MYTH OF ROMANI MUSIC IN PRAGUE

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Abstract: ***In today's Prague one can find a great variety of musical events and recordings labeled as Romani/Gypsy music – from classical music with "Gypsy" themes to* romano hip hop. *For meaningful understanding and organization of it, the article uses both the basic ethnomusicological model of Alan P. Merriam (1964) and Kay Kaufman Shelemay's (2006) concept of* soundscapes. *With their help, four "musical worlds" – soundscapes – are presented: the romantic image that non-Roma have of Roma; Romani coffee house bands; traditional Romani* bašaviben*, that is, playing for their own entertainment, influenced by popular music; and emerging Romani hip hop. Each of these worlds – however they influence each other – is at the same time internally coherent and thus it is easy to follow the connections among the original purpose of this type of music, the behavior of the musicians and the public, and musical sound.***

Key words: ***myth, Gypsy – Romani music, soundscapes.***

I. Myth – music

In the following text I discuss the myth of Romani music in Prague. For the majority of readers the first association with the expression "myth" will probably be something unreal, opposing reality (whatever we understand by "reality"), some sort of chimera, and thus, in connection with Romani music, perhaps what non-Roma naively and erroneously imagine by the term "Romani music." It would be possible to present many examples; a striking one from the last ethnomusicological conference: Speranta Radulescu submitted two pieces of music by two famous non-Romani composers intended as explicit "representations" of Romani music: Ravel's Rhapsody *Tzigane* and the introductory section of Enescu's *Impressions*, for the perceptions of Romani musicians. Neither one of them perceived them at all as "Gypsy" (RADULESCU 2009).

This text, indeed, only partially deals with non-Romani concepts of Romani music. The introductory thoughts are, however, different: they discuss the phenomenon of myth and music in general, their bases and relationship, or more precisely, closeness. My basic concept of myth differs from that folk concept of myth as a "chimera." It is much closer to the concepts of the classics of Mircea Eliade and, especially, Claude Lévi-Strauss. As is clear from the following sentences, in this understanding, striking similarities, almost a twin relation of the music and the Lévi-Strauss myth, arise.

The first, basic, most striking and very surprising parallel in their relations is the realm of concepts, that is, the notions about what myth and music actually are. In the introduction to his Mythologica, Lévi-Strauss does not deal too long with the definition or delimitation of myth (which, by the way, is also typical of the ethnomusicological approach to music). Basically it is concerned with the factual narrative of some sort of events, often of a sacral character, which approaches not only the horizon, but also the meaning of the world[1], but the author, without too much hesitation, also includes in his research folk tales, legends, and pseudo-historical traditions (1983:4). At any rate, the essence is crucial: Myth (like – in my opinion – music) is, according to Lévi-Strauss, composed of concrete cultural material which, when properly analyzed, reveals the existence of laws (of the mind) operating at the deeper level (p. 10). These laws, elsewhere called the logic of sensory qualities or a code, have an absolute nature. *This code, like the others, has neither been invented nor brought in from without. It is inherent in mythology itself, where we simply discover its presence* (p. 12). Furthermore, these laws *become mutually convertible and therefore simultaneously acceptable to several different subjects; the pattern of those conditions takes on the character of an autonomous object, independent of any subject* (p. 11).

In contrast to ethnographers, who describe or trace motifs, Lévi-Strauss, equipped with his transcendental conviction, has the ambition *to contribute to better knowledge of objectified thought and its mechanisms* (p. 13).

In the whole second half of his extensive introduction – "Overture" – Lévi-Strauss devotes himself to music, its concept and mainly the *problem... of the fundamental causes of the initially surprising affinity between music and myth* (p. 15). ... Music, from his point of view,... *operates according to two grids. One is physiological – that is, natural. The other grid is cultural: it consists of*

[1] See flap of the Czech version of *Mythologica* 2006.

a scale of musical sounds, of which the number and the intervals vary from one culture to another. The system of intervals provides music with an initial level of articulation, which is a function not of the relative heights of the notes ... but of the hierarchical relations among them on the scale ... (p. 16).

Particularly impressive is his poetic and many-layered expression of the famous ethnomusicological postulate that "music is made by listeners": ... *music and mythology bring man face to face with potential objects of which only the shadows are actualized, with conscious approximations (a musical score and a myth cannot be more) of inevitably unconscious truths which follow from them...Thus the myth and the musical work are like conductors ... whose audience became the silent performers.* (pp. 17–18)

On the author's clarification of the character of musical "grids," concretely their physiological "objectivity," and also arguing for the use of musically-analytical methods common in western musicology, in the analysis of myths, his little knowledge of musically-ethnographic material of non-European origin is obvious, and also his imprisonment in the contemporary European myth of music, which will be discussed later. Otherwise he would know that the bearers of information are not necessarily intervals, but, for example, timbre, and formal analysis, at least of this type, which is used in an analysis of Wagner's or Debussy's music is not relevant for the Saami *joik* or the singing of Brazilian Bororó Indians (with whose myth he begins his book). Not in vain is Lévi-Strauss considered to be a great ethnologist, but he is not a great (ethno) musicologist despite his knowledge of musical theory and his evidently great experience with listening to music.

