

THE ROLE OF MUSIC PUBLISHERS IN THE PRESENTATION OF REGIONAL MUSIC TRADITIONS

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When I was staying in Croatian Dalmatia, I read an article ¹⁾ about a survey on Czechs as seen through the eyes of foreign visitors in the only available Czech daily newspaper there. The survey was commissioned and certainly well paid, but I could not believe its conclusions. My Croatian friends, who have been great hosts for Czech tourists for decades, laughed and were very entertained by it. The conclusion of the research stated that our false self-representation leads foreign visitors to the false conclusion that Czechs are important producers of sunflower oil who live predominantly in villages, maintaining 19th century standards and still wear national costumes. Generally speaking, foreigners perceive the Czechs as backwards, which is entirely our own fault, because our promotional materials are overfilled with sentimental and picturesque images. The author of the article recommends that next time we should leave out “open air museums, national costumes, folklore, and farm dwellings.”

Jana Adamcová, director of the Department of Communication Strategy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, shares his opinion: “I have known this for a long time,” she says, the research evidently supporting her views. Her institution is professionally oriented on the image of the Czech Republic. She says, “We must stop spreading pictures of costumes and dances; it is necessary to show things which call forth maturity and cultivation.” Luckily, she does not mention music.

1) Vodička, Milan. “Czechs are Simple Villagers and Mainly Produce Oil”. *MF Dnes*, July 7, 2005, book C, pp. 1 and 4.

It was right after reading this sentence that I changed my attitude; from laughing and mocking the incompetence of such views at the beginning, I became really angry. Does this mean that in the end, it was all those devotees who for dozens of years have been saving from oblivion the song and music heritage of our ancestors in the regions were responsible for the image of the Czech Republic as immature and uncultivated? Is it a manifestation of backwardness that generation after a generation is able to pass on the legacy of not only the costumes so mocked in the above-mentioned research, but also local folk songs, a living chronicle of past events? Consider that this was achieved with no governmental support or subsidies.

Such an opinion was in fact very rude. As I learned after my return home, my colleague Jiří Plocek was not silent about it; he wrote a response ²⁾. In it he brought up the basic facts that the given state institution, which is so obsessed with criticising “costumes and dances”, should instead focus on what it is responsible and paid for: a sensible long-term strategy concerning cultural awareness about the Czech Republic. I laughed for the second time, enjoying how he pointed to the heart of the matter: an institution commissioned and paid for research that confirms its own incompetence.

The Czech nation is very lucky: it happens quite often that groups of enthusiastic non-professionals preserve the endangered heritage of our ancestors, even though this is virtually at the last minute and outside of official program proclamations (and traditionally even in spite of them). These people donate their time, funds, and a remarkable part of their own professional careers. In the early 1990s, several music publishers went in the footsteps of the early collectors of folk songs such as Bartoš, Sušil,

2) Plocek, Jiří. “Folklore, Costumes, the Look of the Land, and Administrative Incompetence”. *MF Dnes*, July 14, 2005, p. 7.

Bím, and many others in order to preserve what had survived, and to document authentic records of folk singing and playing, as well as their contemporary modifications and inspirations. They succeeded in some projects (I will comment on it later on), but failed in others: some projects vanished, ended, and disappeared, quite often due to the total lack of interest from the respective state institutions whose support (though little) would have enabled some to continue and save a lot.

I became aware of all this just as I was in Croatia, where I regularly go, not only to the sea in Dalmatia, but also to Slovenia near the Hungarian border. There, in a community of Bjeliševac, in the vicinity of the towns of Slavonská Požega and Kutjevo, you can find a strong Czech minority. A Czech school is still active and there is a demand for teaching the Czech language and thus for listening to Czech and/or Moravian folk songs. There are many mixed marriages, but the songs help people to keep in touch with the language of the old country. As I regularly bring them CDs and cassettes with Czech folk music, I notice that the number of publishers gets smaller every year. This certainly is not because their artistic potential and creativity have dried up, but because of the lack of funds. Enthusiasm is not enough to keep a recording company financially alive; the publishers have to go through the demeaning process of humbly begging various potential sponsors for support.

You may wonder whether an institution whose boss has commissioned such a useless and misleading survey helps this situation, even though it was partially in the competence of her office. The answer is no, it doesn't. She suggests we forget the songs and dances and focus on the presentation of the country as the homeland of the inventor of contact lenses.

