

The Folk Music of Highland Men in Central Slovakia

The unity of man and nature and its influence on the formation of culture is one of the attributes found in many fields and subfields rooted in the areas of geography, cultural and social anthropology, ethnology, ethnomusicology, ethno organology, and more. From this point of view, for the researching of folk music, the reflections of geographical determinants proved to be inspiring, as has been shown by I. Mačák.¹⁾ Following him was P. Kurfürst, who introduced the method of human geography in the first place among some less used methods of musical instrument research.²⁾ Mačák's starting points can be paraphrased as follows:

a) Certain impulses for the development of music and other cultural expressions may be directly derived from the effects given by nature: for instance, the acoustic disposition of flatland and mountain areas for the origin of polyphony, the accessibility of the material for the making of musical instruments, and mountain massifs as important preservation elements which protect the integrity of a certain culture. As a result, there tend to be greater richness and variety of particular elements within a small mountain territory, while for instance in the lowlands, culture tends to be unified through the greater mutual contact of inhabitants, transport possibilities, information exchange, and through contacts with cultural centres and different types of culture, especially urban culture.

b) A geographical place may also be viewed as a space imbued with different values which gradually become an inherent organic part of it. In other words, it can also be perceived as a space inseparably linked with the various activities of humans, while each of them makes it specific and gives it new qualities. In the mountain areas, for instance, a similar type of musical culture can be found as a result of similar work activities and

1) Mačák, I.: *Zur Entwicklung der Musikinstrumente im Westpannonischen Raum aus der Sicht der geographischen Determination*. In: *Dörfliche Tanzmusik im Westpannonischen Raum*. Verlag A. Schendl, Wien 1990, s. 189-207.

2) Kurfürst, P.: *Hudební nástroje*. TOGGA Praha, 2002.

ways of making a living. This is also why all the most important shepherd areas of Europe have some very similar musical instruments in common: signal pipes, horns, whistles, and more.

Looking at a map of Slovakia, it is evident that in its horizontal division, the mountain regions are connected with central Slovakia, covering over two-thirds of its area. A particularly interesting musical culture can be found especially in such areas where people and their dispersed homesteads reached the highest peaks of the hills and mountains. This took place in the 16th to 19th centuries, in connection with the amount of land that had to be worked and cleared in the woods and which was only accessible from the home communities with difficulty. This is why seasonal homes and farm buildings were built in distant places, later on forming the foundations for permanent communities.

In Slovakia, the following areas of dispersed colonization can be found:

- the Myjava hills and the foothills of the Low and White Carpathian Mountains
- the west of the Beskydy Mountains: from the regions of Kysúce over Orava to Spišská Magura (from the musical point of view, the community of Terchová and its more than 80 settlements are a real treasure.)
- the surroundings of Nová Baňa and Pohronský Inovec
- the area of Podpoľaní, also called the Detva region (because of the heart of the region, Detva).

It is worth mentioning that their inhabitants identify themselves as highland men and in this way consciously and with a certain degree of pride place themselves in opposition to people who live in valleys, particularly in communities with a group-building pattern. Incidentally, such a principle based on the "us-them" vision is universal and identical, irrespective of whether it is related to cultural areas, landscape, or micro-regions. This is known, among other terms, as the highland-lowland or uptown-downtown relation.

From the musical point of view, the most attractive and peculiar of the three is the last one, the Detva region, which represents the dispersed colonization of 65 communities. Here it is important to comment on

those factors which are most specific for the area:

- The specific mentality of highland men. This seems apparent in two significant features: as a natural desire for freedom and as opposition to authorities. To prove this, take for instance the rebelliousness connected with this area, which is a real historical fact, not a romantic look at the past in this case. Individualism is another example, arising from the need to cope with hard living conditions without any help from neighbours. This is linked with introversion, a suspicion of strangers, and other such qualities. Here let us anticipate and say that this particular feature of the mentality of highland men is reflected in their music, song and dance, but not in a negative form; it is evident in the great creative power of outstanding performers: players of solo instruments, lead violinists, singers, and dancers.

- The lifestyle of mountain men. The inhabitants of the Detva region worked almost exclusively as independent farmers, lumberjacks, forest workers, and especially as shepherds. In Slovakia, the most precious gems of music and dance performance arts and specific instrumental solo performances originated in the milieu of shepherds, because they played mostly for themselves, during moments of solitude.

- The infiltration of other ethnic cultural influences as a by-product of Walachian colonization. In this regard, shepherds of Romanian, Ukrainian and Polish origin settled there from the 13th to 18th centuries. They not only brought their own terminology for commonly used objects (such as *žinčica*, *bryndza*, *črpák* for sheep milk, curd and milk jar), but they also influenced song culture and musical folk instruments.

