

When Even Listening to Music, Dancing, and Escaping from Auditoriums is Educational. Ethnomusicology at the Faculty of Humanities

According to the head of the program doc. Zuzana Jurková, the evolution of ethnomusicology at our faculty is progressing like a partly-controlled improvisation. “I started out with just a couple of overview courses. Now it is an all-round proper program. This semester we opened 15 courses, out of which eight were led in English by lecturers such as prof. Shelemay from Harvard University, prof. Reyes from Columbia University, or prof. Radulescu from Universitatea Națională de Muzică in Romania. Last year, we published a book entitled *Pražské hudební světy*, whose English version *Prague Soundscapes* was distributed by Chicago University Press. And we also held an international conference whose materials are in print at the moment,” says docent Jurková adding that in her opinion, “There is no university-level ethnomusicological program in Europe that is this dynamic.” Ethnomusicological courses at FoH predominantly focus on the music of the marginalized and on urban spaces. The approximate form of education of future ethnomusicologists is indicated by the recently concluded summer school of Jewish music.

Jewish Musics

“It was amazing to come back to Prague, where I had already spent some ten days a couple of years ago. I am enjoying the

contact and discussions with students outside of my home university,” diplomatically stated Kay Kaufman Shelemay, Professor of Ethnomusicology at Harvard University, in our short interview. The block course led by Shelemay entitled *Jewish Cultures through their Musics* was held between 16 and 22 May at Charles University’s Faculty of Humanities. Using the music of various Jewish communities (Ethiopian, Syrian, and American) for her material, prof. Shelemay focuses on a couple of general topics, for instance on the role of music in our conception of memory. For her, to be an anthropologist means “both an obligation and a privilege to discover the borders between different cultures.” Some students, including myself, thought of this course as sort of a challenge, for it gave them an opportunity to meet the author of *Soundscapes*, the book we translated (and some still do) as part of our Language Skills Exam.

Block Course at Times in Hebrew and with a Yarmulke on Your Head

The course began on Saturday by visiting the Jerusalem Synagogue in Prague. We had an exceptional opportunity to personally witness a part of an orthodox Jewish service during which men read from the five Books of Moses, a scroll of Torah. It is uncommon to allow access to people from outside of the community. We put on our disposable yarmulkes and the men and women separated. Separating men and women for the service by a symbolic see-through wall is part of the tradition of Orthodox Judaism. Thanks to this experience, many of us discovered how little we could speak Hebrew (the whole service was held in this language),

that books can also be read from right to left, and that even Orthodox Jews like to chitchat about profane things during the service.

The acquired anthropological knowledge is, of course, much less banal than it may seem from my description so far – even though it stems from the analysis of the same banal sense of everydayness. The subsequent theoretical class we attended in the afternoon helped us to make more sense of the proceedings in the synagogue, as well as to put these experiences and mechanisms in the broader context of Jewish cultures. Thanks to prof. Shelemay's ethnographic experience with a community of Ethiopian Jews, we had a chance to see how abstract terms such as ritual, identity, memory or community stem from behavior legitimized by practice. Our knowledge thereof gave sense to the fact that in the synagogue that morning, some women had their heads covered while others did not. And to the question why the men counted themselves over and over again, and if there were less than ten of them present they could not continue reading the holy text. It gave us the reason why a little girl was allowed to dally under the altar in the men's part. And revealed how (un)substantiated the first impression that women never get involved in religious life is.

The Theresienstadt Ghetto Is at Peace

In Theresienstadt, the Sunday of 17 May belonged to the memorial meeting commemorating the last execution which took place here on 2 May 1945, virtually only several days before the liberation. After a lecture given by docent Jurková on the topic of Jewish musical life both in interwar Czechoslovakia and in the

Theresienstadt concentration camp, we headed into this fort town for a concert by House of Freedom. It is strange how much Theresienstadt does *not* seem repulsive nowadays. Bathed in the spring sunlight, it does not seem like the sort of place where dozens of people would die every single day. Visitors enjoy the idyllic sights not dissimilar to those from the propagandist films made for representatives of the Red Cross, whose purpose was to show them how great the life of Jews was during the war. Nevertheless, when an excerpt from the children's opera *Brundibár* by Krása was played in the museum, it was difficult not to feel a lump in one's throat.

The main concert took place in the Theresienstadt riding-hall. The roof of the building has a beautiful frame-work which, considering the occasional hungry peeping is home to at least several avian families. The concert was mainly dedicated to the musical output of composers who had been through the ghetto themselves. The disturbing and emotionally broken pieces composed by Viktor Ullmann and others were played by an orchestra and accompanied by commentaries setting the music into the context of its time. The only downside is that the organizers forgot about the Czech language. Those in the audience who did not speak English unfortunately did not understand a word. The hall was quickly brimming with people, mostly foreigners. But there was also a couple of living witnesses of the Theresienstadt hell. For instance, I saw Helga Hošková-Weissová, who spent the nightmare of her ghetto childhood drawing pictures, and who was one of the few lucky ones to survive Auschwitz. Apart from the Czech Republic, her childhood drawings have

been exhibited in Austria, Switzerland, Germany, Italy and the United States.

The following week, lectures were held about *pizmonim*, the traditional musical genre of Syrian Jews which records the memories of the whole community, about Leonard Bernstein and his Bostonian Jewish roots, about Czech Jewish communities, and also about more abstract terms such as identity, memory, and community. We had a chance to visit Jewish cemeteries, Jewish dance classes, or – for all of its depressing success – an exhibition about the historical context of the work of Viktor Ullmann.

The Faculty of Ethnomusicological Studies

The intensive course ended on Thursday, and I have to pose the question if similarly experiential and multimedia forms of education should not be a standard practice at all universities. According to doc. Jurková, it seems that the FoH department of ethnomusicology is indeed taking

this approach, “Right now we are following up with the so-called Small Summer School focusing on Romany music. My dear friend prof. Speranta Radulescu is expected to arrive. She has amazing experiences from the field and has managed to tape the most phenomenal field recordings I know. In June, we have already scheduled two previously tested block courses led by prof. Adelaida Reyes from Columbia University. Prof. Reyes is not only an incredibly kind person, but also one of the greatest intellectuals I know. Kay Shelemay, who is her former student, has this to say about her, ‘Everything I know I learned from Adelaida.’” The Small Summer School of Romany music took place before this article was published. I and colleagues of mine, mostly students coming to Prague through erasmus program, received free guest passes to the Romany music festival called Khamoro, so from Monday to Saturday we familiarized ourselves with Romany music from all around the world. Sometimes it truly is great to be a student.

Jaromír Mára

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