

Crime as a Theme of World Music

The album *Šibeničky* (Little Gallows) by the group Spirituál kvintet, *Slovenské balady* (Slovak Ballads) and other albums by Zuzana Homolová, *Krvavé balady* (Bloody Ballads) by the groups Zimbova and Maraca, and *Murder Ballads* by Australian rocker Nick Cave all represent just some of the familiar projects focused on that part of folk music and revival production where the blood flows heavily, where newborn babies die under water or as a consequence of stab wounds, where a man in love massacres his sweetheart with a knife or a small log, and where gallows appear in the lyrics as often as the words journey, pine tree or friendly camp-fire in the texts of Czech “tramp” songs. Everybody knows very well that after the theme of love, death is the most frequent topic of folk songs. But why are the anonymous authors as well as the creators of pseudo folk music so delighted by the naturalistic description of crimes? Why do contemporary performers of world music choose to sing such songs with such delight?

I will not answer these questions in this paper. It would, however, be possible to compare the bloody ballads with today's tabloid press and their interest in blood and sex. It would be possible to perceive the seemingly easy interpretation of tragic texts as an effort to avoid the same topics in real life (a certain kind of song magic). Nevertheless, the aim of this perhaps too humble paper is to notice some interesting structural constructions and relationships in folk and pseudo folk lyrics which listeners can encounter these days at concerts and through recently released CDs. The conclusions of this paper may serve to those interested as a springboard for prospective, more detailed research.

The material used for analysis consists of 27 song lyrics from the repertoire of current Czech and Slovak performers.¹⁾ In five cases (i.e. 19%), the texts are artificial; the rest is considered to be of folk origin. One song (song 27) represents a word-for-word Czech translation of traditional Irish lyrics, which will provide an important missing topic in this mosaic.²⁾

1) For the complete list of analyzed songs, see the [Czech] enclosure.

2) Jan Laštovička, the bandleader of Asonance, has been often criticised for a certain rigidity in translating English lyrics into Czech. Anyway, for our purposes his translation of “The Fields of Atheny”, works almost ideally.

In all the analyzed texts, you can encounter the topic of crime (of some kind); in most cases, the crime is murder (67%). A further and more subtle division can determine the nature of the specific murders: a hired assassin (3: “She had Katka get her head cut off”); a murder with robbery (17: “They stabbed Janiček [...] for ewes and rams); an infanticide – the murder of a baby (four cases, e.g. 23: “When she crossed the threshold, she gave birth to a son/ She took a long knife and cut his neck”); and an alleged murder (7: “I did not kill her; she killed herself/ I just watched how she murdered herself” – in which case we can also speak about the failure to provide first aid, or possibly about assisted suicide).

A negligent homicide and a road accident are close to the theme of murder (21: “The stable boys of Lhota were driving a carriage/ and ran over a maiden from Lhota on the road”). Another important topic is the killing of an animal, which in fact can also be perceived as a metaphor for the killing of a young maiden (16: “Janiček, Janek, people say/ that you have killed a young little doe in the forest”).

It is rare that the text mentions the weapon used to kill (in one quarter of the analyzed cases only), as the act is more important than the instrument. However, the arsenal of song killers can be described thus: inclusive of a knife, an axe, or a sabre. A pistol appears only once in the present selection. Here the song does not speak about a specific crime, as long as we do not consider the job of an outlaw to be a crime in itself.³⁾ There are three different songs with nearly the same content: a small log is the weapon with which a lover allegedly kills his sweetheart. The inclusion of three variants of one topic can be explained by the structural differences of the respective songs. While in the first version the narrator of the song almost hesitates about whether the deed was done, in the other versions he agrees that there was a murder, yet still allows the alleged criminal to defend himself. Here the topic of a lover who kills his sweetheart with a small log does not conclude with a specific punishment. The climax is represented by the trial “only” and we do not find out the final verdict of the criminal.

