Jan Sobotka, Czech Republic

From Roughness and Back Again

If two hundred years ago a listener from the upper classes realized the qualities (in fact, the magic we discussed here a year ago) of folk singing or instrumental play, he would certainly accept it as something personally unattainable. To be enchanted by the sound of rural instruments, untrained voices and unusual music movements did not mean that onlookers would really try to become musicians. More and more frequently, such enchantment went hand in hand with a certain disgust: *"revulsion mixed with fascination, disgust with desire"*, according to Mary Hamilton[1]. Fans of folk music have definitely gathered the courage to attain truer, rougher interpretations of rural singing over the last several generations.

Allowing ourselves a retrospective view on local and transatlantic scenes respectively, we may find many points of contact; basically, it has always been the same issue, discussed in different places, decades earlier or later. In the 18th century, there were two possible basic solutions concerning the more profound interest in folk music: to work with folk tunes, dance rhythms and here and there also the instrument selection[2] within artificial music, or to invite home some real rural musicians. The latter is the case both in both Czech and American rural areas[3]. Quite often this lead to very bizarre ends: for instance "African slaves were made to play the role of English serfs, to dress like English farm workers, to play English folk games, to speak an English country dialect."[4] Sources from the Czech lands show that those musicians who were invited to entertain the nobility were not always content; they felt like trained monkeys. In a song of that period, they are sending a message to the noble editors: If you wish to have clowns, look for them in Prague[5].

1) Hamilton, Marybeth: *In Search of the Blues*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2007, p. 47.
2) In the Czech lands for instance Weissman in his Pastorale for bagpipe, two oboes and strings.
3) Epstein, Dena J.: *Sinful Tunes & Spirituals*. Urbana-Chicago-London: University of Illinois Press, 1977, p. 83.
4) Cantwell, Robert: *When We Were Good*. Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 23.
5) A paraphrase of Laudová, Hannah: Lidové slavnosti, jejich formy a funkce v jednotlivých obdobích národního obrození. In: *Národopisná knižnice* 29. Etnografie národního obrození, 4. Praha: ÚEF ČSAV, 1979, p. 104.

If the knight Jan Jeník of Bratřice (1756 - 1845) claimed this about songs he collected in the Czech lands: "I know how to sing all the melodies"[6], then we must ask one question, *how* in fact did he sing them? Vladimír Karbusický describes the 19th century practice as follows: "*In those days, singing did not degenerate in the way it does today – when a citizen who allows himself to sing on the premises of restaurants and canteens is automatically considered drunk. Singing in those days did not allow voice degeneration. The ideal of pub singing was a noble and proficient voice.*[7]" An image of Jenik's repertoire (which was repeatedly edited in more or less censored forms because of its coarse content)[8], being performed by a "noble and proficient" singer seems ludicrous. Nevertheless, it is even more unlikely that such a performer would strive for an exact replication of traditional vocal expression.

The half a century younger Josef Jaroslav Langer (1806-1846) suggests the kind of image a similar effort would create: "*It is as if a seemingly witty young man who had once been invited to a village feast, later in town in the rowdy company of some dandies and young ladies, dressed himself in farmer's dress and sings country songs, pretending he is a farmer in love.*[9]" He was commenting on written revival poetry, which was far from the performance of folk songs. Even if an authentic performance turned out well by chance, both a mountain holler and a southern work song would sound inappropriate. Yet it could be mentioned that it was exactly in such a role that the blackened minstrels originated.

It is not a coincidence that in the 19th century an effort to approximate the folk song led to the creation of numerous artificial songs, both "national"[10] and minstrel songs which could be sung without having to overcome the difficulties of traditional singing. This was by no means caused by a quantitative lack of folk songs; nevertheless, such artificial songs were really in demand, although the requirements were of a completely different nature than those of folk singing.[11]

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6) Polišenský, Josef - Illingová Ella. *Jan Jeník z Bratřic.* Praha: Melantrich, 1989, p. 137.
7) Karbusický, Vladimír: *Mezi lidovou písní a šlágrem.* Praha: Supraphon, 1968, p. 123.
8) Traxler, Jiří. *Písně krátké Jana Jeníka z Bratřic.* Vol. I. Praha: EU AV ČR, 1999, pp. 10 - 12.
9) Langer, Josef Jaroslav: *Bodláčí a růže.* Praha: SNKLHU, 1957, p. 259.
10) Karbusický, p. 122.
11) Karbusický, p. 124.

