las Vegas. Her debut album *Diki Tanci* reached platinum sales in Slovakia and almost reached gold in the Czech Republic. Her singles and videos are breaking way on all the music charts. She received Red ESO awards for her videos *Wild Dances* and *Oj zagraj mi muzičenku*. In her second album, *Wild Dances*, fans of this popular Ukrainian vixen can hear rhythmical and driving compositions in English and interesting remixes, which will certainly be appreciated by wild discotheque enthusiasts. The single *I Dance With the Wolves* has successfully launched *Wild Dances*.

This paragraph is certainly worthy of a deeper textual analysis, but as we don't have enough space here, let me focus on some details. In the first sentence, there are the Eurovision awards, a typical example of the lowest stream of pop music, alongside the specific "World Music Awards". Let's not be fooled; the awards have nothing in common with the genre we are dealing with here. The core of the name is not "world music", but "music awards", where the attribute "world" just develops a general connotation of "music awards". So the paragraph is not about "the awards in [the genre of] world music", but in fact about "world (wide) music awards".

According to [www.worldmusicawards.com](http://www.worldmusicawards.com), this is an award for the performers of the bestselling albums globally. There are universal categories, which last year featured Norah Jones, Usher, and Outkast,

and special categories which praise the bestselling artist of Africa, Australia, Britain, Canada, China, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latin America, Russia, Scandinavia, Switzerland, and the Ukraine<sup>1)</sup>.

In the 2004 list, we find alongside the above-mentioned Ruslana from the Ukraine, Dido from Britain, Eros Ramazzotti from Italy, DJ Bob from Switzerland, Latifah from Africa, and an artist called Ľaj Čchou (Jay Chou) from China. With the exception of the Chinese artist, who I must admit I do not know, all the other names confirm that the “World Music Awards” have nothing to do with world music as such.

But how many program directors of Czech radio stations who got the same press notice will look for details in terminology and search for connections? To them, and thus to their listeners, Ruslana will remain just another representative of the genre of world music which is so popular today. The pseudo-folk title of the song “Oj zagraj mi muzičenku” will certainly evoke fusion with traditional folk, in spite of its incorrect transcription. In Czech promotional materials the song title should replace the letter ě with h, because it is in Ukrainian, not Russian which would pronounce it as a g.

On the other hand, the fact that “the album almost reached gold” and the note on the ESO charts will *perhaps* make the selector feeders include this new hit in their program rotations. Actually, there is no “perhaps” about it. Three days ago, I went through the latest charts of Czech commercial radio, and there was Ruslana at number 1 of the Radio Zlín charts and number 6 at Radio Relax in Kladno.

At present, there is one even bigger phenomenon in Czech commercial radio: Arash, a singer of Iranian origin who currently resides

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1) This is the complete list of such ‘national’, ‘regional’, and ‘linguistic’ categories, which would be worth analysing as well. Why for instance are there awards for Swiss artists, but not for Austrians? Why is there an award for the Ukraine, but not for Poland? Why are awards given to Scandinavian artists but not Balkan artists? Why are the Netherlands included, but not Belgium?

in Sweden. The fan web page [www.mujiweb.cz/zabava/arash](http://www.mujiweb.cz/zabava/arash) talks about his style: "He likes dance music, which he performs; he has never done anything else...In his music you may hear Arabic ethnic sounds." Vltava.cz writes about him as a "performer with an exotic sounding name... and slightly exotic sounding pop hits". A look at the charts shows him at number 7 on Radio Kiss Hády and Radio North Music, number 6 on Radio Egrensis in Cheb, and number 13 on Radio Relax.

The hosts of commercial radio present world music, a phenomenon of this time, through the distorted perspective of press notices and the limited information of music directors who have no way of knowing about real world music. While I was browsing through press notices, I came across the only item which I myself would consider world music: number 11 in the charts of Radio Zlín is a song called "Senegal Fast-Food" by the duo from Mali – Amadou & Mariam. On the Radio Zlín web pages, the performers are listed as Amadou + Manu Chao; Mariam has been lost somewhere...

The fact that the song was included in the program does not necessarily attest to the creativity of the music director either. The song came with *Radio Sampler* from Warner Music alongside songs by Alanis Morissette, Garbage, and rapper Missy Elliott. I doubt that the music director heard the whole album *Dimanche à Bamako* by Amadou & Mariam, even though I was able to get a promotional copy from Warner Records without any problem.

Since the late 1980s, some more or less exotic recordings entered the Czech media. Recall the phenomenal success of the Lambada dance and songs when the Brazilian group Kaoma performed them in 1988. In the early 1990s, a period of exploration, Czech radio stations commonly played the hits of the duo Deep Forest, who with the help of interesting guests mixed the features of pop and dance music with the traditional music of Africa, Oceania, and Hungary. Senegal's Youssou N'Dour was successful with songs in English, but he let people know about the existence of Third World singers as well. The media have been gradually

filled with the above-mentioned new phenomenon, which I would call “false world music”. Typical examples of this are not only Ruslana and Arash, but also Karma from Croatia, Tatu from Russia, and O-Zone from Romania. Exotic music simply became fashionable; for those interested in the exotic, hearing an unknown language or something with an interesting effect was enough. Even if this is still the genre of just ordinary pop music, at least program directors don’t have to be afraid of losing listeners.

In contrast to this stream, there is an effort by music publishers to break through into the commercial media with music that really is rooted in tradition. Recently, Czech Radio 1 – Radiožurnál (which is otherwise known for its dull music programming) discovered Traband, Radůza, and the Romany band Gulo čar, despite commercial radio not accepting songs in Romany. The biggest phenomenon has been the band Čechomor, which placed in sixth place at last year’s Český slavík [popular] music awards, before [bands like] Kryštof, Black Milk, and Support Lesbians.

Certainly nobody could suspect Čechomor of conjuncture. The band started with arrangements of traditional folk music already in the 1980s; they performed at folk fairs, wedding receptions, and modern folk music festivals, working their way up the hardest possible way. Their popularity is certainly not artificial. On the other hand, you may ask whether the commercial remixes of Čechomor albums have not helped the band in some way, primarily with the specific targeting campaign of Universal Records: I remember, sometime at the turn of the millennium, the Czech branch director sending a letter to all [radio] music directors asking them to consider including Čechomor in their daily program rotations. In my ten years of professional experience, I don’t remember any other publisher being so intent on the success of one specific band.

Let’s follow the success of Čechomor from the perspective of the information bulletin *Universal Music UniNews* from June 2000 to June 2001: “At its inception, the Czecho-Moravian Musical Society

[Čechomor] was endowed with the unique gift of linking Czech and Moravian folk song with modern and uncompromising elements of rock.” ---- “The Českomoravská [Musical Society] has an album literally packed with great folk melodies using straight rock style and includes a bonus of two radio mixes and one Christmas carol. All the radio stations will get this single with bonuses.” ---- “The merging of folk music and a classical chamber orchestra conducted by a punk bard – this is Čechomor in 2001.” ---- “*Čechomor* is the best-selling title in this country (if you don’t count the soundtrack for the [musical] *Rebels*, which was sold for an inexplicably low 199 CZK). Its fantastic success has been enhanced by the fact that it happened without the support of tabloids, magazine covers, witty TV shows, and with airplay on only 20 selected radio stations. We can’t deny that it can be done! Good music just sells itself.”

In conclusion, I wonder how the two trends will continue. Will good music really “sell itself” in this country? Or will commercial radio stations continue to offer ordinary commercial pop sung in exotic languages under the guise of world music?