Apart from murder, homicide and possible killing (by outlaws), there are other types of crimes in the selected songs. There is a physical attack

3) There are more outlaw songs available, of course. The three analyzed songs can be taken as an example on behalf of a whole set of crime songs.

on a higher positioned person (14: "I smacked the *foit*⁴⁾ across his face"), and surprisingly, in one case only (excluding the atypical example of the Irish environment), a robbery (24: "Malicious talk about the son of the *foit* says/ that he stole four horses in a beech forest"). For this reason I have included the above-mentioned Irish ballad "The Fields of Athenry" (in the Czech version it is "Ptákům křídla nevezmou"). Because it deals with the topic of corn theft during the period of the Irish famine⁵⁾, it resulted in the subsequent draconian punishment of being exiled to Australia.

In 70% of the analyzed songs, the criminal is a man; in more than half of the cases it is an unknown man. In other cases, the narrator often picks an ordinary name: Janko, Janoško, Janíček, or Janošek⁶⁾. (The delinquent women are predominantly anonymous; no generally used name can be traced.) While men prevail notably among criminals (although the 30% of women is worth noticing too), the sex proportion of victims is balanced (nine men, ten women; with many children in one case).

When a man kills a woman, they had been lovers in two-thirds of cases. In the remaining examples, the killer and victim are neither in a family relationship, nor any other definable relationship. When a woman kills a man, here again the predominant relationship is that of lovers. Nevertheless, we can trace a new one: mother/child. Whereas the topic of

4) „*Foist* were officers: administrative, financial, army, and judicial.“ (Jan Janák at al *Dějiny správy v českých zemích od počátku státu po současnost*. Praha: 2005, p. 68). In northern Moravia, *foit* equalled the Czech *rychtář*, or possibly the Silesian and Lusatian *šoltys* (ibid, p. 230).

5) „When the potato decay destroyed the possibility of farming in Ireland, there were only two possibilities left for the millions of people: immigration or death from hunger; in 1846 - 48 it killed about one fourth of the total population. About 80-90% of Irish immigrants were represented by small tenants of farming land, farm workers and farm hands. Ships departing from Irish harbours were overcrowded, almost often unmanageable, with the lack of food and water.“ (Klaus J. Bade. *Evropa v pohybu. Evropské migrace dvou staletí*. Praha: 2004, p.141). On the Irish famine: "Two failed potato harvests managed to destroy the population of farmers, which unfortunately based its system of survival on this product.[...]. Two years of poor crop were enough, as well as the politics of inexcusable carelessness of the British government, that one third of population died because of hunger and infectious diseases, or were forced to emigrate." (Massimo Montanari. *Hlad a hojnost. Dějiny stravování v Evropě*. Praha, 2003, p. 139).

6) In this connection, let us mention the album *Janíčku náš, Janku* by Cimbálová muzika Danaj (Indies 2006), with songs about Jan and Janíček inclusively.

infanticide is typical for women, men never kill their children⁷⁾. When a mother kills her child, it is (in 75% of cases) immediately after childbirth, because of unintended maternity. In only one case is the reason for killing poverty. To kill their children, mothers use various means: drowning, hanging, or cutting their throats.

The lyrics of bloody ballads are usually descriptive: they do not analyze or explain. That is why in 56% of the analyzed songs the reason why the crime was committed cannot be determined. Of the already known reasons – apart from unintended maternity – jealousy also appears repeatedly as well as (in the case of the Irish example) poverty. A strange motive of marital murder is the declared ugliness of a husband (4: “Not for money, but for one thing only / that I could not look at his face”).

While both anonymous and known authors frequently hid the reasons for criminal acts, we know the punishment given to the delinquent in the majority of cases (56%). Gallows followed by jail top the 'charts' of the punishments; other types of punishment are unique (such as beheading, beating, and in one case (26) lynching). The exile of the Irish ballad is virtually unknown in the Czech lands.

