

“Our Song!” Nationalism in Folk Music Research and Revival in Socialist Czechoslovakia

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Abstract: In the Czechoslovakia of the 1950s, traditional folk music was officially presented as the most important resource of national musical identity. Folk- or folk-inspired music was ubiquitous. Although this intensity had subsided in the following decades, the role of folk music as a symbol of national identity remained strong until the end of the communist rule in 1989. While the ideology of nationalism used folk music as its tool, it also influenced the way this music was collected, researched, and presented. The article presents examples from two closely related areas to document this phenomenon: folk music research and folk music revival. A closer look reveals how the idea of state-promoted nationalism influenced the ways researchers presented their findings, how they filtered out material that was deemed unsuitable for publication, and how traditional music was revived on stage or in media by folk music and dance ensembles. Critical analysis of research materials and audiovisual documents from the 1950s and 1960s will show how censorship accompanied a folk song from its collection in the field, through publication, to a stylized production on stage or in film.

Keywords: Czechoslovakia, folk music, folk song collections, revival, politics, nationalism, Communism

Introduction

Throughout history, music often played the role of a political symbol, its meaning depending on who was using it and in what context. In the Czechoslovakia of the 1950s, traditional folk music was officially presented as the most important resource of national musical identity. Folk- or folk-inspired music was almost ubiquitous. Composers of classical music were expected to take it as their main

source of inspiration, it had prominent place in public broadcast, new ensembles and festivals for folk music were founded. Although this intensity had subsided in the following decades, the role of folk music as a symbol of national identity remained prominent until the end of the communist rule in 1989. The word *národní* [national] was used as an adjective connected with various cultural phenomena. But is it correct to talk about nationalism in socialist culture? And if so, how did the ideology of socialist nationalism use folk music as its tool, how did it influence the way this music was collected, researched, and presented?

In my article I would like to present examples from two closely related areas to document this phenomenon: folk music research and public presentation or the revival of folk music. I have chosen one example from both of these areas – a particular research project and a movie about a folk music ensemble – and both from the 1950s. A closer look reveals how the idea of state-promoted nationalism influenced the ways researchers handled and presented their findings and how traditional music was revived on stage or in the media by folk music and dance ensembles. A folk song on its journey from its collection by the researcher in the field, through the phase of publication, to a stylized production on stage or in film was subjected to various subtle or direct manipulations.

When one looks at the relation between nation, nationalism, and folk music (or folk culture in general), one can see that the acts of collecting and archiving folk music play a crucial role. It is exactly through these acts that music turns from a process or an event into an object that can be classified and presented as belonging to this or that group – defined by ethnic, social, or other criteria. The music is taken from its original context and preserved as an isolated unit – in written form or on an audio medium. And our understanding of these units might be different, should one hear and see them in the original context because the selection is already an interpretation of the material. As Anthony Seeger puts it:

No archive preserves sounds. What it preserves are interpretations of sounds – interpretations made by the people who did the recordings, and their equipment.¹

Archived music can also start to live its own life when used by others, e.g. musicians who want to learn about a particular tradition. Here, the music can move even further away from its original meaning, depending on the purpose for which the musicians revive it, how much are they interested in learning about the background of the original recordings. Archives created by scholars in this case can serve as a kind of authority, creating seemingly reliable connection to the music of past generations. Monographs, song collections, or song books are only rarely

1. Anthony Seeger, "The Role of Sound Archives in Ethnomusicology Today," *Ethnomusicology* 30/2 (Spring–Summer 1986), 261–276, here 270.

critically examined by musicians who use them and therefore the music collected in the field can undergo various distortions on its way to new performances on stage or in the media.

National and international

The beginning of interest in the folk song and the folk culture in general coincided with rising national awareness in Europe during the 19th century and it has been always connected to politics, in one way or another. Czech composers of the romantic era – Antonín Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana as the most famous examples – turned to folk song and dance, using them both as a melodic inspiration and as a symbol of national identity as opposed to that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire of which they were citizens. When one looks at the issue of nationalism during the communist era, one has to face a paradox. Communism as a political ideal was strongly connected with internationalism and one can find many proclamations about the brotherhood of nations and, to mention the most obvious musical statement, *The Internationale*, the anthem of the socialist movement, and for some time also of the Soviet Union.

Indeed, nationalism was officially, and in the early phase of Communism more or less also practically, condemned as a bourgeois ideology.² But it was not long before communist leaders in the Soviet Union and elsewhere saw that the national identity is something they can and need to work with. It was closely connected to the groups of people they were addressing and from whom they derived their legitimacy. And while, in the early years, artists supporting the communist idea experimented with avant-garde forms and techniques, soon Communism started to call for the art that combined 19th-century aesthetics with the focus on folk traditions. The romantic approach was also applied to the folk music itself, its research and presentation.