Although Lévi-Strauss's instructions on the use of music for acquisition with "objectivized thought" or "codes" and their mechanisms are useless (or at least have not been used successfully), their concept is close to my way of thinking. In contrast to the majority of contemporary musicologists (who, however, mostly do not think in such categories) and ethnomusicologists (for whom music is mainly, if not exclusively, a cultural product), I understand music, or, more precisely, its sound (because ethnomusicologists and other groups also attribute other aspects to it which will be discussed below) as a doublet[2]. One of its faces is cultural – it is a system of (sound) symbols created and

[2] The hierarchical arrangement of both components seems probable: I presume that it is a question of culturally specific expression of an absolute principle (or absolute principles). However, because I am not able to argue concretely to the advantage of this hierarchicalness, I hold onto the vaguer expression "doublet."

understandable in a given culture. The existence of the second – hidden – face is pointed out by several facts. Of them the most important is undoubtedly that music, mainly such an unnecessary thing, is a cultural universal. Just as for myth, for music it is true that *it has no obvious practical function... it is not directly linked with a different kind of reality, which is endowed with a higher degree of objectivity than its own and whose injunctions it might therefore transmit to minds...* (LÉVI-STRAUSS 1983:10). And is it not a fact that something apparently unnecessary exists always and everywhere, and is thus a cultural universal, evident proof of fulfillment of a very pressing (although meanwhile hidden) need?

Another very striking parallel between myth and music is the transformation of time, the stepping out of ordinary time and the establishment of one's own. Eliade's *in illo tempore,* during the sacral times of the beginning, which primarily characterize myth, is actually applicable to music in the very same way. Not only that the first note of a symphony – and, even more, the overture to an opera – creates a new sound world with its own color space and language, but mainly with its own "life" tempo. This is true in exactly the same way, if not more so, for techno sets[3] and even for the most stupid and most commercial pop clip: its first note, first pulses create a new "first" beginning.[4]

After I pointed out the resemblance of such apparently different phenomena as myth and music, that is, of their ability to transform time and mainly of their dual character – cultural and "eternal" (which is approachable only by this cultural face) – I must still specify my understanding of these terms. As for myth (which I am not dealing with here too deeply) I must add only that, apart from narration, it must also have to do with important and further sustentative forming thought (thoughts).

The second note has to do with the cultural face of music. In the western concept, we tend to objectivize our understanding: music is for us a sound phenomenon. However, ethnomusicology in the last nearly half century tends more and more to the concept of music mainly as human activity. The basis of this concept is the triple model of Alan P. Merriam.

3 Vast sound areas, mainly electrically generated sounds, so very different from common, "natural" sounds, and also a special, separate place and its visual accessories evoke another world with different time *par excellence*.

4 Lévi-Strauss deals with these problems in perhaps too poetic a way on pp. 15-16.

In one of the most influential ethnomusicological books – *Anthropology of Music* (1964) – Merriam presented a research model which shifts the understanding of music as an object toward the anthropological point of view. Music thus, according to him, is not primarily a sound object, but a culturally conditioned human activity, and therefore, when researching music, it is necessary to take into consideration *human and analytical evaluation ... relevant aspects of social sciences and the humanities and a variety of aspects of music – symbolic, esthetic, etc.* (MERRIAM 1964:35). The most apparent analytical level is musical sound itself. We are usually used to considering it as "music itself." However it is apparent that musical sound is dependent on a whole row of factors to which it is possible to give the overall term human behavior: the tension of the vocal cords, the vibrata of musicians' fingers on strings, and this again to the reactions of the audience, not excluding music critics.

However neither is this second layer – human behavior in relation to music – coincidental. On the contrary. It is influenced by the most varied notions, concepts that are connected with music, more closely or more loosely, and can concern relations of emotions and music or evaluations of emotions generally, but also concepts about the origin of music (and thus its values and meaning).

At the very basis of the difference of various music expressions stands the question of exactly what music is, that is, the concept of the phenomenon of music. In our culture we are accustomed to start out from its sound component. The majority of western musicologists would define music approximately as sound structure with esthetic information. Neither on that basis, however, do they agree with the point of view of ethnomusicologists (whose viewpoint in the past decades has shifted toward human activity)[5] nor with the viewpoint of those outside of western civilization who think about music. That is to say, the category of the esthetic is irrelevant to many of them. If music for Africans is often primarily "music making," i.e., social activity (in which their concept approaches the concept of ethnomusicologists), which by coincidence has a sound shape, then it is not surprising that that sound shape is different every time because many, for example, recreational (but also ritual) activities

[5] It is understood, of course, that the camp of ethnomusicologists is not unified either. Bruno Nettl with the wisdom of a Nestor of the discipline in one of his last texts presents concurrently both lines: Mantle Hood's musicological with emphasis on the sound phenomenon and Merriam's anthropological: *Ethnomusicology is , on one hand, the study of world musical cultures from the comparative perspective and, on the other, it is an anthropological study of music.* Nettl 2002: 3.

also proceed differently every time. The fact that western culture introduced for that reality of variability the special term "improvisation," witnesses to its exceptionality. However to use such a term is somehow quite irrelevant in the place where it is a question of one of the basic features of musical practice.

And if for Australian Aborigines (like for some Amazon Indians) music is a certain way of transformation into another type of being or a way of transformation in time, not only is the esthetic aspect irrelevant, but the resulting sound shape of that process of transformation, that is, the resulting "song" – the same one – could differ from performance to performance.

