EASTERN AND WESTERN INFLUENCES THROUGH THE EYES OF A MUSICIAN

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A Czech musician, especially one from Moravia, stands in a way at the musical border between the East and the West – at least within Europe. Of course, this is a great simplification, but the nature of both the banks of the Morava River is in its respective extreme ends so peculiar (take for instance Bulgaria and Ireland) that they represent two different worlds and two strong sources of inspiration to a creative musician. This paper attempts to reflect on the journey of a musical "I" from the West to the East and back again.

What are the West and the East in music? What about the Eastern and Western influences? How can they be described or evaluated? How do they relate to a creative musician and the things that move him inside? Music is not just a subject of musicological or ethno-musicological study; it is an essential multi-dimensional phenomenon for humans. To handle such a theme is problematic in all its complexity. For the beginning, I have chosen the only possible way that I am able to cope – that is my own personal way, a journey of a creative and more or less self-taught musician. This is the only journey I can comment on relatively truthfully, because it covers my own life. Discussing the East and West from my perspective, I should perhaps first focus on the local and foreign influences I have felt (under local I mean Czech, or specifically Moravian influences). The fact that, to a certain extent, both Eastern and Western flavours can be captured and perceived was a notion that I discovered later in life, after years of experience, and I will mention only marginally here.

My Journey

For me as a teenager, the heart of living music – resonating inside of me – was the music of the distant West, of the USA. It was embodied in the cowboys, Indians, and pioneers of the Wild West. Physically, of course, such music was all around me. In comparison with the rest of Europe, the genres of music which were romantically linked with North America – such as tramp music, bluegrass, and country music – were remarkably widespread in Bohemia and Moravia. We must also take into consideration another Anglo-American contribution, the folk music revival of the 1960s with its singers/songwriters, which was adopted in my country as well, and partially merged with the above-mentioned genres. That was my musical world. It wasn't until much later that I started to perceive rock music, which also came from the West.

The sources of original recordings were limited: we recorded bluegrass and country music from Austrian radio; we shared with friends the precious few American LPs which somehow found their way to the Czech lands. Note by note, we followed and copied the solo improvisations of our musical heroes through our low speed reel-to-reel recordings. Our great desire was to see those fantastic and inspiring musicians with our own eyes at least once in life, if they were truly real (singer/songwriter Slávek Janoušek had a song in the 1980s that went "You can bet there is no New York City..."). In the Czech lands in that period, there were two different worlds – one real and the other imaginary. As a result, it was very difficult to learn techniques of playing musical instruments that were in a stage of development even in the United States, such as the banjo or dobro. In that time, I did not think I was playing western music. It was my music! The music of my band! Official state institutions perceived the label of western music ideologically and did not approve of it. Furthermore, the older generation of people, conservative and somehow limited, reproached us, asking why we didn't play something of local origin. Again, we took the foreign music for our own. It resonated within us; it addressed us, unlike the

sterile pop music and orchestral production of that period. In addition to from bluegrass instrumental tunes, we liked songs like "Take Me Home, Country Roads" by John Denver, and "Blowing in the Wind" ("How many roads must a man walk down, before they call him a man...") by Bob Dylan. They resonated with our feelings about life. Such music opened creative forces in us, struck a chord within us, became our musical language.

Despite making my aspirations the western way in the beginning, I very quickly realized that I would never play like an American. On the other hand, I did feel quite good at the Peanut Barrel in Bloomington, Indiana at bluegrass music sessions, which I frequented during my 18-month work stay in America in the early 1990s. My personal character and my national environment have influenced my feeling for rhythm and my ear for melody, both in improvisation and in the creative process. As thousands of other Czech musicians, I have created my own musical language. It originated as a reaction to various elements within me. Such a reaction is a long-term process and needed time to attain results: expression which is true and pure. In 1996, when my band Teagrass and I performed in America, people were coming to see me after the show saying, "That's unbelievable! You use bluegrass musical instruments and play bluegrass music, but you do it in a completely different way – different melodies and different harmonies!" They really appreciated that we were different.

