Instrumental Roots: The Dulcimer in Bacova´s Ceska Kapela

Jesse A. Johnston

Given the Festival's theme of "roots", it seems appropriate that this project began as part of an exploration of my own family's musical roots as Czech-Americans. My first encounter with the Baca band, in fact, was during my research about polka music at Czech-American festivals in Wisconsin in 2003.[1] At that time, I was intrigued that the band included a dulcimer, but I was more interested in the wider issue of musical ethnicity among European immigrants to North America and their descendants, a perspective that remains a key element in my understanding of the Baca band's broader significance. My emphasis here, however, is more interpretive and theoretical. I have kept this outlook in place as a framework because I see the broader phenomenon of European-American music making as a valuable way to think about the implications of this ensemble of Moravians in the New World.

The Baca Band (*Bačova Česká Kapela*)

The Baca Band took its name from a family of Moravian immigrants to Texas. The first immigrant of the family was Joseph Bača, who came from Moravia with his family to Fayetteville, Texas, in 1860 (Greene 1992). Joseph's son Frank, who was born in Europe but grew up in Texas, studied the trumpet and eventually joined a local Czech orchestra. Frank fathered thirteen children. These children, all of whom Frank trained in music, became the core of the "Bača Family Band" in 1892 (Greene 1992, 24). This first ensemble had eleven members who all

1) In my discussion of the Czech-American community and musicians, I have chosen to preserve Americanized spellings and transliterations. Thus, most of the diacritics have disappeared (and pronunciations have occasionally changed). The first and second generations of immigrants often spoke Czech, and the Baca band's early cylinder recordings credited *Bačova Česká kapela*. At present, however, the band is typically referred to as the "Baca band". Likewise, I have chosen to call the instrument known in Czech as *cimbál* by the English *dulcimer* since that was the term used by the musicians in the Baca band. In his liner notes to Dalibor Štrunc's 2000 album *Prameny / Sources*, Jiří Plocek is adamant that the term *cimbalom* be used in English when referring to the large hammered zithers common in Central Europe rather than *dulcimer*, which has English and Appalachian connotations: "In our English translation, we use the unique term cimbalom. . . . The term is a current component of the English vocabulary, as defined in [standard dictionaries] ... 'a complex zither of Hungary'... We use the term cimbalom band for *cimbálová muzika*, and never dulcimer band" (Štrunc 2000).

played brass instruments (Strachwitz 1993).[2] Frank led the band until his death in 1907 when his son Joe took over. Under Joe's leadership, the band garnered a reputation for playing concerts, folk music, and marches throughout south Texas (Greene 1992, 143). After Joe's death in 1920, John R. Baca took the baton (Greene 1992, 143), and during the mid century the group saw various incarnations, including a Dixieland jazz band (Strachwitz 1993, 5). One of the unique features of the Baca group was the use of the dulcimer. Photos from the 1920s show the dulcimer in front of the other brass instruments and clarinet.[3]

Old-Time Ethnic Music

As a brass band of immigrants to the United States, the Baca Orchestra is an example of the widespread popularity of wind bands in American popular music from the 1860s into the twentieth century. Similar bands were a primary avenue through which European immigrants influenced American musical culture. Bands were a community symbol, were often integral parts of town life, and featured repertory that was oriented to both municipal and ethnic communities. They linked American culture to Europe, and many skilled musicians from the Old World played in such bands (Procházková 2006; Greene 1992). The historian Victor Greene, in a study of the history of polka music among European-Americans has suggested the term "old-time ethnic music" to refer to the popular appeal of European-Americans dance music as well as its importance as a lucrative genre for American record companies in the mid-twentieth-century (Greene 1992, 2–3), many of which stocked catalogs for specific ethnic audiences including Czechs.[4]

Early recordings suggest that polkas, waltzes, and marches—the mainstay of old-time ethnic music—were also the mainstay of the Baca band repertory. The band made its first recording for the OKeh label in 1929, and by 1935 they had

2) Strachwitz dates the band's inception to 1882, but I have chosen to maintain the date presented by Greene.

3) According to Greene, folklorists noted dulcimers early on among Moravian musical ensembles in Texas (Greene 1992).