There are numerous examples of the impact of the concept on the sound of music. That it is actually musical sound, like the activity around it, as a result of human concepts and thoughts about music is not particularly surprising. In a further part I will try to clarify how the western concept of music has formed in the past approximately two centuries and what kind of impact it has had on "music itself."

II. The myth of music [6]

In 1923, Leoš Janáček (1854–1928) composed his first string quartet, the "*Kreutzer Sonata*." Although originally (based on sketches of the composition worked on starting in 1909), he wrote the composition for violin and piano, eventually he wrote it for a classic quartet. This quartet of strings – two violins, viola and cello – was used by composers for more than one hundred years as a "diaristic" ensemble, to which it was possible to entrust the most intimate thoughts. Besides, the next Janáček string quartet, one of his last compositions, was called "Intimate Letters" (originally "Love Letters") and it was the most emotional declaration of the old composer to his last love, Kamila Stösslová. Indeed, it is not possible to imagine a more appropriate interpreter for the most personal message: the homogenous instrumental combination evokes the impression of uninterrupted intimacy, string instruments capable of reacting to the player's slightest impulse seem perfectly ideal for the expression of those most subtle emotions. Janáček subscribed to this concept. He took over the classical instrumental combination and also the common four-movement form. However, with individual parts he handled his way – not only in

6 I hope the ethnomusicological, not musicological character of this text is evident.

the field of tempo, but in his entire musical language: his work with musical motifs[7], harmony and generally work with color[8], and primarily a maximum of expression – each tone as if it expressed the most varied shades of joy or sadness, despair or resignation. As Milan Kundera (2004:26) writes precisely (and expressively): for Janáček only tone that is an expression, that is an emotion, has a right to exist. Janáček's string quartet, the "*Kreutzer Sonata*" was already the third link in the chain. The chain, which very clearly encompasses a change of concept of music during the last century and a half.

At its beginning, in 1803, Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) the last classical composer with a step forward toward romanticism, composed the "*Kreutzer Sonata"* for violin and piano. The composition is famous for its technical demands; however, despite the fact that Beethoven's musical language was no longer classicistically symmetrical like his predecessors, only rarely today would this sonata be called unusually emotional or even passionate.

The second link of the chain is the eponymous novella by Leo Tolstoy (1829–1910). One of the basic themes here is passion, against which the narrator of the book argues for his life story, in which passion at first pretended, then let out like a genie from a bottle and nourished by music ruins lives. At the end of the book, the main character, emotionally (understand erotically) aroused by Beethoven's composition, during which she accompanies on the piano a friend with whom she begins an extra-marital relationship: the husband – similarly emotionally aroused – kills her.

Tolstoy appears here like a prophet warning against the destructive effects of passion, here passion evoked and strengthened by the music. Too late. In 1889, there was no longer the strength that would conquer the idea, maximally developed and supported by romanticism, about both sovereignty and the "sanctification" of emotion/passion – and also of their close connection to music.

Even if we did not know anything about Janáček's such romantically empathetic relation to the heroines of his operas Katya, Jenufa and Emilia, and even if we did not know the line from his correspondence relating to his first string quartet ("I had in mind a poor woman, abused, beaten, beaten to death, as the Russian writer Tolstoy wrote about her in his Kreutzer Sonata[9], from the first

7 Janáček uses some themes of the Beethoven sonata to work with them in his own distinct way, almost as with living beings.

8 In the fourth movement there is, for example, a passage which is markedly reminiscent of the last scene of Katya Kabanova, the solo aria of Katya and the chorus backstage.

9 Quoted according to: Havlík 2000.

notes of the music – the painful chord of the string instruments, and in general the entire Janáček language, full of dynamic and tempo changes which is the very essence of emotion – clearly convey whose side he is on. Away with Apollonian discipline! Feeling/passion/emotion is everything.[10]

It is difficult to imagine something else: Janáček's personality as if it were the embodiment perhaps of all the main romantic ideas: from the close connection to folk culture through maximally personal and creative individualism and long-term social non-recognition to numerous emotional outbursts at women. (By the way, Janáček's *Kreutzer Sonata* was not the last in the above-mentioned chain; in 2000 the Dutch writer Margriet de Moor wrote a romantic novel with the same title, referring to all of its "predecessors.")

But why do I present Janáček and the whole chain leading to the rise of his first string quartet in the context of music and myth? (My own interest in Janáček's music is certainly not a sufficient reason to set him apart in an essay about myth of music in an urban environment.) For two reasons. The first of them is the assumption that music DEFINITELY DOES NOT HAVE TO BE a "language of feeling," but it may be almost anything else (as will be clear later in this text). Thus the connection of music and emotion or even passion is one of those petrified ideas (often garbed in symbols) that are taken for granted even by Lévi-Strauss (18). For example, all concert- or opera-house programs confirm its dominance.

In support of the assertion concerning the possible diversity of musical concepts many examples are available. From European tradition, think of the Gregorian chant, the modest music (and personality) of Joseph Haydn, Johann Sebastian Bach with his contemporary relevant approach to music praising the glory of God (... *as with all music, so in the basso continuo there should be nothing else but the final and last goal which is God's glory and recreation of thought. Where this is not respected, no real music will arise, but only hellish noise, and bad fiddling will sound* – J. S. Bach 1738 – viz. Michels 2000: 101*),* and post-romantic ideas: the mathematical understanding of music of the serialists or the architectonic understanding of Ianis Xenakis.

