

World Music on Czech Radio: a Contention between Traditional Roots and Ethnic Modernizations¹⁾

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Concerning the theme 'world music', Czech Radio still has very little to offer, while the connection of traditional music and Czech (Czechoslovak) Radio has been, however, very rich. The following essay cannot do without questions concerning the relation between the folk music tradition and the contemporary trends in world music. When did world music appear on Czech Radio for the first time? How has the designation of various kinds of music, music styles and genres come into being? What is the contemporary situation in presenting traditional folk music and world music on Czech Radio? Let us start with a historical excursus on the relation of Czech Radio to the folk music phenomenon.²⁾

At the beginning, music only accompanied the "Czechoslovak radio and telephony newscast" (Jeřutová et al., 39). The radio was understood as a mere mediator of contents (which it did not create by itself), not as an independent creator. The radio broadcasting started in 1923 as a pure urban and definitely technocratic hobby. If we do not take into account the only successful experiment of the radiotelegraphic and radiotelephonic station in Brno with wireless transmission of several folk songs (1922), the first years of operation were beyond the radio's interest in both the local folk and international music and song.

Unlike the original assumptions, it soon became apparent that music would be the most attractive programming. According to the radio executives of Prague Radiojournal, it revealed a hitherto intriguing opportunity to present classical music and to offer the nation an aesthetic education by means of high art works that were otherwise available with difficulties.

Miloš Čtrnáctý, the first programme editor of Prague Radiojournal, was the first one to make use of the opportunity. Jaroslav Krupka, a conservatory professor, choirmaster and conductor, became the chief editor of music programming. Radio cooperated very closely with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, and it organized concerts and transmissions of philharmonic music and chamber concerts from its studio. The concerts often began with lectures by

1) This is a shortened version of the Czech paper.

2) The paper concerns only the situation in Czechoslovak Radio, or since 1993, Czech Radio; not commercial and other radio stations.

musicologists. In 1925, opera transmissions from the National Theatre in Prague were included into the programme; later on, events from other theatres and other cities followed.

The first radio announcers tried to cope with confusions of naming the various kinds of music and music genres; they contributed, however, to the cultivation of the terminology. First, it was usual to write and speak about classical and entertaining music.

Since 1929, composer Otakar Jeremiáš was the bandleader of the radio orchestra; later on, he became the chief music editor. Mirko Očadlík and Oldřich Ladman, new and at that time young contributors, supported the focus on modern Czech music. In the second half of the 20th century, classical music as an instrument of the aesthetic education predominated in programming; folk music records were part of the radio resources at that time, too. The oldest recording from the Prague archives comes from 1928; the Czechoslovak Academy of Science made it.

Unlike in Prague, the pioneering years of the regional branch of Radiojournal in Brno linked with folk music directly. The experts, such as music folklorist Karel Vetterl, took part in creating specific music programmes. These experts worked for the benefit of both classical and folk music. So as early as in 1925, when the regular everyday broadcasting started in Brno, the station for instance offered a concert called *The Drinking and Moravian-Slovak Songs*, which featured Jaroslav Čihák and Valentin Šindler of the opera ensemble at the National Theatre in Brno. After that, the focus on folk culture in Moravian regions extended, the portion of arranged folk song on the air increased gradually, including arrangements for brass band orchestras. In this context, the station introduced different competition series for the listeners.

When the radio signal reached other rural locations, the listeners used to draw attention of the programming personnel to the exceptional folk music performers of their regions, sending also the written records of song lyrics. "Thus, as early as in the beginnings of the activity of the Radio, traditional folk music became a frequently used genre, and the presentation of Moravian folk culture became a carefully looked-after specificity of Brno Radio" (Bukovský, 16).

In the course of this period, the original magic of radio as a technical invention vanished definitely, the audience increased and the variety of the genres and forms suitable for broadcasting grew. It became an unsolvable problem to satisfy all those interested and their various preferences.