In my opinion, current Czech state cultural policy is completely lacking a long-term and meaningful project that would focus on "reaching the West" – a concept of official presentation of authentic music materials from various regions of the Czech lands (which almost miraculously have survived the communist era). Some grants were given

for individual projects, but comprehensive long-term projects have failed. The world perhaps falsely believes that Czech villagers wear folk costumes every day (so what if they did?), but the presentation of Czech and Moravian folk music abroad has virtually disappeared. If, for example, you visit a music shop in France, Italy or Spain and look in the European folk music section, you find CDs from Hungary, Romania, Moldavia, quite often Bulgaria and even the Ukraine – but none from the Czech lands.

It is a sad fact that the governmental support of publishing projects focused on following traditional regional music culture is so minimal. To be a publisher of folk music in the Czech lands (with the exception of brass band music) means to eke out a living on the edge of the poverty line, to go into debt, or to support your publishing projects from other more commercially viable sources, such as other music genres or the operation of a recording studio.

These kinds of opportunities to get money are few. There have been many well thought out and specifically conceived projects focused on recording folk music of different regions, but they did not qualify for regular financial support. On the other hand, large sums of money from the state have vanished, which can be easily proved. Several smaller projects have not only financially exhausted their initiators, but have made them fed up with the work as well. Two of the three publishers whose model qualities I am going to discuss are now being forced to gradually minimize or completely end their activities.

Though their publishing activities have gained respect from professionals and the educated public, they still experience great financial problems. The government is ready to present their work in the media as part of the positive picture of the Czech lands abroad whenever there is some international recognition of such a publisher; nevertheless, government support of the publishers via grants and public commissions is given exceptionally and minimally. Unfortunately, capitalisation and the cultural free market are leading to the immediate demise of culture.

Finally, to the core of the presentation: in the years immediately following the revolution of 1989, about ten small (regional, independent) publishers started up who had a vision of presenting folk music heritage in its authentic or (more rare) revival form. A representative list of them can be found in the final pages of the booklet to the CD called *Proměny v čase* (*Transformations in Time*) by Gnosis³⁾. (*Transformations in Time. Traditional Folk Music of Moravia in the 20th Century*. Booklet, 9. Contacts to publishers, p. 41. Jiří Plocek – Gnosis Records, Brno, 2001). To demonstrate different concepts of publishing approaches, I have chosen three companies coincidentally based in Brno: Aton (the company has in fact recently moved to the Czech-Moravian Highlands to the community of Koroužná), Gnosis, and Indies. Listed in alphabetical order, they follow the increasing scope of the publisher's ideas. Among the ten original companies, these three are the only ones with a specific publishing concept.

1. Aton is the smallest of the companies and has family ties to the area of Hornácko. Publisher Martin Holý is part of a large family of important and respected folk singers from the Hornácko region, which includes his grandfather Martin Holý, uncle Luboš Holý, and father Dušan Holý (who is an outstanding scholar and university professor in the field of ethnology). Such a background ensures the authenticity of the published materials, and provides for detailed linear notes, good structuring of themes and time periods, and solid documentation based on the preserved oral traditions and period photographs.

During its approximately ten years of existence, Aton has managed to publish excellent profiles of some of the best of the regions folk singers – witnesses of the old times (Martin Holý, Jan Mikloško, Jura Hudeček, and Kateřina Ďugová), and the two most influential bands: the Ňorek Band from Hrubá Vrbka, and the Jožka 'Master' Kubík Band. A possible

3) *Transformations in Time. Traditional Folk Music of Moravia in the 20th Century*. Booklet, 9. Contacts to publishers, p. 41. Jiří Plocek – Gnosis Records, Brno, 2001.

new direction has been suggested for Aton: production co-operation with other bodies, in this case the communities of Javorník and Hrubá Vrbka, and the release of the albums *Přes Javorník malovaná dlážka* (a profile of folk singer Anna Kománková) and *Hrubá Vrbka, Hrubá*. There is one questionable part in this otherwise valuable publishing effort: instead of the regular multiplication of CD copies, Aton has been practicing simple burning.

2. Jiří Plocek got the idea of launching Gnosis Records during his work and study stay at Indiana University, Bloomington, USA. He wanted to help Czech and especially Moravian folk music find its way to the American mega music stores. As a result, Plocek has produced a remarkable and representative line of CDs gradually covering authentic folk music of many Moravian regions and focusing on outstanding representatives as well. The Gnosis Records production includes a valuable profile of folk singer and player Martin Hrbáč of Hornácko; an album of Vlastimil Ondra, a long-term teacher, musician and promoter of folk music culture among young adults in the areas of Bánov and Nivnice; and a long list of regionally oriented albums – from Hornácko (featuring Martin Hrbáč), the Uherské Hradiště region of Dolňácko (featuring Karel Rajmic), and Strání and Kopanice (featuring Vlasta Grycová), up to the northern part of Moravia, to Valašsko (Walachia).