If we looked around beyond the border of western art music, we would find even more different concepts: music as sound realization of the heavenly order,

[10] I also agree, however, with Kundera's characterizing Janáček as an "antiromantic" – but in the strict sense of Kundera, who understands romanticism as a false, "romantic" view of the world.

that is, of the universal order in China; music as a kind of transformation from one type of being to another among the above-mentioned Amazon Indians; as bringing into the present memories of people or places among the Northern European Saami or as an objective device for reaching coveted "illumination" of thought – among many others.

A second reason for the introduction of the Janáček example is the illustration of the complexity of the musical phenomenon according to the Merriam model. Music, at least classical, has in the past century become an event which is excluded from the common, profane (in the romantic concept of the low and pragmatic) world, and it has reached the "higher" world of "sacred" emotions. This concept can well be read in the sphere of human behavior relating to music, for example, of a festive environment in which music is performed, or from the clothing of the musicians and listeners. (Tailcoats or morning coats of musicians during afternoon concerts sometimes strike the eye.) Another striking related characteristic is the sophistication of the musical language. The creation of a musical work is not commonly accessible to amateurs – it demands special training, just like the performing of the pieces these specially trained composers created. Extraordinariness, exclusion from normal life is expressed here, both with technical demands on the performer (who thus stands as a romantic hero outside of the majority society) and also a special "unnatural" quality of musical sound (one is strongly aware of it when one unexpectedly hears opera singing: in a daily environment a surprising sound, unlike anything else).

In the resulting musical sound – both, to a certain extent, contradictory tendencies – are present in our concept of music: disciplined refinement on one hand, and declared – and, in the framework of the presented convention presented – emotionality on the other hand.

Into these starting thoughts about the character of music in general and its form in Western classical tradition specifically it is now possible to insert a picture of what is presented in Prague today as Romani/Gypsy music and dance.

III. The myth of Romani music in Prague

As Romani music, I label everything which, in Prague 2008 (I did my research from May to November) was called Romani/Gypsy/Gipsy[11] music (song, dance)[12]. In other words, I am interested in what Praguers imagine Romani/Gypsy music to be or what they call it. An attempt at possible delimitation through the genre or style emitting from our preconceptions would necessarily founder, as we point out not only from collected material, but also older experience of other authors[13]. My point of departure was publicly available materials (cultural programs, flyers, Internet ads) announcing live performances. It is surely possible that I was unaware of some performances, but I do not supposed that that happened too often and that the resulting picture is too incomplete.

The other field that interested me was available recordings, in whose title or genre category appeared the word Romani/Gypsy/Gipsy.

So what was performed as Gypsy/Romani music in Prague?

1. Regularly repeated performances

a) Once a year – the last week in May – the World Romani *Khamoro* festival takes place in Prague. It is one of the five category A metropolitan festivals, like, e.g., the Prague Spring. In 2008 *Khamoro's* tenth anniversary took place May 25–31. Besides seven concerts (the premiere with two Czech groups, three called Gypsy jazz, three concerts of traditional Romani music; in them there were 13 bands from eight countries), there were also a Music and Minorities international ethnomusicological conference, a Spanish flamenco workshop in the Zambra studio[14], four exhibitions and two film showings.[15]

b) Once a week – on Sundays – the popular Lesser Quarter music club Popocafépetl presents so-called *Gipsy Nights*, during which two rompop bands, *Bengas* and *Gitans,*[16] alternate.

11 In Czech I looked for the word cikánský/romský.

12 In this text I am not going into an analysis of the use of the expressions "Gypsy/Romani"; I am convinced, however, that this is a promising research field.

13 E.g. Reyes 1982.

14 We will also discuss the Zambra studio in connection with Gypsy dance courses; flamenco courses are not usually advertised in connection with Romani/Gypsy music.

15 For details, viz www.khamoro.cz.

16 For details, viz www. popocafepetl.cz.

c) Also once a week – on Thursdays – in the Zambra dance center in Vinohrady women from 21 to 48 years old meet and eagerly learn "Gypsy dancing."[17]

d) Every week from Wednesday to Sunday in the restaurant "U sedmi andělů" on Jilská Street in the Old Town there is a trio of Roma who play violin, cimbalom and double bass. Evenings are advertised as *Today Live Gipsy Music*.

2. One-time performances

a) In August the Theater without Balustrades reprised[18] the musical *Gypsies Go to Heaven*. To a great extent the performance copies the famous Russian film from 1976 which, besides, can still be bought on DVD. A CD of the performance has been published with the songs of the show. Ida Kelarová is credited in the program as the author of the musical arrangement; her band *Romano Rat* also accompanies the singers on the CD.

b) As part of the "Prague Autumn" classical music festival there were, on September 20 and 21, three concerts of the Budapest Gypsy Symphony Orchestra, also called A Hundred Gypsy Violins. This orchestra has been part of "Prague Autumn" every year since 2003.[19]

c) On October 18 the Strašnické Theater premiered a "dance-theater project/social specific theater"[20] – "Gypsy Suite." In the performance are heard several songs by the late Romani singer Jan Áču Slepčík; the performance was dedicated to him.

d) On November 8, there took place in the Abaton club in Libeň the autumn part of the Sázava Fest, a well-known musical festival (the main part of which was held in the summer). As the main performer, the popular Romani rapper Gipsy.cz appeared here with a repertoire from his two latest CDs.