K. B. Jiráček, a composer of classical music, worked as the chief editor of the music department between 1930 and 1945. In this period, it was a custom to distinguish three categories of music: entertaining, popular and light. Under

popular music, one did not understand the popular music, as we perceive it today; it was the popular and easy-flowing classical music: overtures, suites, fantasies, and concert dances performed by the Radiojournal Orchestra with lead singers from the National Theatre, arias from popular operas, comical melodramas, artificial and folk songs. With light music, one meant both new directions of jazz and jazz-influenced dance music, tramp songs, marches and brass band music.

Musicologist Mirko Očadlík said that sending music to the clients, who cannot come to a concert hall or an opera house, “is the justification for the existence of radio”. Hence, broadcasting should answer the needs of music, and not to transmit “that kind of music that is available and most spread everywhere” (Ješutová et al., 137). From the contemporary point of view, this standpoint represents a shrewd attack against popular music; in the context of that time, however, the concern was to maintain the artistic level of radio broadcasting. Anyway, the concessionaires began to revolt. Demanding music reached a simple and – therefore – inexperienced audience. Music could reach them easily; the listeners did not have to travel for music. However, we are not sure whether they really were interested in it.

According to Karel Vetterl, an average listener looks for clear melodic tunes and brisk dance rhythms that bring an untroubled mood to his home. In the 1930s, the contention between the artistic ‘needs of music’ and the entertaining needs of an average concessionaire grew into an open conflict. In the end, the pressure of the public claimed a bigger portion of simple popular music on the air.

Under these conditions, traditional folk music survived on radio in three different levels. First, it was part of conceptions concerning the nation-oriented streams of classical music; then it was part of entertaining programmes created in regional radios, including the increasing portion of brass band music; and, in the end, it was part of scholarly interest in the folk culture exploration.



Radiojournal recordings, 1935.

Since the 1930s, the regional broadcasting of the Radiojournal in Brno focused on special programmes from different regional locations. Choir singing with folk inspirations was very popular. The pressure on lighter and more entertaining tones opened the space for folk brass bands. Since 1929, the first brass band worked on radio in Brno.

In July 1929, a regular daily radio programme started to operate in Northern Moravia. Radiojournal Moravská Ostrava, a branch of the Prague Company, came into being. With the help of ethnographic ensembles of that period, the station initiated special programmes, such as Silesian *Harvest Festival* (1930), *Walachian Wedding* (1931), and others. The new station gained a good reputation also thanks to high-quality music ensembles that performed live, or were even established by the station: the children's choir *Jistebniční zpěváčci* conducted by František Lýsek, the brass band from Radvanice, and the Ostrava Radio Orchestra (ORO) that covered the broadcasting needs of philharmonic music, jazz, and dance genres.

Let us skip the war period when the unnatural conditions distorted completely the development of radio practice and theory. In the following years, the aesthetic and educational issues arose: Shall music descend to the folk, or shall we help the folk approach music? Music ensembles, such as the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Prague Radio Orchestra, the Ondříček Quartet, the Choir and the ensembles in Brno, Ostrava, and Plzeň, where the new broadcasting studio was established in May 1945, began to serve the newly formed objectives. The educational mission of music on radio, which was perceived in an old-new way, was fulfilled mostly with programmes related to the anniversaries of music composers.

In the period of the Cold War between the East and the West, and the fight against all that was capitalistic, American, free and progressive, quite a wide space for presenting the local folk music was given. According to ideological assessments of that time, folk music ranked among the progressive traditions, and it vicariously referred to the folk culture of friendly Slavic countries. This new space as well as the governmental support was reflected especially in the existence of folklorism (i.e. the second existence of folklore, its relocation from its original environment to the variety stages and to similar, often improper contexts). It became contradictory for the next development of local folk traditions and for the reputation of folk music among young people. Czechoslovak Radio took a significant part in this trend.

In 1952, the internal division of the institution was re-organized radically. Music broadcasting was divided into partial departments, specialized e.g. in philharmonic, vocal and chamber music, in opera, music education, international music and especially in Russian and Soviet music. Czechoslovak Radio was fully

isolated from the western radio practices. Folk and brass band music found its place at the department of entertaining and operetta music. At the same time, Albert Pek, a professor at the Prague Conservatory, established the 'department of songs and folk art' that became one of the departments of the music division (Jeřutová et al., 280). Apart from local folk music, it focused on traditional music of foreign countries – at that time, however, these were mostly the friendly socialistic countries.