4) There is a distinction between "polka" and "polka music" in this context. The varied repertory of marches, waltzes, polkas, schottisches, and mazurkas that were played by many of these brass bands has become known in North America as "polka music" – dance music that was popularized in North America by European immigrants (Greene 1992; see also Gronow 1982; Lornell 1985; Leary 1997; Bohlman 2002). While based on European roots, the genre is distinctly American in its ethnic diversity. Discussing European-American ethnic recordings, Pekka Gronow (1982) has noted that "the polka served as a common denominator among German-speaking and Western Slavic areas of Europe" and therefore appealed to a "pan-ethnic" audience in North America, which made polka music an attractive and commercially successful genre for recording companies. In 1996, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, an industry group, established polka music as an award category in the Grammys (Greene 1992).

recorded over forty songs, the band also played regularly on the radio, probably beginning in 1926 (Greene 1992). The band played many songs with verse-and-chorus forms, but the march influence is also audible: many of the selections feature three or four melodic strains that repeat. The melody is always clear, whether played or sung, another characteristic of Czech-American polka styles (for an overview, see March 2007). This melody-based style can be heard on the band's 1929 recording of "Lesní zábava" (re-released by Arhoolie Records as *The Texas-Czech, Bohemian, and Moravian Bands* [Folklyric 7026]).

Czech-Americans and Music

Czechs were the first Slavic group to immigrate to the United States in large numbers.[5] Although Czech immigrants were known for their musicianship, most that immigrated in the nineteenth century became farmers. More than half of the Czech immigrants to America in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century settled in rural agricultural areas of Nebraska, Wisconsin, Texas, Iowa, and Minnesota (Freeze 1980, 263–264).[6] Some accounts suggest that many Czechs were "recruited" as homesteaders because the Bohemians reputedly "could make crops grow where no one else could" (Freeze 1980, 265).

Texas was the destination of many Czechs who went to the south. Census records indicate around 40,000 Czech speakers in the state in 1910. The Czech communities of Texas were differentiated from Czech settlement elsewhere in North America "in that more… were from Moravia than Bohemia" (Greene 1992). The first centers of Czech settlement were in Fayette and Austin counties, and around the turn of the century all of these communities had brass bands.[7] The Czech communities of Texas continued to grow in the twentieth century. In the decade of the 1920s, the number of foreign-born Czechs tripled (to 36,000), and the entire Texas Czech community numbered around 300,000 in total (Greene 1992).

Alongside their purported agricultural abilities, Czech immigrants to the U.S. were recognized at large for their musical interests.[8] Clinton Machann, for example, writes that "music, after language, is probably the most important

5) Most Czech immigrants came in family groups and settled near others who spoke Czech or German (Freeze 1980). Compared to other immigrant groups of the time, Czechs were highly skilled in industry and agriculture; ninety-seven percent of Czech immigrants were recorded as literate in their own language (ibid.).

6) A detailed scholarly account of nineteenth-century Czech immigration to North America is Korytová-Magstadt 1993. Czech-Americans remain the only Slavic immigrant group in North America with a large farming population (Freeze 1980, 261).

7) The statistics in this paragraph are based on Greene 1993, p. 23.

8) The earliest wave of immigrants from the Bohemian Lands, a group of German-speaking Moravians who immigrated in the 1740s and 50s, settled religious colonies in Pennsylvania and North Carolina that are still known for their instantiation of (Crawford 2001). Bohlman calls the Moravians "one of the most sophisticated musical cultures of colonial America" (Bohlman 1986).

element in Texas-Czech culture. . . . [Moreover,] music has always been the single most important cohesive force in Texas-Czech culture" (Machann 1983, 3).[9] A sociological study from the 1920s of a Czech community in Virginia noted that even among the poorest residents musical instruments were prized possessions (Freeze 1980, 268).[10] Richard Spottswood, a scholar of early American ethnic recordings, notes a 1903 patent application filed for the Laboratoř Ed. Jedličky, suggesting that a Czech-American was the first producer of recordings "exclusively for a specific American ethnic audience" (Spottswood 1990, 2:638).[11] As Greene points out, many Czech immigrants brought music "not only in their heads but also ... in their baggage" as sheet music from the Prague publisher Urbanek and Sons (Greene 1992, 51). This music was often re-published in North America by the Chicago publishers Joseph Jiran and Vitak and Elsnic (ibid.), who published some music played by the Baca Band.

