

# Romani Music in Czech Lands at the Beginning of the Third Millennium

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In 2004, the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno published a very creditable work: the album *Gi'la Ďila Gil'ora*, accompanied by elaborate documentation describing three types of Romani song expression: songs of Olah Roma and new and old expressions of settled Roma. Tomáš Šenkyřík, ethnomusicologist and curator of audio collections at the Museum as well as editor of the album, explained to me: “Traditional music of the Olah Roma<sup>1)</sup> is absolutely distinct since, in contrast to settled Roma, they do not use any musical instruments to accompany their songs. They accompany themselves only with sounds they create with their own bodies. They snap their fingers, clap their hands, tap their feet, or create throat bass accompaniment. Influences of Anglo-American musical culture, including jazz and rock, are characteristic for the new musical expression of settled Roma.”<sup>2)</sup>

Musicological analysis of particular types of traditional Romani music is not the aim of this paper. I prefer to focus on going into Romani music genres that can be encountered in summer festivals—into folk and world music as well as pop, in the good or bad sense of the word. I will concentrate only on “new musical expressions of settled Roma,” if I stick to the division mentioned above.

At present, I consider the bands Točkolotoč, Terne čhave, Gulo čar, and Romano Rat to be the “final four” of our Romani music.

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<sup>1)</sup> Olah Roma represent about 10% of the Czech Republic's present-day Romani population.

<sup>2)</sup> Tesař Milan, “Gi'la Ďila Gil'ora” (interview with Tomáš Šenkyřík), *Rock & Pop*, May 2004, p. 54.

Točkolotoč from Svitavy won their spurs in the Porta festival before the Velvet Revolution.<sup>3)</sup> They returned to the stage with honor at the end of the 90s, and their album *So has oda has* (2005)<sup>4)</sup> convinced me of the viability and development of this talented band. In a review for the *Folk & Country* magazine, I wrote: As regards the present style of Točkolotoč, “acoustic crossover” came to mind while listening to the opening song “Sam manuš sam” over and over. The accentuated funk bass, together with acoustic guitars, slightly evokes softer songs of Red Hot Chili Peppers, and the composition is decorated by the saxophone of the guest artist Milan Straka and the keyboards of the group’s occasional member, Bohumír Bartoška, which can be heard bubbling in the background. In the number of guests, the opening song is different from the rest of the album, but it reveals quite a lot about the whole album. For example, the accentuated bass appears in the second song “Čhaje” as well.<sup>5)</sup> Note this important fact: we can hear the wind instrument, saxophone, performed by the guest musician. We likewise observe this in the music of Gulo čar from Brno. Though all the brass musicians here are members of the group, they are not Roma.

Terne čhave from Hradec Králové drew attention to themselves and became more visible in 2001 after winning the viewers’ vote at the Zahrada festival.<sup>6)</sup> During that festival, they awakened the interest of Milan Pálež from Indies Records, where they have already released two albums.<sup>7)</sup> The sound of Terne čhave, with the consonance of four acoustic guitars, evokes the world famous Gipsy Kings more than any other Czech group.

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<sup>3)</sup> Točkolotoč is one of the winners of the Porta festival in 1986.

<sup>4)</sup> Točkolotoč, *So has oda has*, Brothers Records (2005).

<sup>5)</sup> Tesař Milan, “Peštové v konkurenci obstáli,” *Folk & Country*, December 2005, p. 33.

<sup>6)</sup> Terne čhave won the Krteček award (viewers’ choice) at Zahrada exactly 15 years after the success of Točkolotoč at the Porta festival.

<sup>7)</sup> Terne čhave, *Avjam pale*, Indies Records (2003); Terne čhave, *Kaj džas*, Indies Records (2004).

Gulo čar from Brno has an absolutely different style. The only features of traditional Romani music that can be found in their work are language and the structure of the lyrics. They use very modern musical instruments. As to genre, the newest album<sup>8)</sup> is predominantly funky and the group could be compared to Monkey Business. For this reason, it is also surprising that Gulo čar won an Anděl award in the World Music category. Vladimír Dirda, the group's bass guitar player, told me during an interview in 2004.: "Our music could easily be compared with the production of famous musicians who play good traditional music. We want to remain as good as our grandfathers, but we want to do it in a modern way."<sup>9)</sup>

The fourth group, whose approach to Romani tradition is different from any of the previous ones, is Romano Rat of Ida Kelarová, whose Romani background is more her desire than reality.<sup>10)</sup> The band's style tends more and more towards quality jazz and blues but with Romani lyrics.

There are, of course, more bands: Bengas, who experiment with the modern pop and other styles; Kale, who are trying to find a new sound and new audience after the departure of their internationally known singer, icon Věra Bílá; or the young group Le čhavendar. With the increasing popularity of hip-hop, rapper Gipsy and his band Gipsy.cz<sup>11)</sup> have been gaining ground recently. In my view, the most interesting

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<sup>8)</sup> Gulo čar, *Gipsy Goes To Hollywood*, Sony BMG (2006). It is the group's third album. The previous ones were

<sup>9)</sup> Milan Tesař. "Gulo čar. Funky from Bronx of Brno" (interview with Gulo čar), *Rock & Pop*, April 2004, p. 55.

<sup>10)</sup> Ida Kelarová is the sister of well-known singer, violinist, and composer, Iva Bittová. Their mother often highlights that Koloman Bitto, father of both daughters, has Hungarian roots but was not Roma. Despite this fact, Ida Kelarová often mentions her father's Romani background. "My mother was Moravian and my father was Romani. We often played Moravian and Slovak folk music at home" (Milan Tesař, "Ida Kelarová – Z konzervatoře přes Provázek ke kořenům," *Folk & Country*, July–August 2001, p. 38).