The regional studios followed the pre-war programming in which folk culture had its important place. In the 1920s and 1930s, this orientation resulted from the fact that folk culture was a basic and natural part of the music life in regions. After the war and in the 1950s, when Czechoslovak Television started its broadcasting and the market with gramophone records developed faster, the aspect of folklorism became visible very much (such as supporting folk music and dance ensembles and their competitions), and an interest in making archive recordings.

The turn of the 1960s was peculiar in terms of brining new types of popular music. Besides Dixieland, especially young people in towns discovered the actual styles, such as western swing, country & western music, and mainly rock'n'roll. Nevertheless, sources of this new music could only be reached via listening to foreign radio stations, such as Radio Luxembourg, AFN Munich, and the Vienna programme *Autofahrer Unterwegs*.

Czechoslovak Radio, held in an ideological grip of the totalitarian regime, became fossilized. Although the entertaining music portion in broadcasting increased up to 70%, this music was - more or less – out of touch with life. It carried enthusiastic songs, 'traditional' dance and popular music, and folk music. The overblown presentation of folk music contributed to its rejection.

The liberalization of the political and social situation in the 1960s became evident in the radio practice, too. Apart from classical music, enthusiastic songs, and brass band music, jazz and modern dance music could be heard. In 1960, the Czechoslovak Radio Dance Orchestra was established; later on, the orchestra split into the pop-music branch and the jazz branch. In the mid-1960s, the group of broadcasting stations was extended and new programme series were introduced; modern folk, country and rock music were presented (Czech rock bands Vulkan and Atlantis even made use of folk music instruments, such as the cimbalom). However, radio did not play a significant role within this unique trend of ethnic modernization.

Finding foreign folk music in the 1950s broadcasting only sporadically and exclusively in its 'socialism-oriented' form, ten years later the situation was more optimistic. In 1966, Radio Praha offered series like *World Folk Art Treasures*, and *World Folk Music Treasures*. In them, in fifteen minutes, they covered topics like 'A short walk with music in the country of guitars and castanets', 'Songs about

Clementine and other heroines of the Gold Rush', '...about the outlaw Jesse James', 'Songs about the sea and Bahia', or 'Do you know Ragas?'. With the cultivated word of Rudolf Pellar, the audience received the information and recordings that were otherwise available with difficulty. It looked like the better times were coming.

Large space for brass band music and folk songs remained in broadcasting even during the period of the 'normalization' in the 1970s. Within ideological analyses of the 'right-wing opportunistic forces' activities, different normative guidelines were searched for and determined, such as the ratio of local and international entertaining music on the air (50 % local music, 25 % Soviet music, and 25 % other music within one week). Classical and traditional folk music was hardly ever mentioned by the Communist ideologists in the Party documents since this music was considered problem-free. A series called *Travels to Folk Music* was a top long-term broadcasted programme in the 1970s. From Monday to Friday from 1:35 to 2:00 p.m., the Vltava radio station played music by local folk ensembles from various ethnographical areas; on Saturdays, the time was devoted to the probes into international folk music. In 1977, the series included 'Songs and dances from Northern Italy' and 'The Atlantic France, the mountain France'.

At the same time, it was necessary to find new ways and connections. In 1976, the creators of a long-term running cycle called the *Colourful Singing World*, which was prepared in Brno and Prague, set out on one of the ways. It was pioneered by Jaromír Nečas, composer and Brno Radio editor, under whose dramaturgic supervision 106 thirty-minute-long tales originated about the origin and development of music cultures in different parts of the world, a series on folk songs and song activities of different social groups with a high documentary and cognitive value. The Prague part of the series developed at the same time, under the supervision of editor Jana Merhautová, featuring themes like 'Islamic Cultural Territory – Near East', 'Canadian Folk Singers', or 'Lullabies of Four Continents'. The series *Colourful Singing World*, as it was broadcast between 1976 and 1980, could be considered as the first detailed and systematic view into the field we call world music today.