The Dulcimer in the Baca Band

This musical heritage has become an integral part of the collective imagination of the Czech-American community. What interests me about the Baca Band, however, was their use of the dulcimer. Musical instruments were important objects that many Czech immigrants took with them when they left their homes to emigrate. Karen Freeze writes that, "If an emigrating Czech took anything from home other than a feather quilt and food for the voyage, it was a musical instrument" (Freeze 1980, 267). Likewise, the dulcimer in the Baca band may be a useful point of analysis for historical studies of Czech-American music and comparative studies with contemporaneous Czech music. The focus on music instruments also effects a pursuit of alternative ways to study folk culture through material culture. Such an approach in studies of European-American traditional music was indicated by Erich Stockmann's suggestion of a focus on instruments and the codification of the term "folk music instrument" (Stockmann 1961).[12]

9) These statements may be extended to many, if not all, Czech communities in the United States: "Of course," remarks Machann, "the Czechs' affection for music is widely known" (Machann 1987). Similar sentiments are voiced among other Czech-Americans (e.g., Smíšek 1994) who often treat the importance of music in their culture as a historical fact.

10) A 1900 survey recorded that one-third of 1,000 male professionals among Czech immigrants were musicians or music-teachers; the rest were clergymen, doctors, electricians, teachers, lawyers, journalists, artists, and actors (Freeze 1980, 265).

11) The Laboratory of Ed[ward] Jedliček. Spottswood has little information on the company, but Jedlička presumably maintained a recording studio as the firm recorded and released almost fifty cylinders (Spottswood 1990, 2:639).

12) In Czech, the term *nástroj lidové hudby* is used (e.g., Kunz 1974, 1993b). I have theorized a cultural approach to the study of musical instruments more fully in my recent dissertation (Johnston 2008).

The Baca band of the 1920s, under John Baca's leadership, was characterized by the dulcimer. According to an interview with Ray Baca in 1978 by journalist Allan Turner, the dulcimer was made by Ignac Krenek, a cousin who had brought a small instrument with him from Czechoslovakia.[13] Upon request of Ray's father, Krenek made two slightly larger instruments for the Bacas. According to Ray Baca, the instrument had a range of about two-and-a-half octaves (ibid.), and according to one extant photograph, the instrument was about the size of the *malý cimbál* common in Moravia during the nineteenth century. In the surviving recordings, the instrument was played by Ray Baca, although Ray's sister Annie and older brother Joe also played the instrument (Baca 1978).

American folklorist and producer Chris Strachwitz suggests that the dulcimer in the Baca band "gave the band its unique old timey sound and added the rural flavor" (Strachwitz 1993, 5). This observation suggests that the instrument might be related to early American country music or perhaps Appalachian music and downplays the instrument's links to the band members' Moravian ethnicity. However, a more likely explanation is that the Baca musicians were familiar with ways that the instrument was played in Moravia. Dalibor Štrunc, a Moravian cimbalom player who has looked at the surviving Baca instrument in Texas, suggests that the instrument is similar to the ones that Leoš Janáček noted during ethnographic excursions in the 1890s and early 1900s.[14]

Conclusion

The Moravian roots of the dulcimer in the Baca band may appear self-evident to many of you here. However, among American ethnomusicologists working with old-time ethnic music, the connections and comparisons of New and Old World music traditions have sometimes been overlooked. The significance of language and song texts has been explored (Machann 1983; Leary 1997), much research has been undertaken about record labels aimed at ethnic audiences (Gronow 1982; Spottswood 1990), and Victor Greene's research (1992) has clarified details about the development of many ethnic bands and their roots from a historical standpoint. Musical instruments have not received direct attention, however, even though analysis might reveal concrete connections between communities in North American and Europe.

13) Because of the ambiguous way of referencing the Bohemian Lands among immigrants, it is difficult to evaluate this statement. While it is possible that Krenek brought the instrument to Texas after the formation of Czechoslovakia in 1919, it seems more likely that it was brought earlier since, if Krenek was a cousin of an older generation of Baca's, then he would have been more likely to immigrate in the nineteenth century. It is also likely that Krenek came from Moravia rather than Bohemia.

14) Dalibor Štrunc, personal communication, 18 July 2008.

Further research on the Baca's dulcimer might clarify further insights. For example, I suspect that the Baca band's recordings of 1929 to 1935 are among the earliest surviving sound recordings of the *cimbál* as played by Moravian musicians. Although the melodies are not Moravian per se, these recordings would appear to conform to nineteenth-century descriptions of the role of the *cimbál* in folk bands here (e.g., Kunz 1993a; Kurfürst 2002). A comparative investigation of the construction of the instrument could also clarify whether or not the instrument is related to those that Janáček noted in Moravia. The Baca band's use of the dulcimer reinforces the view that musical instruments are significant markers of ethnic roots and can be more closely investigated.

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