Commonly available musical recordings[21]**:**

In the category of "Romani music" I found recordings of a favorite Slovak band

17 I have details about the Gypsy dance course at Zambra from my student Pavlina Holcová, who not only takes dancing lessons there, but is also carrying out research about Gypsy dance for her bachelor's thesis.

18 The premiere took place on April 15, 2004.

19 After the first concert there appeared in *Romano Džaniben* an interview with the band leader and first violinist, Sándor Rigó-Buffó, viz *Romano Džaniben*, jevend 2003, pp. 208–211.

20 Quoted from the invitation: To the question of what it means, the authors of the production explained that it is a theatrical work which strikingly reflects a social theme, here the Romani question (from the historiographic and comparative perspective)"

21 I looked for recordings that would fulfill two requirements: 1) they can be bought immediately in physical form 2) they can be bought at non-specialized CD shops.

*Diabolské husle, "*Devil's violin of Berky-Mrenica: Gypsy Dance" and "Devil's violin: Greetings from Slovakia."

The term "Gypsy" is connected with two performers of Dvořák and Bendl Gypsy songs and Gypsy melodies (Roman Janál, Magdalena Kožená), a Brno funky band *Gulo čar* CD entitled *Gipsy Goes to Hollywood,* altogether seven different recordings of the French *Gipsy Kings,* the pop band *Triny* with its *Gypsy Streams* CD, three CDs of the above-mentioned rapper *Gipsy.cz,* that is, *Rýmy a blues*, *Romano hip hop* and *Reprezent*, and also Lagréne Birelli, an exponent of Gypsy jazz.

Labeled as "romano" are the CD *Staré slzy,* one of the latest CDs of Ida Kelarová and *Romano Rat,* a mixture of genres and performers of the "Most beautiful Gypsy songs/ *Jekhšukareder Romane giľa,"* and *Gipsy Way,* the newest CD of the violinist Pavel Šporcl and *Romano stilo.*

Besides the above-mentioned categories, but clearly presented as Romani music, are also the two latest recordings of Věra Bílá and her group *Kale* (who, however, have not played together since 2005), *Rovava* and *C'est comme ça*, and also a CD entitled *Dža* by the *Bengas* band.

Soundscapes

At first glance it seems that the collected materials represent a whole continuum of possible musical approaches to the "Gypsy" topic. Despite this, I will dare to try to sort them out. As its starting point, I will use the contemporary concept of *soundscapes* of Kay Kaufman Shelemay. The resulting groups show a certain coherence, from the basic concepts, through human behavior and to the resulting musical sound. At the same time, however, it is true that the basic feature of *soundscapes*, relating to their continual variability, is their mutual influence.

The term *soundscape* is found in relevant literature with two basic meanings. The first is the musical-ecological, close to the idea and term *landscape*. The initial concept of its founder, the Canadian composer and theoretician Raymond Murray Schafer, is the perception of sounds (that is, any sounds at all, not necessarily meaningfully organized; meaningful organization is, however, considered to be the basic assumption of music) in a certain place, including their meanings and relations.[22]

For the organization of data relating to Romani music in Prague, there is, however, another more appropriate concept, the one of the Harvard ethno-

22 For details, including contemporary literature, viz Griger 2007.

musicologist Kay Kaufman Shelemay (2006). She uses the term *soundscape* in a more abstract and dynamic meaning and compares it to *seascape,* that is, sea scenery with its unpredictable changeability and multi-dimensionality. In addition she even injects into it the element of change in time, which is lacking in Merriam:

...here we will more often compare a soundscape to a seascape, which provides a more flexible analogy to music's ability both to stay in place and to move in the world today, to absorb changes in its content and performance styles, and to continue to accrue new layers of meanings. (p. XXXIV).

In the material that I presented I see three *soundscapes* that have existed for some time and one newly forming (at least in the Czech lands). I label it according to the original performer-listener pair. This pair, however, determined the goal of the music performed – and it formed (besides other things) the basic features of musical language.

Who for whom as key

We can locate a soundscape most easily through an encounter with a specific musical performance... [The best tangible traces of soundscape in human behavior and musical sound are there. Here one can deduct much about basic concepts.] To better understand a soundscape, we need to attend repeated events and to gather a range of additional information about their sound, setting, and significance. (Kaufman Shelemay 2006: xxxv)

1. Gadje for gadje about Roma

Magdalena Kožená: Songs My Mother Taught Me

Magdalena Kožená, today undoubtedly the most famous Czech opera and concert singer abroad, chose for her "personal" CD songs by composers from her native land. Near the beginning are three songs from the famous Dvořák cycle Gypsy Melodies, op. 55: "Songs My Mother Taught Me," "The Strings are Tuned" and "And the Wood is Quiet All Around."