In her study on musical life in the Soviet Union, Marina Frolova-Walker describes how the concept of music “national in form, socialist in content” was brought to life under Stalin’s rule and how various national cultures were brought under a Soviet umbrella.³ Stalin’s words and actions were of course a model for communists in Czechoslovakia, too, including the explanation of the paradox of national internationalism. This issue was addressed by Zdeněk Nejedlý, for many years the main ideologist of Czechoslovak culture:

2. The relation between Communism and nationalism was of course much more complex and it took different forms in different countries and decades, see Roman Szporluk, *Communism and Nationalism: Karl Marx Versus Friedrich List* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

3. Marina Frolova-Walker, “‘National in Form, Socialist in Content’: Musical Nation-Building in the Soviet Republics,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51/2 (Summer 1998), 331–371.

The culture relying on the people and flowing from the people cannot be other than national. I want to briefly mention the still widespread misconception that communists cannot be national, and therefore neither the culture created by them can be national – when they are an international movement. Of course the communism is international and every true communist is international. But the internationalism is not the same as a-nationalism how some people still think. If I want to be internationalist, I necessarily have to be national, although not nationalist. ... It is only logical then that the greatest authority on the national issue of today is the internationalist Stalin, author of the book *Marxism and the National Question*. But Stalin defines the proletarian culture as socialist in content, national in form.⁴

The Communist Party used traditional folk music as a tool to justify its actions and to forge connections with the people. To use this tool properly two things were needed: 1) to collect and classify the music and 2) to present it in the correct way. In both phases, it was possible to manipulate the music in order to create a desired image of the nation. Although communist regime had turned to the old-fashioned nationalist sentiments, it needed a new, special idea of the “folk” for it, one that was purified and remodeled.

To put things in a historical perspective, it is necessary to mention that nationalism was not absent from the first republic, i.e. the Czechoslovakia between 1918 and 1938, and from the folklore research of that period. On the contrary, the young state was trying to strengthen its identity, and traditional folk music played an important role in this process. As an example, I can briefly mention the Phonographic Commission of the Czech Academy of Arts and Sciences which has produced an impressive collection of recordings of folk music and dialects between 1929 and 1937, but with clear nationalist bias omitting all the non-Slavonic groups inhabiting the republic, i.e. Germans, Hungarians, Jews, and to a certain extent Gypsies.⁵

When somebody wants to work with nationalist sentiments and to manipulate them, one needs to handle two issues. Firstly, the strong image of one's own nation, secondly, the creation of “the Others.” In the case of the Czech lands, the Others were, in the first place, the Germans. Before the war, there lived approximately three million Germans in the Czech lands and, in many regions, the musical cultures of Czech and German villages were influencing each other. That this

4. Zdeněk Nejedlý, “Za lidovou a národní kulturu” [For folk and national culture], in *Z dějin českého myšlení o literatuře I* (1945–1948) [From the history of the Czech thinking about literature] (Praha: Ústav pro českou literaturu AV ČR, 2001), 33–48, here 42.

5. In this collection, Gypsy musicians can be heard playing Slovak folk songs, but not songs in their own language. A selection from the recording by the Phonographic Commission was published in The Institute for Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences, see Matěj Kratochvíl, *Lidová hudba v Československu 1929–1937* [Folk music in Czechoslovakia 1929–1937], (Praha: Etnologický ústav AV ČR, 2009).

coexistence was not without problems is clear from the case of the Phonographic Commission mentioned above. But at that time the lack of interest from the Czech Academy was supplanted by other institutions or individual efforts, so that traditions of German speaking regions were documented and presented. After 1948 the German element became almost nonexistent in the folk music research, although there were still approximately 150,000 Germans left in the republic after the large-scale postwar expulsion.

Another ethnic group perceived as the Others were the Gypsies or Roma. The view on this group was much more complicated. Large part of Czech Roma population died during the war and new groups from Slovakia came after the war to take their place – often in the now depopulated regions previously inhabited by Germans. Since their music had a distinct identity, that was different from the Czech musical traditions, there were attempts to “domesticate” their music and to create a new repertory which would be suitable for the socialist state. So in the 1950s there were new songs composed in Roma language praising the Communist Party or the Soviet Union. One example is a small book titled *Cikán zpívá jinak* [The Gypsy sings a different song] mixing traditional Gypsy songs with new material.⁶ Otherwise, in postwar Czechoslovakia it was easy to get an impression of an ethnically homogenous society with no “disturbing” elements.

Miners’ songs from Kladno

After the Second World War and with the Communist Party seizing the power in 1948, there was a shift in the approach to folk song collecting and presentation. While during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, collectors were coming from the big cities to document peasants’ songs, now there was a new figure – the worker.

