

REFLECTING ON RETEXTING OF SONGS: HISTORY, CASE STUDY, AND ENGAGEMENT

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What happens when we change the lyrics of a song? Retexting—my term for the creation of a new text for an existing song—is a common transformation, but our understanding of the value of these changes needs refinement. I will first examine practices of retexting within the context of bluegrass music in the Czech Republic, proposing that Czech bluegrass retexting is not merely derivative, but creates new meanings and meaningful works. My observations have led me to reflect on how practices of retexting can be useful tools for pedagogy and other sorts of community engagement.

Literature review / terms

My awareness of retexting started early, learning the song “Twinkle, twinkle, little star” and then realizing that “Baa, baa, black sheep” and many more songs simply recycled the same tune. In elementary school, I heard parodies of Christmas songs (“Jingle bells, Batman smells, Robin laid an egg...”) that used retexting to make fun.

Studying American musical history as an undergraduate, I learned of Christian congregational singing in which a handful of tunes can be used to sing all of the psalms—song and tune are interchangeable parts in a technology that supported the musical life of a community in a situation of scarce resources. The continued traditions of interchanging text and tune by Primitive Baptists in the Appalachian South has led to the distinctive practice and sound of American religious folksong singing (Patterson 2001).

As a graduate student doing fieldwork, I observed the ways that Czech bluegrassers retext songs. Some retexted songs preserve the meaning—“covering” the song through translation. Other Czech bluegrass texts use the melody of an existing song but carry a differing meaning. Pop music scholarship on covers provides a model

for thinking of this range of approaches. David Horn discusses how “covering” a song is different from freer “interpretation” of a song (Horn 2000: 30). Deena Weinstein distinguishes “covers” which use a certain performance or recording as a reference from “versions,” where differing versions of the song exist equitably as varying possibilities for performance (Weinstein 1988: 138). Some retextings show an intent to connect Czech bluegrass to American bluegrass, while others seem less self-conscious about the connection to another version, and seek to establish something new (and perhaps equal).

Musicologist Robert Falck provides historical context with his etymology of the terms “parody” and “contrafactum.” For 16th century writers, parody meant “songs sung in imitation of others,” “a song sung to another melody,” or “...to introduce in place of a serious thing another ridiculous one” (Falck 1979: 3). In the 1700s, Jean-Jacques Rousseau contrasted “well-made music” where the melody is composed to the words with “parody,” in which “...the words are composed to the melody” (Falck 1979: 9). In the 19th century, parody became primarily a literary term, and contrafactum was more popular for discussing music. Falck concludes by discussing Ursula Aarburg’s mid-1900s definition of contrafactum that—unlike Rousseau’s—is rhetorically neutral: “the invention of new texts to given forms and melodies.” Falck comments that Aarburg’s “...notion of contrafactum becomes virtually indistinguishable from the process of song composition itself” (Falck 1979: 20).

As I explore this topic, I am inclined to follow Aarburg’s example in seeking neutral language. For example, I resist using the word “original” to describe the English language text of an American song that has been re-created through retexting in Czech. I hold, with Alexander Dent (2005), that while retexting creates a work that is in some way derivative, it also creates a new work that is fully enmeshed and effective in its own context. Per Richard Peterson’s discussion of the fabrication of authenticity in country music, retextings might be seen as less “authentic” using the “real, not imitative” definition, but could be considered as authentic using

the definition “credible in current context” (Peterson 1997: 207–208). Accordingly, my ethnomusicological consideration of Czech bluegrass retexting pays attention to the local contexts of people who create and use these words and tunes.

Czech bluegrass retexting

Bluegrass musician and community leader Petr Brandejs has considered Czech translations of bluegrass lyrics, analyzing rhythm, vowels, and how translators modify “natural language.” More relevant here, he provides an insider’s views on bluegrass retexting, including an outline of the different approaches a Czech lyricist can take and the challenges and opportunities they face. As Brandejs puts it, “a lyricist, who tries to translate a song from English to Czech, should obviously consider not only the phonetical and rhythmical side of the text, but also the meaning and overall message” (Brandejs 2011: 13).