On the recording can be heard, first, the mournful motif of the piano; then it is repeated and developed by the highly cultivated voice of the famous singer (so unlike untrained or folk singing); she sings of the feelings of a Gypsy mother, song, music and dance, sadness, nature and freedom. It is easy to imagine a live

performance during which this beautiful and always perfectly dressed woman leans on a shiny concert grand piano played by a man in a black jacket. The audience in the hall, dressed somewhat less elegantly than the performers, listens quietly; someone has on his lap a program in which he can check the text (which is not always easy to understand). For the majority of the listeners the music undoubtedly evokes some emotions, apart from the fact that the listeners are enthusiastic about the singer's performance and at the end they applaud enthusiastically.

This *soundscape* is undoubtedly the oldest of those discussed: Goethe (1749–1832) and Pushkin (1799–1837) had already written about what Gypsies experienced (more precisely, how non-Gypsies imagine what Gypsies experienced). The image of Gypsies/Roma ideally corresponded to the romantic values of the time: passion, abandon – and frequent professional connection to music, which in the contemporary point of view meant their status as "artists," strengthened this romantic image even more. It is not surprising that Gypsy literary inspiration appealed so much to the romantic composers Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) and Mikhail Glinka (1804–1857) to begin with – and in our times ending, e.g., with Sylvie Bodorová (b. 1954) and her composition *Giľa Rome* (1980). Besides, the famous Russian film *Gypsies Go to Heaven* (1976), based on the novel/stories, *Makar Chudra* (1892) by Maxim Gorky and his subsequent innumerable variations are proof of the long-lasting popularity of this romantic myth.

The musical language of this *soundscape* is initially closely attached to mainstream musical language: not only do Antonín Dvořák in his songs or Giuseppe Verdi in his operas (Troubadour) not use Romani music idioms, but neither does Janáček in his later The Diary of One Who Disappeared (1916) in the singing of the Gypsy girl Zefka deviate from his musical speech. Specific musical language in connection with Roma appears in the music of Franz Liszt (1811–1886): exotic intervals or scales with augmented second (since his time in musical theory denoted as "Gypsy major" and "Gypsy minor") evokes the romantic image of some extraordinary thing, use of rubato rhythm which is not subjugated to regular meter, again free handling with time. Liszt's relation to the music of the Roma was, however, exceptional, mainly thanks to his connection to Hungarian culture. In it Romani musicians had the exceptional position of bearers and guardians (musically expressed) of the national specificity. Besides this, Liszt could be in relatively close contact with the contemporary expansion of Hungarian "Gypsy bands," whose style of playing he minutely detailed in the first systematic book about the music of the Roma (Liszt 1859).

Liszt's influence is important for this *soundscape* in one more sense: in his welcoming opening with the "foreign." Through him inspiration of the music of the Roma became more or less strong – from Béla Bartók to the above-mentioned "Gypsies Go to Heaven," whose folk-like melodies later became folksongs, mainly among Roma.

The essence of this *soundscape* nevertheless remains emotionally satisfying to listeners more or less accustomed to the idioms of classical music. Therefore, for example, in *Gypsy Suite*, which is dedicated to the memory of the Romani songster Jan Áču Slepčík, his music and singing are not sufficient: for "real" impression the directors had to supplement it with a romantic solo violin played, moreover, by a Rom in red shoes.

2. Roma for gadje
One hundred Gypsy violins
Rudolfinum, September 20, 2008 at 4 p.m.

Within the framework of the "Prague Autumn" classical music festival, in the Rudolfinum, the most prestigious concert hall in Prague, three concerts of the *Budapest Gypsy Symphonic Orchestra, also called One hundred Gypsy violins*[23] are taking place. As every year, all three are sold out in advance, and this is despite the fact that tickets in the orchestra cost about a thousand crowns.

The audience is extraordinarily varied, starting from parents and grandparents with children, to youths to senior citizens. (There are only a few Roma in the auditorium.)

With a ten-minute delay, which is not too common in classical music concerts, 100 musicians, among them two women – in white shirts, black pants or skirts and red or blue vests – arrive on stage. (Later it will become clear that the blue vests belong to the soloists – besides violinists, there are also one clarinet player and one cimbalom player.) For the second half of the evening the players put on classic black suits. Except for nine clarinets, the orchestra contains only string instruments: six large Hungarian cimbaloms, and mainly violins, violas, cellos and double basses.

On the program there are compositions, the majority of which can be heard in classical music concerts, but most often as encores or as "light" concert numbers: Monti's Czardas, Sarasate's *Gypsy Melodies [Zigeunerweisen],* the

23 The orchestra, founded in 1985, was originally called the "100-strong Budapest Gypsy Orchestra".

Budapest Gypsy Symphonic Orchestra. September 20, 2008. Photo by Zuzana Jurková.

Thunder and Lightning polka *or* The *Blue Danube* waltz by Johann Strauss, Jr. *or the Radetsky March* by Johann Strauss, Sr., and Khachaturian's *Saber Dance* from the ballet *Gayaneh*. The second type of compositions are those written by contemporary composers specially for the orchestra (e.g., *Gypsy Fire* by Zoltán Horwath) which show the specific qualities of the orchestra, mainly their instrumental virtuosity balancing on the edge of performability combined with proverbial (perhaps well feigned) temperament.