In the beginning, one way to an authentic sounding performance was not necessarily through voice, but by using a more feasible way through instruments. These were frequently unusual and only later on deprived of their rough tonal quality, some of the most noted examples being the bagpipes and banjo. The first mention of this could perhaps be found in the novel *Late Summer* by Adalbert Stifter (1857). One of his characters, the student Heinrich, says: *"I asked a forest gamekeeper, or someone more like a tramp than a huntsman...to deliver me a zither over the mountains."* Later on, when Heinrich and his sister are taking lessons with a town tutor, he says to her: *"The man who taught me in the mountains played much better, yet not so affectedly."*

This is why the youth tries to capture more of the gamekeeper's playing. *"I recorded as best as I could all that the gamekeeper taught me ..."*, and when he and his sister are travelling over the mountains, they are both carrying their own instruments in their rucksacks and listening to local musicians: "*At that time, I told Clotylda that she was about to listen to some common native zither players, like those she had already listened to and liked more than the city artists or even me - myself being somebody halfway between an artist and a mountain player.*" [12)]

Within the central European context, Stifter's literary hero really managed to acquire some successors. For instance in 1871, Josef Formánek, director of the Strakonice school, gave a bagpipe concert, the pipes being an even more rustic instrument than the zither. In spite of the fact that he was able to recognize the peculiarities of traditional playing, similar to the student Heinrich, even many years later he still claimed that the specifics would forever remain "*the possession of real pipers.*"[13)]. In a photograph from the 1890s we can see painter Theodor Hilšr, a friend of [painter] Mikoláš Aleš, playing the cimbalom in his studio[14)]. Here again we may ask how far his playing was from that of folk musicians. At the turn of the century, there were more eccentrics like him, and not only in the Czech lands. John Allen Wyeth, a surgeon and the president of the American Medical Association (whom folklorist Dorothy Scarborough met in 1921), learnt as a young man to play the banjo from a black slave on his parents' plantation. His colleague commented thus: "*We all felt*

12) Stifter, Adalbert: *Pozdní léto.* Praha: Odeon 1968, pp. 182, 186, 187 and 385.
13) Formánek, Josef: Dudy ve službě písně národní. In: *Dalibor* XVI, 22 - 23/1894. p. 167.
14) Svoboda, Emanuel: *Jak Mikoláš Aleš tvořil.* Praha: B. Kočí, 1920. P. 124.

very honoured even when passing him a sponge [for operations]; nobody could believe that he could let loose like that with a banjo."[15]

Playing folk music in towns was usually a private matter, seemingly without prospect; even at the very end of the 19th century, Otokar Hostinský strictly refused a request for folk music to be professionally and artistically performed at the Czech and Slovak Ethnographic Exhibition. He argued that this had to be executed "by the most competent powers, that is, the folk themselves,"[16], and not by some "fools from Prague". Nevertheless, they had already gradually entered the scene, some of them with greater intimate knowledge of the real form of folk music, such as teacher Karel Michalíček from Košíře. In spite of the efforts to be authentic, in the end they generally reverted back to the tame arrangements of folk songs [17]. Even as late as the mid 20th century, Vladimír Úlehla (1888–1947) expressed his experience as follows: "*It doesn't matter how a song springs forth from the throat of a singer in front of the musicians; the song from the lips of a real folk singer is far from the song of an artificial singer trying to sing it.*"[18] The word *trying* says it all.

Similarly, Richard Dyer Bennet, poet Carl Sandburg and folklorist John Jacob Niles tried it on concert stages and in recordings in the USA [19] to a greater or lesser degree of originality. From this point of view, it is very interesting to consider Alan Lomax (1915-2003), of the younger generation, who in spite of his unique field experience and an extraordinary understanding of the subject could not avoid a certain scholarly tone: perhaps it was the persistent humble belief that authentic expression cannot be reached.

Since the 1930s, by coincidence and under the auspices of Alan Lomax, more informal pioneers of the folk revival appeared. Nevertheless, in most of them, you could still hear aspects of cabaret, theatre or choir stereotypes, such as Cisco Houston, Burl Ives and even the Weavers quartet. In comparison with commercial recordings of bluesmen and hillbillies, these performers still sounded like the wise men of Gotham. In terms of the roughness of expression they did not surpass the exemplarily moderate expression of Pete Seeger, who

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15) Hamilton, p. 44.
16) Národopisná výstava Československá v Praze 1895. Praha, J. Otto [1895]. P. 240.
17) Markl, Jaroslav: *Česká hudba dudácká.* Praha: Orbis, 1962, pp. 45 - 46.
18) Úlehla, Vladimír: *Živá píseň.* Praha: Fr. Borový, 1949, p. 311.
19) See the film record of Niles singing in *No Direction Home* (2005) by Scorsese.

sounded exactly like "*something between an artistic and mountain player*", to quote Stifter's student. However, Seeger looked for theoretical solutions as well, and finally even set down certain rules for the singing of folk songs. It is not a coincidence that later on it was a subject of intellectual interest of Moravian folklorists, and then even theoreticians of Czech popular music after them.[20]

Since the early 1950s, individual performers of the next generation, such as Tom Paley, strived to manage authentic instrumental techniques. Along with this, the approach to singing changed spontaneously, and what was until then the simple language of folklore "pups" reached the level of "wolves": the American duo of Derroll Adams and Jack Elliot were playing in England, enchanting the London elites in their Stetsons, jeans, and cowboy boots; in Cambridge, a folk circle with high demands for authenticity was forming around Eric von Schmidt, as far as authenticity is concerned; and finally, Dave Van Ronk was tuning up his voice in jazz orchestras in Greenwich Village.