The songs are about criminals, both real and alleged. Therefore, it is striking that the narrator in the majority of cases does not condemn the delinquent. In 26% of examples, the song gives a positive view of the offender. What is surprising here is that this concerns male criminals (such as an outlaw, but not a murderer), especially men with an unknown reason for illegal activity. In a total of 52% of examples we may even speak about “not a negative” view of the criminal by the narrator.⁸⁾ The authors look benevolently at delinquent males and females, at female murderers, murderers, and robbers. The narrator uses diminutives to

7) Daniela Tinková (*Český časopis historický* 1/2003, p. 39): "Regarding the infanticides, it was generally a rural phenomenon, which frequently touched the less favored levels of the female population. Among the mostly accused, there were usually unmarried women of the average age of 20-30. We know relatively little about their partners from the preserved examination protocols; mostly it was about an incidental love between servants (frequently in the carnival or harvest period, which is evident in both examinations and birthdates of the unfortunate children), as well as (quite frequent) examples of misuse (especially servant maidens) from an employer or his son; the consequences of rape are not so frequent. "

8) Of course, the border between a "positive" and "not negative" approach is not sharp, anyway, I tried to differentiate the measure of positive approach at least in this way in the analysis.

describe the criminal and diminutive words are used to describe the executioner's instrument ("little gallows") as well. There are only four cases where no feeling of the narrator toward the criminal can be traced (a neutral view); surprisingly, only in two of the analyzed songs is the criminal perceived with absolute negativity.

The last important element of the song structure is the conclusion of the text. We can find both positive endings (ranging from hope to "happy ending") and negative endings. Although this does not signify a traceable tendency, it is worth noting that two of the four songs with the theme of infanticides end tragically and the remaining two more or less positively (hope, new beginnings)⁹⁾. While similar and seemingly identical structures are repeated in songs, the points of the story in the two versions of the song are often quite different.

This humble analysis of less than thirty well known song lyrics has outlined some interesting structural features of "bloody ballads", especially from Czech, Moravian, and Slovak environments. In addition to a more profound analysis in the future (with a larger number of examples), possible future work could be developed in another way too. An analysis of the combination of specific textual elements and music (such as the tempo, minor/major keys, and expressive performance) would certainly result in some interesting finds. We could also trace the differences between the unique folk materials (or those considered such) and artificial pseudo folk materials. The most striking conclusion of this analysis has so far been the positive or "rather positive" perception of the criminal. It is as if the folk layer and the consequent revival creation were infiltrated with a cliché of the positively perceived "rascal", whose roots may be traced back to the Gospels.¹⁰⁾

9) see Tinková above (p. 44): "No sentence of death was executed in the case when women denied their fault, because only a full confession justified such a verdict. P. 45 "There was one possibility left [...] for the convicted women: an emperor's mercy. Anyway, in the . Theresian monarchy, mothers-murderes rarely saw such mercy; only the abuse of official ower could match their crime in the eyes of Regina-Imperatrix. "

10) „[Pilate] released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, whom they asked for; [that is the criminal Barab'bas]." (Bible, Lk 23, 25a)

Recordings used:

- Asonance: *1 & 2* (Aura 1995)
Čechomor: *Co sa stalo nové* (Sony BMG 2005)
Českomoravská hudební společnost: *Čechomor*
(Venkow/Universal 2000)
Docuku: *Domrtě!* (Indies Happy Trails 2007)
Docuku: *Meziřečí* (Indies 2004)
Homolová Zuzana: *Tvoje duši zahynúť nedám*
(Slnko Records 2005)
Kočko Tomáš & Orchester: *Ondráš* (Indies 2000)
Kočko Tomáš & Orchester: *Poplór* (Indies 2006)
Koňaboj: *Já sa koňa bojím* (Indies 2004)
Muziga: *O lásce* (Indies 2002)
Segrado František & Veselá bída: *Nebozízek* (Indies 2005)
Spirituál kvintet: *Šibeničky* (nahráno 1987, reedice Sony BMG 2003)
Zimbova: *Krvavé balady* (Indies 2005)

A survey of analyzed songs:

See the chart in the enclosure in the Czech version.