This was happening after the release of our CD *Cestou na východ (Eastbound*, Gnosis Brno, 1995), which now in hindsight can be considered a great turning point. It was really a matter of defining a new style; it is no coincidence that this was what some of the reviewers, both Czech and international, agreed upon. To sum it all up, in the second half of the 1970s, I tried to copy and learn the craft of a musician; twenty years later, I had my own musical language.

In my country-bluegrass music beginnings in the second half of the 1970s, I did not differentiate much between eastern and western

influences. In fact, I just played pure western music – both from a geographical and musical point of view. The East in music was something that I did not understand, something that was very oriental to me.

To be honest, the mythical East had already started in Brno [where I live] in the environment of hammer cimbalom bands and the BROLN orchestra [the Brno Radio Orchestra of Folk Instruments]. Since the early 1980s, one of my bluegrass companions, double bass player Petr Surý, had been playing there. It was through him that I met the musicians of a real hammer dulcimer band for the first time and listened to Rumanian and Hungarian recordings at his home. What I did not understand was how such music was played. How did they reach that rhythm, energy, and unbelievable range of tones? Even though I had recorded two mandolin tracks in Rumanian songs with the BROLN orchestra, I did not understand it. Luckily for me, the Rumanian songs were arranged by František Dobrovolný, nicely laid in sheet music. It was beautiful music, chamber orchestral music in character, vaguely resembling its charismatic and forceful origin.

In the mid 1980s, I was struck most by an album of a very young Hungarian band called Zsarátnok, lead by Bulgarian multi-instrumentalist Nikola Parov and with guest singer Márta Szebestyén. I don't recall how the album found its way to me, but I may have bought it, perhaps at the Hungarian Cultural Centre. It was a unique island of music for me. I listened to it over and over, as I had before with my first albums of Dire Straits and New Grass Revival. I admired the exuberant fiddle playing, the unbelievable improvisations, and the performances on the various Balkan strumming instruments. The band was part of the Hungarian new folk wave, together with a revival movement called *táncház*.

At that time, I knew nothing about it. Zsarátnok played music originating from Greece to Hungary; they tried to play it with the utmost understanding for the original traditional style, with a great sense for

detail. At the same time, they were able to develop their own music. Many of you have followed the career of Nikola Parov: he is one of the most respected and prolific musicians in the field of world music in Eastern Europe. His original album *Killim*, the latest recordings of Zsarátnok, and his studio work for Márta Szebestyén on the CD *Kismet* were at the peak of world music in the second half of the 1990s.

For me, such music was wonderful, almost ecstatic, but I could not work with it in a creative way – to use it in solos, improvisations, and create instrumental tunes. Inside me, there has always been the urge to find my own way, to explore, not to be perfect in somebody else's style. My aim was to discover my own path, my own musical expressions. I started to create melodies and instrumental tunes right at the beginning of my playing mandolin and banjo; I learnt to play the instrument through my own compositions. When I was getting acquainted with bluegrass music, I was always looking for musicians who crossed the borders of the traditional style: banjo players such as Tony Trischka, Bill Keith, and later Béla Fleck; mandolin player David Grisman; and New Grass Revival. In any case, my real guru was Andy Statman, mandolin player, clarinettist, and saxophonist. His bluegrass music was really extravagant. His solos, at times almost free jazz, were fascinating. His gradual exploration of his Jewish roots, both in life and in music, was very impressive. His "Flatbush Waltz", named after a New York City area with predominantly Jewish inhabitants, was my favourite composition. Those who know Andy Statman also know that he started as a bluegrass music rebel, but gradually became one of the most respected representatives of the Klezmer music revival in the U.S.A., especially as a clarinettist.