Plzeň Radio took another possible approach. It linked the folk tradition and the studio's electronic equipment, using new techniques of composition. Jaroslav Krček, Josef Krček, and Zdeněk Bláha pioneered this direction. Jaroslav Krček prepared many recordings for the international radio competition Prix de musique folklorique de Radio Bratislava, and he gained many awards there.

The extent of the use of international folk and ethnic music depended on the availability of the material. There were no CDs or Internet. Broadcasters used three types of music sources: 1. Gramophone recordings issued by Supraphon and

commissioned by Czechoslovak Radio via Artia – the International Department of Supraphon; 2. Orders of recordings issued by foreign radios via OIRT³⁾ (despite the limited budget it was sometimes possible to get a recording from a foreign radio on the studio audio tape); and 3. Recordings from the limited private collections of external editors.

After 1989, circumstances and conditions changed, of course. As before, music covered approximately a half of broadcasting time, but the programme was more open to the world, especially to the Anglo-American production. Welcome back were the banned singers-songwriters, sacral music, and other formerly 'anti-communistic subversives'. The roles were re-arranged of national stations of Czech Radio (Czechoslovak Radio ended in 1993). The opening-up to the world went hand in hand with an increasing interest in ethnic music; trade term for world music was introduced. The programme series contributed to it, such as *Ethnic Music on Vltava Waves*, *Metamorphoses of Tradition*, for a short period also the renewed cycle *Colourful Singing World*, furthermore *The Ethno-Club*, *Between the Snake and the Dragon* or the *Tearoom...* Music editors Ivana Radechovská and Aleš Opekar prepared the series; there were and many external editors, such as Petr Dorůžka, Jiří Moravčík, Vlastislav Matoušek, Kateřina Andršová, Elena Kubičková, and Jiří Mazánek.

Petr Dorůžka and Jiří Moravčík introduced new views on the worldwide context of ethnic music cultures on Czech Radio. Dorůžka's pioneering show *Music on the Border Area* (since 1988) dealt with new trends in the field of classical music first; since 1992, as Dorůžka became a member of World Music Charts Europe⁴⁾ and obtained a source for music recordings, the programming has been aimed at the actual trends in ethnic music and world music. Dorůžka's activities including those on radio can be found at www.world.freemusic.cz; Jiří Moravčík's activities at www.world-music.cz.

It is interesting and to a considerable extent sad that local traditional folk music was left out a bit. After 2000, there appeared a contention between the family oriented station Český rozhlas 2 - Praha (Czech Radio 2) and the culture oriented station Český rozhlas 3 - Vltava (Czech Radio), a station that specializes in broadcasting of traditional folk music. Both stations rather wish to profess just the latest folk music within the contemporary world music trends. Ethnic music of the world pushes out Czech and Moravian traditional music to a certain extent.

3) The International Radio and Television Organization (*Organisation Internationale De La Radio Et Television*) of the Eastern Bloc countries; after 1989, the organization, including its member countries, joined the European Broadcasting Union.

4) World Music Charts Europe was founded in mid-1991.

The audience rating for the traditional folk music programmes is not as high as it used to be. Is it a tragedy?

Perhaps not. We have been living in an era of the fast development of digital and Internet broadcasting. In this space, there is no shortage of broadcasting frequencies. Although such claim may seem to be a little illogical – considering the contrast between the rustic origin and the technological progress – I can see the future of transmitting of folk music exactly in these new technologies. The new series called *Folklore Radio*, prepared by Czech Radio in cooperation with the Folklore Association of the Czech Republic, can serve as a good example. So far, the series is represented by eight hours of folk music, divided thematically, in a repeating loop. Another step reflecting the present day radio needs could be the discussion on the planned musical portal of Czech Radio. It should also include the present D-Dur digital and Internet station for classical music, and two new stations: one of them jazz oriented, the other one folk music oriented. It would be possible to receive them through Internet, as well as in digital and cable networks. Nevertheless, it will take some time before the aforementioned forerunners, just like swallows announcing the coming of spring, raise their wings to reach the needful range and height.

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