- A wide range of artistic expressions relating to music, dance, as well as oral and fine arts. It is significant that music is connected with various artefacts linked with the jobs of shepherds, such as herding and manufacturing animal products. Such activities include working with wood: carving wood and other techniques of ornamentation (jars, clubs and other decorative wooden objects); working with metal: for instance, lead and tin moulding typical for shepherds clubs; or inlay and engraving of brass objects like belt buckles, manufacturing and processing leather: belts and straps, fur coats; and processing and decorating items made of horn material. This shows that mountain men had a distinct and outstanding aesthetic ideal in general.

All these factors have also been fundamentally reflected in the folk music of mountain men, equally influencing solo instrumental performances, ensemble performance (folk ensembles), and song and

dance. In the area of folk music instruments, this can be demonstrated as follows:

- The production of a broad range of shepherd folk instruments. They include signal pipes and horns, various types of edge aerophones such as the six-hole flute, double duct flute, end-blown flute (which is a flute without holes; the player combines the harder blowing of aliquot tones and covering and uncovering the other side of the whistle), the *fujara* (a large duct flute played originally by shepherds), and bagpipes. In this context, it is necessary to mention that the *fujara* was included in UNESCO's Third Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2005.³⁾

- The techniques of instrument decoration are dominated by wood carving, etching/burning, metal moulding/casting, engraving, and brass inlay.

In performance styles - there are two different worlds: the first is represented by a simple and uncomplicated vocal form of song; in the other, the songs are presented as instrumental tunes, rich in ornamental forms and variations. They go hand in hand with performance techniques such as the specific fingering of flute players, the partial (not full) covering of holes in bagpipe playing, the rhythmic symmetry that varies within stanzas and the ornamentation methods, that is, the use of tremolo, trills, and so on.

Both the vocal and instrumental versions exist alongside each other in a strong unity; stress on the content and message of the song is one of the most typical marks of the solo instrumental music of highland men. In practice this means that singing is an inseparable part of *fujara* and flute playing for the musicians of the Lower Polana region. Typically, such interpretation is usually based on the alternation of singing and instrumental play, or singing the whole song first and following it with the instrumental part. In both cases, stressing the content of the song means that the song is perceived as a whole, that is, with all its stanzas.

- In shepherd song, tonal variety is linked with the acoustic peculiarities of edge aerophones. This variety results in characteristic

3) See Garaj, B.: *The Fujara – A Symbol of Slovak Folk Music and New Ways of its Musical Usage*. Studia Instrumentorum Musicae popularis XVI., Vilnius 2006, pp. 129 - 138, or Garaj, B.: *Minulosť a prítomnosť fujary v slovenskej ľudovej kultúre*. K zápisu fujary na Zoznam majstrovských diel ústneho a nehmotného dedičstva ľudstva UNESCO. Národopisná revue 2/2006, pp. 104 - 110.

modal tone scales: the Lydian mode, which is related to end-blown pipe playing, and the myxolydian, typical for the *fujara* melodies.

In the repertoire - apart from the broad range of shepherd and bandit songs, other specific forms are linked with the folk music instruments of the highland men: they are purely instrumental, without any connection to lyrics. One example is the concept of *mumlanie*, or mumbling, in which the *fujara* player blows in the low position of the instrument in order to resemble the gurgling of a stream. There is also the idea of *trojčenie*, or tripling, in which the flute player covers only the three lower holes of the six-hole whistles. The technique of the playing resembles (three-hole) *fujara* playing and allows for harder blowing – up to the 10th aliquote tone. This allows for the most impressive individual possibilities of interpretation, differing from musician to musician and representing a significant aural or musical symbol of each musician.⁴⁾

- The adaptation of newer instruments, especially the button accordion – the instrument has become an especially important instrument for highland men for many reasons (such as its portability, strong voice, solid tuning, and the connection of melodic, harmonic and rhythmical parts). It has adapted all the specific performance features of lead violin players of the Lower Polana bands.

- The specific features of highland culture have also touched the sphere of instrumental groupings, namely folk music bands. These can be identified as follows:

- The instrumental line-up of highland bands – although string bands and hammered cimbalom bands are typical examples for the whole Lower Polana area, small bands have dominated in the Detva area, such as string band trios and quartets; the hammered cimbalom appears there only rarely.

- The performance style of bands – this is especially determined by the outstanding personal performance skills of musicians, mostly lead violinists (*primasi* in Slovak) and second violinists. The most important feature of highland bands in the Lower Polana is the fact that the second violinist is an equal partner to the first violinist (who is called the *primas* or front man). The importance of the second violinist is emphasised by the fact that he has come to be accepted as an assistant *primas* in the band.

4) Elschek, O.(ed.): *Podpolanie, ľudové piesne a hudba*. Podpolianske osvetové stredisko Zvolen 2002, p. 353.

One of the most important attributes of the playing of the Lower Polana bands is the complementary position of the playing of the *primas* and the assistant *primas*.