Numerous members of the audience – those silent performers (of course not silent when standing for enthusiastic ovations in the Rudolfinum) – confirm the constant attraction of the tradition whose roots are in Hungarian and Slovak restaurants and coffee houses of the 19th century. Still today it is possible to find isolated groups with that original, chamber-like appearance in Prague. The context of the city of the 21st century, however, gives it a rather different character and meaning.

Today Live Gipsy Music at 8 p.m.
Restaurant U 7 andělů (Seven Angels), Jilská Street, Old Town,
November 22, 2008

If you type "Live Gypsy music in Prague" into Google, they will not offer you on the top line the Web page of the Romani festival *Khamoro* or some popular Romani group, but "Prague's Best Restaurants."[24] Among these fourteen restaurants, undoubtedly aimed primarily at foreign clientele, twelve of them offer "live music." My personal research, however, revealed that "live Gypsy music" (in any shape) is not offered by any of them. On the Internet advertisement for "Prague's Best Restaurants" the offer of live Gypsy music is clearly part of their image.

"Live Gypsy Music," however, is surely possible to track down in Prague. It is announced on a board (in English) on the door of the *Seven Angels* restaurant, which is in the most historic center of Prague, only a few yards from Old Town Square. It is hard to imagine a place with a greater concentration of foreign tourists – and obviously the announcement is meant for them. The main room to the right of the entrance is evidently supposed to impress you in two ways: its antiquity (above the entrance the date 1392 is emphasized, patinated painting, the whole place with historic [or historicized] furnishings; and luxury (most of the little tables only for two – however, closely lined up so that the impression of *séparé* is hardly convincing; large, richly decorated mirrors reflect the flames of candles; in comparison to the little tables, strikingly large wine glasses...). To this correspond relatively high prices for average food and mainly for drinks.

Among the guests, we are the only Czechs. Couples in ordinary clothing prevail; a group of youths are dining at the larger table. In a little alcove of the main room, at the entrance to the cloakroom, there are three musicians in dark suits and white shirts: a cimbalom player at a large Hungarian pedal instrument; behind him a bass player; in front – nearest the guests – a violinist. He also reacts to the (sparse and lukewarm) reactions of the guests. During one of the breaks I learn in an interview with the musicians that they are brothers from a musical family from the Slovak-Hungarian border.

Their repertoire is very similar to the repertoire of the Budapest Gypsy Symphony Orchestra. The *Radetsky March,* the *Blue Danube* waltz, a melody

24 www.pragueexperience.com/restaurants/highlights/restaurants_live_music.asp (12. 6. 2009).

from *Carmen*, and even among Gypsy bands of this type the popular Jewish *Hava nagiľa*... and, besides all this, jazz compositions and Suk's *Song of Love*.

The *soundscape* around Gypsy coffee-house cimbalom bands (which sometimes play with a clarinet or its metal cousin – the *tárogato* as another melodic instrument) has a rather different character from the former one. The music in it is not art that communicates emotion, but a craft – a craft serving to give the guests of the coffee houses or restaurants a good time. For this purpose is connected an auditorily undemanding repertoire. Listeners value Romani musicians for their perfect technique and then the mastery of their craft (even if an adequate dose of emotion, mediated by Roma as their romanticized incarnation, is also expected). The Romani community traditionally valued its coffee-house musicians for their ability to earn a relatively high financial reward.

In Prague at the beginning of the 21st century, this *soundscape* takes various shapes. Listeners to symphonic music are satisfied with a less demanding repertoire. The violin virtuoso and showman Pavel Šporcl spices up his performances (and discographies) with something unusual, that is, playing along with a real "Gypsy cimbalom band"[25]; their repertoire is easy to predict: Monti, Sarasate, Khachaturian, Strauss... And it also accommodates tourists looking in Prague for "genuine, old-fashioned atmosphere" with which perhaps in their imaginations the Austro-Hungarian coffee-house band can distantly correspond.

3. Roma (not only) for themselves: rompop [26]

Gipsy Nights: *Bengas*

Popocafépetl Club, October 26, 2009 at 8 p.m.

Popocafépetl on Újezd in the Lesser Quarter of Prague has several namesakes, but this is the only one to have regular music programs: on Mondays, Havana Nights; on Fridays and Saturdays, Friday/Saturday Dance Fever; and on Sundays, Gipsy Nights. On these nights two rompop bands – *Gitans* and (the better known) *Bengas* alternate.

The club occupies the whole basement of an old house on the main Lesser Quarter street, right next to an elegant Thai restaurant. But, despite

25 Viz booklet CD Pavel Šporcl + *Romano Stilo*

26 I have already devoted a separate in-depth article to rompop – Jurková 2008.

its attractive location, its interior resembles many of the usual music clubs: unplastered stone walls, bare wooden tables with the club logo. The main room with a bar (where prices are surprisingly low) and only a hint of a stage at the shorter wall; in an alcove, the mixer. The next room is acoustically connected to the main room. On the other side of the staircase, where the music sounds much weaker, there are two quieter, today almost empty rooms, marked as a "wine cellar."

A half hour before the beginning the main room is completely full. Most of the audience are young people between 20 and 25 years old, often in hip hop sweatshirts with hoods, but also in shiny disco tops. In addition to Czech, you can hear English and French (the club is a frequent destination of foreign students who are in Prague on an Erasmus exchange program). Shortly before the announced beginning two groups of Roma arrive and clamor to be seated in front of the stage.