It was through Statman and his music's original eastern European Klezmer and Balkan flavours that I became acquainted with Eastern melodics, which extended and relaxed the scope of my expression [1]. It really helped me to capture the music creatively and internally, not from the academic point of view. Moravian folk songs and their melodics

played a similar role for me. In the early 1980s, I did not know any of them properly, but contact with real musicians and listening to cimbalom bands stirred an ability in me to create melodies and their fragments which were not so western. I felt that they were coming from another part of my soul, a more emotional part. In 1983-85, I had a band called the Classic Newgrass Quartet where I learned how to play instrumental compositions flavoured with ethnic and folk motifs. They were kind of pre-cursors to world music.

My composition "Z brněnského venkova" (From the Brno Countryside) comes from this period and was recorded in 1989 on our album called *Chromí koně* (*Lame Horses*, 1990) on Supraphon Records with the group Poutníci. With hindsight, I can clearly see the different motifs which I then felt as folk motifs. It was natural that my next band, Teagrass, should follow in these steps after being established in 1990. We gradually went from a folk-bluegrass period to traditional folk music influenced by the cimbalom and Romany songs (CD *Folklorní tvář (Folklore Face)*, FT Records/Monitor, 1993) to finally creating a sound of our own. Perhaps the best comprehensive retrospective of the journey of Teagrass is evident from its last, live CD called *Večírek (The Party*, Indies Records, 2002). In the line up, there were musicians who grew up on bluegrass music as well as traditional Moravian and Slovak folk songs, and who were open to new concepts. They are all very creative and independent musical personalities who live on the borders of established genres; they were the right kind of people for an exploration of the unknown. You didn't have to dictate anything; you just offered a motif or melody and each of them would contribute equally. As a result, something new and original came to be.

In the second half of the 1990s, this excellent formation of Teagrass

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1) Perhaps the most distinctive difference between my musical thinking and the more stylistically bluegrass music playing of Jan Máca can be recognized in the solos we recorded for banjo player Luboš Malina on his first profile CD *Naper se a pukni!* (*All You Can Eat*, Venkow Records, 1995).

recorded with Hungarian singer Irén Lovász (CcnC Records, Germany, 2000). Through her, we gained access to the utmost Eastern original materials. Irén even brought along some songs from Moldavia. Later on, Teagrass musicians went even further – into the world of Turkish and Arabic music. Our guitar player Michal Vavro fell in love with the Arabic lute the *oud*, and brought back some original recordings from Turkey for inspiration. Nevertheless, this inspiration remained within the limits of the jamming sessions at rehearsals.

In terms of interpretation itself and the philosophy of music arrangement, we had already reached the East before. For instance, we let the old Moravian melodies work within us and we tried to express our feelings. Many such tunes include a distinctive Eastern core. This was perhaps the reason why we arranged the Moravian song "Víneček zelený" (CD Teagrass: *Moravské písně milostné (Moravian Love Songs)*, Gnosis Brno, 1999) in a special way: we used limited harmonization and everything was based on a rhythmic figure which resembles sitar playing, but which is imitated by Michal Vavro on guitar (as well as the imitation of *tabla*); Stano Palúch in the end of the song expresses his love for Indian violinist Shankar.

In the case of my band at least, such a search was never an arbitrary matter, not even a capricious or trendy thing. It was our joy and pleasure to explore musical worlds; we were not bound by the intentional desire to make our music more commercial, or to fit into a tradition or canon. We opened our possibilities and let ourselves be influenced by the things that were addressing us both in melody and rhythm. Nobody pressed anybody to do anything and it was easily recognizable in our music. On the other hand, we also paid close attention to the borderline feelings, so the song would not extend into another realm. It is a matter of personal view: for some, we might have been too tight, for others, too loose.

My journey with Teagrass was more or less completed with the release of *Večírek*; each of the musicians has continued to go his own way and explore his own musical worlds. From time to time, we meet to

discuss how far we have come. After years of musical wandering, my own way has led me to home inspirations. They have resonated inside of me the whole time and led me to a certain musical simplicity in my expression. I also make use of musical principles which I have learned elsewhere. That is for another chapter.