The focus on the worker and his songs became an important part of the new folklore research, and workers partially replaced peasants as the nation’s main representatives. During the 1950s, folklore researchers started to prepare a detailed study of various regions of Czechoslovakia. The 1950s and 1960s were the era of intense attention directed towards the small regions by the teams of scholars. This resulted in a series of monographs describing many aspects of the life of the people, including their music. Thanks to the fact that the research was conducted mostly by large institutions with proper archival system, we can today analyze how the process functioned and what kinds of filters were used to create a proper image of the nation.

6. Jan Sobota, Josef Sekera *Cikán zpívá jinak* [The Gypsy sings a different song], (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1953).

One of the first extensive monographs of this kind was devoted to Kladensko, a region near Prague, which was an important place for coal mining. It is easy to see why the newly formed Institute for Ethnography of the Czech Academy of Sciences chose this place – miners were the heroes of socialist industry, providing it with “black gold,” the coal. Kladno had also a reputation as the center of the socialist movement already since the beginning of the 20th century, earning the nickname “Red Kladno.”

A team of researchers spent quite a long time – there have been several visits between 1953 and 1957 – among people of the Kladensko mines, writing down the songs the workers remembered, completed with information on where they have learned the songs, and so on.⁷ In other words, a proper ethnomusicological fieldwork had been conducted. After several years of preparations, a book was published in 1959 with the subtitle “Life and culture of the people in the industrial region.”⁸

It is difficult to tell how the material was selected for publication. There is no official documentation suggesting censorship from official institutions, so one can presume that it was rather the authors’ view that formed the final selection. When asked in an interview many years later about possible political pressures aiming to manipulate their research, Olga Skalníková, head of the research team, did not recall any. On the contrary, she claimed that researchers had complete freedom to research and publish any way they wanted.⁹

Reading the book on Kladensko, one can get the impression that the miners sang mostly songs about hard work and social injustice. Besides this kind of songs, only few lyrical and love songs were included. Comparing the book with the archive and studying all the songs collected then, one will get a strikingly different picture. A rich assortment of drinking, erotic, religious, and humorous songs was collected but not deemed suitable for publication, although they would be the perfect illustration of local musical life.

Especially religious songs presented a complicated issue in case of miners’ folklore. Mining as a profession was always strongly connected with various beliefs, not only coming from the Christian religion, but also with all kinds of superstitions or mysticism. This was a result of the fact that the miners spent a large part of their lives underground, risking their lives and thus relying on supernatural help. Even the traditional greeting of the miners reflected this: *Zdař Bůh!* [God

7. The research was led by Olga Skalníková. Musical material was collected mainly by Jaroslav Markl, Dagmar Palátová, Vratislav Vycpálek. They were later joined by Vladimír Karbusický, who wrote the main chapter on music.

8. Olga Skalníková et al., *Kladensko. Život lidu v průmyslové oblasti* [Kladensko. Life of people in an industrial region], (Praha: Československá akademie věd, 1959).

9. Lenka Novotná, “Jak se přihodí, že se žena pustí do hornictví...” [How come that a woman gets into mining...], *Kladno Záporno kulturní revue pro Kladno* 3/2 (Autumn 2007), 29–31. Also available online under: https://issuu.com/kladnozaporno/docs/kz_03/2

help!] and prayers to patron saints – St Barbara or St Prokop – were sung before each shift. Of course during the first decades of the 20th century, religious feeling gradually became weaker even without the influence of communist ideology, but at the time of the collection this kind of song was quite spread among informants. Although the authors of the monograph did not want to discuss religious topics, they had at least to mention them briefly. Vladimír Karbusický, author of the chapter on music, writes: "Religious songs are without a doubt the oldest layer of the repertoire found in the Kladno region. They are a typical manifestation of feudal superstructure, linked to the position of a miner in the professional guild." He limits the discussion of the topic to two paragraphs, concluding that interest in religious songs started to recede "with the rising of socialist awareness of miners' masses in the 1890s."¹⁰

Religious songs were not the only ones that did not find their way into publication. Songs about the village football team, the coal miners' ball or a description of a work day were left in the archives. Even numerous political songs that would seem ideologically appropriate were left out, probably because their humor was deemed to be too wild or subversive. This was for example the case of a song about "the American beetle," i.e. the potato beetle damaging crops and, according to the propaganda, thrown from the American airplanes to harm socialist agriculture. The collected material, properly archived but hidden from the public, contains a very interesting mixture of old and new songs, showing how some traditions were kept even after the political change, while some songs were only remembered by the oldest singers and not performed anymore. The new 'folk' had to be different and better than the one before socialism: it was not allowed to be either vulgar, nor religious, nor overtly satirical.