This usually is an equal relationship between two strong musical personalities: while the *primas* plays a decorated ornate melody, the assistant *primas* plays smoothly, and vice versa. From this point of view, the highland music of the Lower Polana resembles jazz principles where the theme is developed into numerous richly decorated variations. It is no wonder that an unprepared listener can get lost in the basic melody, which appears surprisingly, or finally vanishes after a maze of ornate parts. Another important performance feature of the highland bands is the strong but rich and rhythmical accompaniment of the contra violins and the double bass.

The music of the highland men of the Lower Polana is typical for its rich vocal, or more precisely, vocal-instrumental tradition. In addition to the richness of the song repertoire and its generic variety, there are other typical features:

- The absence of harmony and, on the other hand, the domination of unisono singing in choral singing. This is the biggest difference as compared to other areas of Slovakia, both flatlands and mountains. The cause of this may be seen in the geographic profile of the Lower Polana, with its rolling hills and broad, shallow valleys which eliminate the echo effect, as well as in the above-mentioned strong individualism of highland men. This also means that the men especially express their performance qualities through solo singing.

- Connected with this is a specific occurrence of one of the most unique vocal-instrumental forms of expression of the highland men: the ordering songs (*rozkazovačky* in Slovak). They represent the best of what has already been mentioned several times before: the power of individual masterliness in performance. The rendering of the ordering songs in front of a band is thus marked by a certain rhythmic and tempo freedom which is connected with the bold sovereignty of the singers, as well as the rivalry among them. Frequently, a new song comes about in the form of a short order, shout, or the mere singing of an introductory phrase of a melody; then it is replaced with a new song by another singer.

Ordering songs can testify not only to the quality of the singers, but to the musicians as well. Within a maze of increasingly more orders, musicians must finish the present melody, and only then can they play a

new one; they must integrate the final tempo and rhythm flows into a unified and homogenous whole in terms of both style and performance.

Although dance represents an integral part of the folklore of the Lower Polana, we will focus on information about two claims only:

- Dance is closely linked with music and song: ordering songs are presented with the dance creations of the singers of ordering songs.
- The dance style of the highland men is primarily a summary of numerous individual and personal dance styles; this is also true in the case of pair dances.

In conclusion, it can be said that the basic components have not vanished from the music of the highland men, but, on the contrary, have remained intact. This is so in spite of the reduction of grazing areas, the modernization of shepherding as a traditional occupation of the highland men, economic transformations, and the change of social relations. Without boasting, the area has continued to flourish to the present in the many surviving forms of music and dance folklore: there are numerous *fujara* players, flute players, singers, dancers, a great number of outstanding music bands, and so on. For a long time, the music of the highland men has had a specific objective, to serve as a measure of quality of performance virtuosity to musicians from other regions who try to master the stylistic details. It is not surprising that since the first recording projects and audio anthologies, audio recordings of the Lower Polana music have been among the most published ones, as well as the most requested within traditional folk music in Slovakia. This may best prove that this music is not only unique and peculiar, but attractive and viable as well.

The Rough Cordiality of the Highland Players:

Master Jožka Kubík and his Followers

The music of the Highlands (or Horňácko in Czech) celebrates an important anniversary in 2007; it is the 100th anniversary of the birth of *primas* and original personality Jožena Kubík. (He was born in Hrubá Vrbka on 9 April 1907. Hrubá Vrbka is one of the seven communities of the Horňácko area which is distinguished for its unique folklore). Kubík was a gifted self-taught musician, learning by ear at an early age; soon after, as a pupil, he learnt from local farmers and musicians, often playing with them. He was a natural who brought specific ornamentation and original folk philosophy into the Highland tradition. During his life, he was highly regarded (which was evident, because even though he was a Gypsy helping hand, he was called “master” by the school teachers and farmers). By the time he died he was admired and respected by both folk musicians, listeners, and noted scholars. Since then, he has been remembered with humour and more generally with reverence. It is by people who witnessed his music band and who learned from him and played with him, such as *primas* Martin Hrbáč, and contra fiddler, singer, and directing teacher František Okénka, also a long-time secretary of Kubík's music band.¹⁾

According to Dušan Holý²⁾, one of the most competent professionals (Holý was born in Hrubá Vrbka as well, and became a professor of ethnomusicology), Jožka Kubík was a very creative musician. He brought into the Highland melodies much of his natural Romany

1) Compare the narration of František Okénka in the track of the second CD of the double album *Zpívání a vyprávění z Kuželova* (published by the community of Kuželov in 2006) as recorded by Miroslav Minks, and in the Autobiography, as prepared by František Okénka for the booklet liner notes on the CD *Preletělo fíťča* (Gnosis Brno, 1996), especially in the pages 7-9, and in the interview with Jiří Plocek there, pp. 12-14.

2) Holý, Dušan. „Zrod a vývoj primášské osobnosti“. CD Booklet of *Dalekonosné husle-Muzika Jožky Kubíka*. Český rozhlas, Brno 1998, pp. 15-22, especially p. 19. See also „Profil horňáckého hudece“. In Holý, Dušan: *Mudrosloví primáše Jožky Kubíka*. Editio Supraphon, Praha 1984, pp. 15-44.