Brandejs addresses how retextings focus on sound and phonetics. “Rovnou, tady rovnou,” Jan Vyčítal’s Czech version (1969/1970) of bluegrass standard “Roll On, Buddy, Roll On” (Charlie Bowman and His Brothers, 1928; Monroe Brothers 1936/7) indicates how Czechs have recreated the sounds of sung English (Brandejs 2011: 7–8). In these three lines from the repeated chorus of the song, the English text is at the top, followed by two phonetic transcriptions by Brandejs: English in the middle, and Czech below. This comparison reveals strategic use of the “O” vowel in the Czech text to match the English one, and the near-rhyme of “tadi” and “buddy”:

Roll on, buddy, roll on
/rɒl ɔ:n bʌdɪ rɔ:l ɔ:n/
/rovnou, jo:, tadi rovnou/

You wouldn’t roll so slow if you knew what I know
/jʊ wʊdn rɔ:l sə slə:ʊ əf jʊ ŋju: wɒt ai noʊ /
/prost’e t’e pic a nehledej mňe vi:c/

So roll on, buddy, roll on
/səʊ rɒl ɔ:n bʌdɪ rɔ:l ɔ:n/
/to t’i ři:ka:m rovnou/

I'll add another example here I have heard of a Czech bluegrass piece that takes its melody from a US song ("You Don't Know My Mind," written by Jimmie Skinner and a trademark song of Tennessee-born artist Jimmy Martin) paired with a Czech text with different meaning but phonetic resemblance. In an informal jam at his house in spring 2019, mandolinist Tomáš Alexa explained that the repeated final line of the verses is where the resemblance is strongest. Here "Baby, you don't know my mind today" is echoed by the corresponding line "*nejmín na román má to děj.*"

Brandejs identifies texts that diverge in meaning from corresponding English lyrics (Brandejs 2011: 13). Geoff Mack's "I've Been Everywhere" (1959) originally listed places where the singer has been; Vyčítal's version, performed with the Greenhorns, "...changed the meaning into the list of his own favorite painters (being himself a painter), singers (being himself a singer) and tongue twisters (having himself a huge problem with correct Czech pronunciation)" (Brandejs 2011: 13). Singer and literary translator Robert Křest'an has used his artistic sensibilities in transforming songs. He retexted the Anglo-American folk ballad "Fair and Tender Ladies / Little Sparrow" (Roud #451) as "Pět prázdných slunců" (Five Empty Suns), conveying a similar bleak emotional resonance, but with male, first-person regret instead of the female narrator of the American version.

I have often heard from Czech bluegrassers that Czech-language lyrics by Prague-based mandolinist, singer, and bandleader Petr Kůs "feel" or "sound" more American, and that they are more idiomatically "bluegrass" than those by other Czech lyricists. Brandejs offers a rationale, proposing that that especially in "songs written to his own music [...] Petr Kůs's writing style might be based on favoring some long vowels that make the text easier to sing, but not necessarily easier to understand" (Brandejs 25). As a singer who has worked to perform Czech bluegrass texts, I present below the four lines that make up the first verse of "Zlatá rybka" as an example of Kůs's original text and music that are intuitive, for me as a native speaker of American English, to sing. Here is the text with phonetic transcription by Petr Brandejs; I have underlined the words where I place emphasis (Brandejs 2011: 37–39):

Lod'ku máš, vesla na ní jsou, tak pluj tam,
/lot'ku ma:š vesla na ni: sou tak pluj tam/

kde stříbrně zrcadlí se proud.
/gde stři:brně zrcadli: se prout/

Rozhod' sít' a pak celou noc tam zůstaň,
/rozhot' si:t' a pak celou noc tam zu:staň/

s ranním úsvitem smíš ji vytáhnout.
/s raňi:m u:svitem smi:š ji vita:hnout/

The beginnings of each line don't display the initial emphases characteristic of spoken Czech. Further, the phrases “Lod'ku máš,” “Rozhod' sít',” and “s ranním úsvitem” position two short syllables before one with an accent indicating extended length. When I sing this song, these syllables are further highlighted because the melody extends them, and also positions them at the top of a repeated figure that ascends the first three notes of the scale of D major, the tonic area of the song. I feel this as an avoidance of the initial accent, and something more like the iambic weak-strong pattern that is so familiar to me as an English speaker (and singer).

Returning to the discussion of texts that imitate the sound of other texts, I note that “Pod střechou vikýř mám” was written by Petr Kůs, indicating again his ability to create Czech lyrics that emulate the rhythmic “feel” of English. I also note that in addition to the sonic similarities, there are commonalities in the meaning of the texts. While the texts of both songs speak to loneliness and alienation, there are differences in how these emotions are manifested. The narrator in “Pod střechou vikýř mám” is isolated by a static position peering down on the action of the world from their “dormer under the roof”, in contrast to the mobility of the other song (in which the narrator self-identifies as a drifter, rambler, hobo, and tramp who has “Heard the music of a rail / slept in every old dirty jail”). Retexting bluegrass can also involve reconfiguring it as a way to address the emotional, social, and aesthetic needs of a performer or a community.