The East and the West

During my musical journey, I have always tried to think about the music and people I have met. I got to know some principles in music and philosophy which helped me in understanding the eastern and western art of music, and the differences between eastern and western music in its core. This relates to the spiritual core of both of the Earth's hemispheres. Now I am not talking about the forms and functions of music, but about the moments of its creation, about a special aspect of its making. What I mean is an extreme position, but reality lies somewhere in between. Western music, at least in its modern form, is a manifestation of the human as an individual – and this applies to individuals in jazz music and to composers of contemporary classical music.

To follow a certain musical style and repertoire as it is known from traditional music, respected genres such as Dixieland jazz and classical music, it is important to partially lose the individual approach as a performer. On the other hand, within a social context, it is important that an individual performer and/or composer makes a place for himself. Eastern music (here I mean the music of India as a contrasting example) mainly stresses a certain psychological status, meditation in a way, where the performer merges with the universe. To a certain extent, the aim is to get rid of your individuality (regarding your skills), and let the music flow like a peaceful river, to submit yourself to the situation. The western spirit, on the other hand, tends towards self-expression, movement, and dynamic development.

With his truly unique and open musician's soul, violin player Stano Palúch primarily uses as improvisation the eastern way of playing the

violin. An example of this is in the composition "Čajový frejlax" (CD Teagrass: *Večírek*, 2002). In any case, his western character and desire for gradation wins in the end. His musician's ego wins, I would say. There are people who prefer the other, eastern approach, even in the Czech lands: for instance, musicians of the Relaxace band, ethnomusicologist and Japanese *shakuhachi* flute player Vlastimil Matoušek, and multi-instrumentalist and yogi Jiří Mazánek. They have all been known for their involvement for some time.

It is very difficult to change your culturally and socially conditioned approach to music and take a strictly Eastern approach in the West [2]. It demands that you take such an approach in all aspects of your life. You may ask whether it is possible to follow it strictly in our cultural environment today, without the loss of your psychical health and social prestige. The merging of the East and the West, or better said, exploring the East and the West from respective points of view, is perhaps an inevitable process within the growth of planetary consciousness, in spite

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2) Each acceptance of foreign musical expression – if authentic and thereby bringing forth new value – is generally connected with certain cultural novelties and 'strange' things, especially during its early phases. It is linked with the extension of spiritual space. This does not have to include the communication between the East and the West only; it is in a way an extreme. In the Czech lands, we may find many examples of accepting western values – especially in the music and performances of local tramp music, country music, and bluegrass music. It can also be seen in their typical attributes, such as clothing, vocabulary, literature, and lifestyle.

Recently, we have been witnessing the 'inner' import of Balkan music into the Czech lands: enthusiastic musicians visit Bulgaria, Rumania, Greece, and Macedonia, they learn to play there, to build instruments, and think about music. It is very healthy in today's context and quite understandable, but most of all, it is free of all political pressures. As a result, there is no [negative] mass response to those new initiatives, which was quite frequent some years ago, as a reaction to compensating for such pressures.

Provided we perceive such movements in an open society, they have a double impact today: they creatively extend local national culture (not oppress it, as some sceptics claim; the Czechs have not become a nation of cowboys and tramps); and they deepen the awareness of local ancient traditions and their shaping (which is a natural reaction to outer pressures). Local traditions, which the state used to support for ideological reasons before, have now somehow been diminishing in their regional extent and universality, but on the other hand, they gain more uniqueness and inner authenticity.

of how suspiciously, critically, or fearfully you may take it. (I don't want to use the word globalization here as it objectively denotes this process; nevertheless, it seems to me that its meaning is too general in many cases.) In the same way that the West perceives and takes spiritual inputs in music from the East, the East admires and accepts music of the West, mutually enhancing each other's roots. This is understandable, as together we create one universe and it develops towards a unity, to mutual acceptance and understanding, although not to similarity.