<sup>11)</sup> His new album should be released by Indies Records in the second half of 2006.

Romani lead singer is Ján Ačo Slepčík whose guitar playing and singing style remind me of a lonely bluesman from the Mississippi river basin.<sup>12)</sup>

Whatever genre these groups or soloists do perform, they have one thing in common: lyrics. Their songs are in the (for us exotic) language Romany, which is paradoxically closer to Czech than, for example, German or English.<sup>13)</sup>

Vladimír Dirda of Gulo čar told me: “The lyrics of our songs very often feature God, love, and children. We try to express our life as we feel it now through our music.”<sup>14)</sup> This can be observed in a few extracts from lyrics on their album *Gipsy Goes To Hollywood*, which is very modern in terms of genre. “We love children, small and big, and our love is repaid. We teach them this and that, and they listen because they have no idea how the world works.” “I like people. We all have one father. Nobody of us lives twice on Earth and nobody knows when his last day will come.” “We are walking your way, God, and the song we are singing belongs to you. We are all your children who are following the way you showed us.”

Extracts of other Romany texts:

Točkolotoč: “When my pocket’s full of money, to the tavern I should hurry. Delicious wine and beer for all, please. Daddy and mommy, I want to drink and be at ease.” – “My heart talks to you every evening when I look at stars. My heart is sick because of you, my beautiful Romani.”

Ján Slepčík: “I’m father of her child. I will go to see her, I will go. She doesn’t want me to be with her. I want to see her, but I cannot find her.” – “Mother, what should I do when I don’t have money? I get some money only once a month. I cannot survive with that, I’ve got small children.” – “I loved you so much and you left me; you left with somebody else and forgot about me. Sweet God will punish you, you’ll feel sorry.”

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<sup>12)</sup> Ján Ačo Slepčík, *Gipsy Songs*, Amabile (2004).

<sup>13)</sup> Romany evolved from Sanskrit. Within the frame of the Indo-European language family, both Romany and Czech, together with other Slavic and Baltic languages, fall into the so-called satem group of languages. Germanic, Romance, and Celtic languages are among the centum group.

<sup>14)</sup> See interview in the magazine *Rock & Pop*.

To sum up, it can be said that Romany lyrics have simple structure and that they illustrate everyday problems of their authors. Song lyrics are the most obvious elements of folk music in contemporary Romani music, whereas instrumentation is influenced more by other genres and western musical culture.

The music of Roma, particularly because Romany is not widely understood, is not often heard in the media. Though the music of Gulo čar, for example, could be quite playable on commercial radio, this does not happen. Some bands, like Gulo čar and Točkolotoč, try to solve the problem their own way—their CDs also include songs in Czech, but these are often the weakest pieces on the album.

Romani bands are quite popular at summer festivals. In addition, Roma have their own festivals. Khamoro, the World Roma Festival in Prague, is one of the most important; however, music from Czech Roma is represented only symbolically at this festival.

Each of the previously mentioned “big” Romani bands has a different music publisher. Terne čhave’s important album *Baro drom* as well. Gulo čar managed, after winning the Anděl, to transfer to the multinational Sony BMG. Točkolotoč’s newest album was released by Brother Records, whose distribution is secured by Sony. Kale left BMG and their first independent album was released by Supraphon,<sup>15)</sup> which is one of the strongest labels on the Czech market. The lead singer Slepčik is the only one whose album *Gipsy Songs* was released by a small company, the label Amabile in collaboration with the Romani association Dženo. Bengas from Prague settled for the small music publisher Vaško Music.<sup>16)</sup>

The Museum of Romani Culture in Brno is concerned with collecting recordings, both commercially released and field recordings.<sup>17)</sup> The Museum is at 67 Bratislavská street, which places it right in the middle of

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<sup>15)</sup> *Kale*, Supraphon (2006).

<sup>15)</sup> Bengas, *Amen Phiras/My jdem*, Vaško Music (2005).

<sup>16)</sup> See the Museum’s Internet presentation (<http://www.rommuz.cz>). I recommend it for basic information about Roma history, Romany language, and music.



the so-called “Brno Bronx.” As I have already mentioned, the collection of audio material is curated by Tomáš Šenkyřík, whose work includes, among other things, regular field research in Czech Republic and eastern Slovakia.

I asked Tomáš Šenkyřík, a man with vast experience who is constantly surrounded by Romani music, which musical instrument is presently the favorite among Romani musicians.<sup>17)</sup> I guessed that fiddle had been changed for guitar and that the cliché of the Romany cimbalom would have been completely forgotten. To my big surprise, Tomáš answered, without any hesitation, that keyboards are now the favorite among Roma. According to him, all of the above is music created by Roma for us “white” audiences, for our festivals, and for our fans. And 90% of Roma people listen to something completely different: Romani pop with a primitive keyboard with a limited range, which simplifies traditional songs into duple rhythm, often based on the preset rhythm programs of cheap electronic keyboards. This means that it is something similar to the commercially successful duo Eva & Vašek from the publisher Surf in Blansko. These cassettes and CDs are imported mostly from Slovakia, though some Czech Romani bands perform this style of music as well.<sup>18)</sup>

Luckily, we do not need to listen to this style, and so for us, Roma are still perceived as a nation who has an innate sense of music. The applause of thousand fans following performances of Romani bands at summer festivals or their victory in annual music industry awards can be seen as happy moments when the problem of racism in Czech Republic does not seem to be so serious. This is the magic that world music can offer.

Author’s Web site: <http://hudba.proglas.cz>

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<sup>17)</sup> Takes from a live interview on Proglas, July 2006.

<sup>18)</sup> See Gipsy Doktor. *Čare Šumperkostar 3*. Published by Miloš Bandy, 1998.