Reflection: Contrafact as a teaching tool across cultural boundaries

These days, there is a particular meaning to some of the terms I have used thus far. For example, for jazz players and scholars, “contrafact” is a specific kind of borrowing: using a previously composed chord progression as the chassis for a new melody (with no particular idea that any sort of text is involved). The sorts of retexting that I have documented through my work with Czech bluegrassers has its own community-specific relevance. My analysis of Czech bluegrass retexting processes has opened my eyes to the different and specific utilities of these tools of transformation, particularly with regard to the intent involved. I have used these tools in my own artistic and pedagogical work. I list here some examples and explanations of the intent that they accomplish.

First, an example that addresses the most intimate of cultural boundaries, those across which a person reaches out to others through creative work. My wife Emily and I have liked singing the song “Old Homeplace” originated by the group The Dillardards (with composition credited to bandmembers Mitch Jayne and Dean Webb) because it is set near the town of Charlottesville, Virginia, where she is from and where we were married. We have, over years of singing it, come to notice a disconnect between the tone of the lyrics, which include the narrator’s loss of the titular homeplace, their livelihood, family, and their beloved, to which they respond “Now I wish that I were dead,” and the melody. The melody of the song is in the major mode with a use of the major-III chord that is atypical for the bluegrass genre, and which highlights the upwards thrust of the major third even more! Searching for an alternative melody for the text of the song, one that was more plaintive and which worked at a slower tempo, we tried many tunes until we settled on “How can I keep from singing,” by American hymnodist Robert Lowry, first published in an 1869 collection entitled *Bright Jewels for the Sunday School*, and since in wide use in English-language hymnody (Bradbury et al. 16).

The next example arose first from necessity, and then turned into an opportunity for exploration and reflection. Teaching the “Global

String Band” ensemble and course at the Faculty of Humanities in Prague, Czech Republic in the spring/summer semester of 2019, I was working on how to include a song in the Indonesian kroncong tradition. This style includes “kroncong” lutes which are plucked chordophones that reveal the extent of Portuguese colonial, trading, and cultural influence in the globalizing early modern world. Thinking—during a train trip on Czech Railways—of how to include a sung element of the song “Sapu Lidi,” the text of the Czech national anthem (“Kde Domov Můj”), and with the help of fellow passengers, by journey’s end I learned the text of the song by Josef Kajetán Tyl, and had made the slight alterations that would fit it to the Indonesian melody. My reasons were partly practical, as I wasn’t able to recruit singers able to sing the Sapu Lidi text. This retexting also references the experience of Indonesian-born people in the Czech Republic. I had recently heard of the 2016 film *Letters to Prague* which dramatizes the experience of an Indonesian man living in Prague. In subsequent iterations of the Global String Band course, this new text/tune combination that asks in Czech about the location of “home” to an Indonesian melody provokes questions about origin and belonging that are central to bluegrass music (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iE90jM-9c8M>).

The final example was an intentional example of cultural bridge-crossing that also grew out of the Global String Band course in 2019. Singing the text of the Anglo-American ballad “Handsome Molly” in combination with the Mexican Son Jarocho song “El Balaju” was a matter of practicality when our group couldn’t find singers of Spanish in Prague. In making this particular combination, though, I was thinking ahead to using this contrafact at my home institution in Tennessee, where there is a rich community of Spanish-speaking people. Emigrants and the generations of their children who have settled here are not often welcomed, so joining elements of Anglo and Mexican musical traditions in the Global String band is an attempt to open new avenues for understanding and connection (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-miOR7Oyqs>).

Retexting and the future

Machine identification of musical material is used to enforce intellectual property rules and to facilitate the flow of economic capital to copyright holders. Understanding musical materials as subject to re-creation through retexting sometimes can subvert this process, as not all interpretations of a copyrighted song will be detected by the monitoring systems. While of course artists should be paid for their labor, it also seems important that we keep adapting musical works to our own local communities. My work with Czech bluegrassers has shown that this sort of transformation can lead to artistic, social, and economic flourishing. So I say, keep on retexting!

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Summary

Retexting is a common way to change song, but our understanding of the significance of this kind of change needs refinement. The retexting within the context of bluegrass music in the Czech Republic uses Dent's (2005) idea of conjuncture to argue that Czech bluegrass retextings create new meanings. Czechs have engaged in all sorts of transformations: translating American bluegrass and country songs into the Czech language in (more or less) direct ways, seeking to preserve meaning, providing new Czech texts that don't correspond with the meaning of the original lyrics, and other approaches. This diversity of retextings and the importance they have for Czech bluegrassers leads the author to reflect on how practices of retexting can be a useful tool for pedagogy and other sorts of community engagement.

Key words: Retexting; parody; contrafact; bluegrass; meaning; Czech bluegrass.