"Tomorrow they will be dancing everywhere"

The Kladno monograph exemplifies how the process of creating the right image of the nation started at the level of regional research. The next step was to show how various regions put together create the nation. At a certain moment, regional differences had to be ignored or dissolved in favor of the whole. And when one moves one level up, the nations of the socialist states formed together a brotherhood of nations, a "meta-nation."

This approach – combining distinct regional characteristics into an image of the nation – was reflected in the folk revival movement. The revival groups have been documented as early as the late 19th century, while the first half of the 20th century saw an increasing number of people recreating folk music and dances

10. Skalníková, *Kladensko*, 286.

which they saw as endangered and disappearing. With the seizure of power by the communists, this movement had gained new energy and turned into a new direction. Existing ensembles were transformed and new ones were founded under the patronage of state companies or factories. Besides the large number of small local ensembles, large state ensembles were founded to provide music and dance for large audiences and to represent the socialist folk culture abroad, as was the case of the Czechoslovak State Ensemble of Folk Song and Dance which existed between 1948 and 1991.

The process of creating a new repertory of songs reflecting the new social and political situation – already mentioned in connection with the Roma – was applied to folk songs in general. For some time, many folk ensembles were performing songs in which young men were riding not a horse but a new tractor and their shirts were not decorated with flower motives but with a red scarf – a symbol of socialist youth. However, this trend did not last long as people grew tired of it, leaving only few songs that became a stable part of the repertory.

The procedure of creating a national image from small regional pieces also found its expression in folklore festivals, of which the most important was the one in Strážnice, founded in 1946 and continuing until today. These festivals were also meant to present regional cultures as pieces making up national unity which in turn was a part of the international unity.

One can find in contemporary films several examples of folk music as representation of the new nation. There are numerous movies having the folk music and dance as an important topic, but probably none of them is more instructive than *Zítřka se bude tančit všude* [Tomorrow they will be dancing everywhere], made in 1952. Folklore revival becomes the central theme here. The movie, with a screenplay written by Vladimír Vlček, Božena Šochová, and Pavel Kohout, was the directorial debut of Vladimír Vlček.¹¹ Many actors from this movie were later to become stars of Czechoslovak film industry. Although the film focuses on the traditional folk music, its soundtrack consists mainly of orchestral music by Ludvík Poděšť, a successful composer of mass songs, the typical musical genre of the socialist culture in the 1950s.

Zítřka se bude tančit všude is a story of a small folk revival ensemble on its way from the modest beginnings to the grand finale on the international youth festival in Berlin. The dramatic plot involves two members of the ensemble who want to corrupt the team's efforts. One of them even confesses that he wants to have the ensemble to himself, despite his contempt for dance and ethnography, seeing it as an opportunity to avoid having a real job. They discuss their plotting, hardly accidentally, to the sound of American jazz so that the music reinforces the opposition

11. Pavel Kohout, who wrote the lyrics for the title song, was a convinced Stalinist in 1950s, but changed his views during the so-called Prague spring, then during the 1970s he was forced into exile.

between healthy socialist culture and decadent Western art. Despite their efforts, there is finally a happy ending with a staged carnival celebration with masks including an atom bomb and a multicultural community of people celebrating the fact that in Communism it is possible to be nationalist and internationalist at the same time.

The film shows how the regional cultures were highly prized and on the other hand quickly dissolved in a mix if necessary. One of the messages of the film is to show the shift of the protagonists' approach from cold and academic interest in the folk song and dance to closer contact with the people and with their culture. The film follows the dancers on their excursion to the Valašsko region in the eastern part of the Czech Republic to learn authentic songs from village people only to see later a performance mixing costumes, songs, and dances from every part of Czechoslovakia with a traditional ensemble on stage pretending to play while we hear a symphonic orchestra.

Conclusion

Both the Kladensko monograph and the movie *Zítra se bude tančit všude* show mechanisms that were used by communist ideology to reshape the folk culture to fit the needs of the politics. The celebrated "culture of the people" was filtered, dissected, and reassembled into a new form to create a mosaic the particular pieces of which were interchangeable. The article by Stalin, referred to by Zdeněk Nejedlý earlier, sums this up and provides an explanation of the communists' idea of the paradox between national and international:

Under the conditions of a dictatorship of the proletariat within a single country, the rise of cultures national in form and socialist in content has to take place, so that when the proletariat wins in the whole world and socialism is a part of ordinary life, these cultures will merge into one culture, socialist both in form and in content with a common language – this is the dialectics of Lenin's approach to the issue of national culture.¹²

When looking at the culture of socialist countries, it is sometimes hard to discern what was a spontaneous result of the creativity of the people and what was a politically motivated manipulation. Both elements were at work in folk music research and in folk music revival. Understanding them may help us to better understand the development of traditional folk culture and the relation between research, culture, and politics.

12. Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National Question* (International Publishers: University of Virginia, 1942), 195.