Several prestigious music awards, including the *Harmonie* music monthly award, were given to two Gnosis projects: the CD *Nejstarší zvukové záznamy moravského a slovenského lidového zpěvu* (*The Oldest Sound Recordings of Moravian and Slovakian Folk Singing*, Gnosis Records, 1998) and the double CD set *Proměny v čase – Tradiční lidová hudba na Moravě ve 20. století* (*Transformations in Time: Traditional Folk Music of Moravia in the 20th Century*, Gnosis Records, 2001). This set, which compares the older and newer forms of folk music within one century, will perhaps be more appreciated in a few decades.

Plocek has managed to expand the world market with his own band Teagrass (the Taiwanese distributor Tree's Records sells his albums).

A CD of Teagrass featuring Hungarian singer Irén Lovász is distributed in Europe (through the catalogue of the German label CCn'C). Teagrass is a contemporary acoustic Moravian-Slovak band, deeply inspired by regional folk music. Unfortunately, Gnosis Records has recently (and hopefully just temporarily) stopped production due to the lack of operational capital.

3. The biggest of the independent record companies is Indies, a label from Brno. They have a publishing plan that is maintaining a healthy rate of growth. They have made space in their catalogue for folk music and its genre modifications. They cover authentic (traditional) genre interpretations, crossover (a multi genre mixture), and also the very loose inspiration of traditional echoes and music motifs.

Indies is celebrating its 15th anniversary this year [2005]. The label's catalogue includes the leading contemporary bands, such as Hradišťan. Firstly, Indies published a joint project of Hradišťan, Gajdoši, and the Martin Hrbáč Cimbalom Band called *V Brně na Špilberku (At Špilberk Castle in Brno)*, then Hradišťan's unique and commercially very successful project *O slunovratu* (Solstice), and a few albums of the Hornácko region – an excellent project of old folksingers, male and female, called *Zpívání z Hornácka (The Singing of Hornácko)* and also male and female choirs from the same region called *Došli jsme k vám (We Have Come to You)*.

Indies has been very open to bands who perform regional music in an almost unchanged though nearly perfect form (such as the Radošov band), as well as to bands who are loosely (sometimes very loosely) inspired by traditional music, but which are unique in their creativity and invention (bands like Teagrass, Docuku, Traband, recently Maraca & Zimbova, Hudecká úderka – that is the Plocek-Šuranská duo, and great singer and unique personality from Moravian Walachia František Segrado and his band Veselá bída).

Čarohraní (Indies Records, 2003) is a great sampler of previously released music. It is the company's flagship and really represents the

publisher's objective to follow music production that is deeply rooted in folk tradition but which has been transformed into a variegated final music forem.

Indies has a good foundation and a growing international reputation due to its high quality catalogue. This indeed allows Indies to undertake a journey back 'from the West to the East'. Under Czech licence, Indies has published albums of Transglobal Underground, an album of the Slovak Hungarian band Ghymes, and a special Czech audience-oriented compilation of the Finnish group Värttinä called *Snow Angel* (Indies Records, 2005). The album includes selections from the band's projects from *Seleniko* to *Iki* and has great liner notes, which actually exceed all the originals.

Indies dared to publish a sampler of Celtic music as well, in spite of the fact that such music has been subject to overproduction in the Czech lands recently and has been declining in quality. The album is called *Ostrovy (Islands)* – Indies Records, 2005) and includes international acts recorded live at the festival Folkové prázdniny in Náměšť nad Oslavou in 2003 and 2004. The bands presented include Dún an Doras, Kukulín and Jan Hrubý, Tomáš Kočko and Skipinnish, and Hoover the Dog. Here Czech and international musicians from East and West easily found common ground.

The top of this year's season will unquestionably be another album on the Indies label: Iva Bittová and a New York group called Bang on a Can – All Stars. The CD *Elida* (its title referring to the favourite soap brand of Bittová's grandmother – so the inspiration of the ancestors is immediately revealed) is sure to include the sounds of Moravian folk songs, as Bittová always does.

In spite of the fact that the three above-depicted publishers and their concepts and sources of inspiration may be different, they basically and completely follow various simple and difficult ways that lead to the same aim: the preservation and documentation of contemporary forms of interpretation in the heritage of folk music, and the contemporary

unlimited transformations of various genres of the musical heritage of our ancestors. The objectives of the publishers are symbolically hidden in the name of the previously mentioned CCn'C label, which means Cross culture, Contemporary, new Classical. This expresses what the current and often quite various efforts of capturing folk music traditions are going through, what they are, and what they could and should become in the future.