Such active penetration of the world of traditional music was not without some quaint mistakes: New York fans were dying to copy the sound of a recording from 1928 which had been sped up during the recording process for technical reasons. Similarly at the same time, a certain folk ensemble in Bohemia carefully learnt a dance with bent backs, because the old man they were learning the dance from could no longer stand straight. It seems that everything was going well until the start of the 1960s, when all of a sudden a remarkable inversion occurred: the folk music renegades began to sound rougher than the originals that were rooted in tradition. African American artists Big Bill Broonzy, Brownie McGhee and especially Josh White sounded virtually toothless at that time as compared with the likes of Spider John Korner.

The moment when folk singers started to present themselves as clean shaven, it suddenly became fashionable for them to sport false beards. In 1958, when the charts were topped by the smooth Kingston Trio (who were not so academic, but simply commercial), circles of until then anonymous folk singers created the uncompromised New Lost City Ramblers. Unlike the above-mentioned Czech patriot Langer, they were not ashamed to "*later in town in the rowdy company of some dandies and young ladies, dress ... in farmer's dress and sing country songs.*"

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20) Dorůžka, Lubomír. Cesta za „písničkami o něčem". *Melodie,* 1974. N. 6, p. 176 and n. 7, p. 208.; Holý, Dušan. O interpretačních normách folklórní hudby. In.: *Lidové umění a dnešek.* Brno, Blok 1977, pp. 119 - 123.

The memoirs of Dave Van Ronk published in 2006 provide a profound view on these issues: it seems that the division between "pup" and "wolf" vocal self-stylization was sensitively perceived at that time. To a certain extent, Van Ronk comments on this as a generational matter; in his interpretation he even uses this to point out the distinction between Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. He explains that this difference was perceived amongst male and female folk singers in general:

"The thing about Baez was that like almost all the women on that scene, she was still singing in the style of the generation before us. There was a cultural lag: the boys had discovered Dock Boggs and Mississippi John Hurt, and the girls were still listening to Cynthia and Susan Reed; it was not just Joan. There was Carlyn Hester, Judy Collins, and people like Molly Scott and Ellen Adler who for a while were also contenders. All of them were essentially singing bel canto – bad bel canto, by classical standards, but still bel canto. So whereas the boys were intentionally roughing up their voices, the girls were trying to sound prettier and prettier and more and more virginal."[21] It is no coincidence that Bonnie Raitt, the pioneer of rough voice female folk blues, confirms that she entered the scene when it was actually over.[22]

I am aware that this quick survey cannot provide a definitive answer concerning the entry of the rough sound into the folk music revival; nevertheless, I hope that I have succeeded in pointing out the basic direction for the future. Such forms of folk music and their offshoots where the radical interruption of tradition did not take place have been left out of this line of discussion; this is to an extent the case of Moravian folk music. The fact that the further development of such regained roughness led quite quickly to a condition where the roughness of the vocal or instrumental expression became an end in itself and lacked effect is not important. It is more important to ask where and why especially at that time revival singers gained the courage to reach the unreachable and make fools of themselves with such enthusiasm; not only fools from Prague, but fools from Greenwich Village and Cambridge. Parallel trends of the 1950s made the situation easier: the colourful richness of jazz, the coming of the beat generation, and

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21) Van Ronk, Dave-Wald, Elijah. *Dave Van Ronk - The Mayor of McDougal Street.* Cambridge: Da Capo, 2006, p. 167.

22) Schmidt, Eric Von-Rooney, Jim. *Baby Let Me Follow You Down.* Amherst: University of Massachsetts Press, 1994, pp. 305 - 309.

naturally, rock'n'roll. Evidently, the most important were the fist re-editions of the inter-war recordings with predominantly traditional music; they not only protected, but also quite often multiplied the magic of rough music with its anonymity from the other world[23]. It was perhaps the false illusion of those days – which would soon pass– of the completely vanished authentic folk music which gave birth to the first vocal turncoats, and who after a while even surpassed the singers from the traditional environment.

23) *Anthology of American Folk Music,* (booklet). SmithsonianFolkways, 1998.