Bengas[27] (Devils) are playing this time with three guitars, one bass guitar, a keyboard and three different sets of percussion instruments. Although the group acknowledge various sources of inspiration, their musical language is relatively homogeneous: a dense fabric of guitar sound; above it solo masculine singing in Romani, the refrains alternating with parallel part singing. There are short instrumental introductions and interludes, in which there may be virtuoso playing. Lucid phrasing, no great dynamic or tempo changes. The musical style of the group is undoubtedly influenced by the *Gipsy Kings*, with whom *Bengas* played in 2004 during their Prague concert.

After 8 p.m. not only are all the places taken (including a few newly brought in tables and room at the bar), but people are also standing between the tables. During the music they sway to the rhythm. After each composition they applaud or whistle favorably. Today *Bengas* are clearly the most popular group playing *rompop*. This term[28] originated in the 70s and refers to a fusion of traditional music that Roma played and sang for themselves with elements of contemporary western popular music, specifically pop music. In the broad stream of *rompop* two main styles loom large. The first of them, reminiscent of the musical expression of ethno-emancipating attitudes, consciously linked to their own local tradition and combining its special characteristic musical elements with elements of international pop music (mainly in the field of

27 Viz www.bengas.net

28 Katalin Kovalcsik (2003) uses synonymously *Roma pop*.

instrumental accompaniment, but also rhythm and its realization...). Pioneers of this style, sometimes labeled as *ethnic mainstream*[29] in Central Europe are the Hungarian *Kalyi Jag*.

Much more popular both among the majority public and, chiefly, among Roma is the style that consciously does not use (at least to such a striking degree) local music idiom, but often lets itself be inspired by other patterns, first and foremost, the enormously popular Spanish *Gipsy Kings*. In the Romani environment this style – both as recorded music and as music actively performed – has the classic function of *bašaviben*, played and sung for their own entertainment, accompanying social gatherings, often connected to dance. In the past two decades, however, *rompop* has also often been discovered in the non-Romani environment: at concerts of world music, in "classical" music clubs such as Popocafépetl, Roxy, etc., but also at high-level events.[30] The spectrum of bands that have turned to it is very broad. One thing that is notable, however, is that if we compare the social background of the groups with their musical language, we come to a remarkable correlation. On one hand there are groups that formed as amateur, generally on a family basis. They played first of all only for themselves and their closest surroundings, and from this local level gradually rose, perhaps even to the international scene. They play mainly their own compositions, and their own musical language – although the musicians acknowledge various influences – has features similar to those described above: a dominating distinctive melody, a "thick" and energetic accompaniment and perfectly "well crafted" mastered part singing, which is mainly made up of parallel melodic lines. This can be reminiscent of the sound realization of what Steward (2005) calls the timeless brotherhood of Roma. The first and most striking representative of this genre in our country is the musical style of Věra Bílá[31] and her accompanying group *Kale* (Blacks)[32] as well as of the East Bohemian *Točkolotoč* and *Terne Čhave* (Young Boys)[33], and the Prague *Bengas*.

A different type are the groups that arose, as it were, from the outside with dramaturgical or commercial intentions. Their members do not have any links

29 HEMETEK 1998. Kovalcsik (2003) labels it *ethnic music culture* (s. 92 n.)

30 In the year 1990, e.g., the rompop group *Točkolotoč* played at the benefit concert "SOS Racism," organized by President Havel and at which Paul Simon performed; in the summer of 2006 *Terne čhave* performed at a garden concert organized by the Senate of the Czech Republic.

31 http://romani.uni-graz.at/rombase/ > personalities > Bílá, Věra; official Web page: www.verabila.com.

32 In the year 2005, however, Věra Bílá and *Kale* separated and today they sing alone.

33 www.ternechave.net

other than musical ones, and musical products (that is, not entertainment realized through music as with the preceding groups) are their *raison d'être*. This very different musical concept is – unsurprisingly – reflected in their musical language, which is much more artistic, with complex sequences of playing with timbre, etc. The different point of departure is also clear in the composition of the repertoire, which contains mostly old Romani songs. In this category are both Ida Kellarová and her projects and mainly the group *Triny* (Three)[34], behind whose rise stands the experienced producer Ivan Král.

The rompop *soundscape* confirms to the attentive listener the realization that the basic concept, or WHAT music represents for the musicians, is straightforwardly and clearly reflected in HOW the music finally sounds – without regard to a uniform label.

4. Romano hip hop

Get a Taste of Europe: performance of the group Gipsy.cz
Wenceslas Square, March 6, 2009

One of the events accompanying the Czech presidency of the European Union was the three-day "Festival of European Regions" Get a Taste of Europe, March 5–7, 2009. It took place at the so-called Golden Cross, that is, the place where the main communication arteries meet: Wenceslas Square and Příkopy. On a small stage on Příkopy you could see and hear folk music groups; a large stage on the lower part of Wenceslas Square was occupied by various genres of popular music.

While the preceding band, the Greek hip hoppers *SIFU Versus and DJ WAXWORK* did not attract the interest of many Praguers or tourists, several hundred people gathered in front of the stage for the group *Gipsy.cz*: not only homeless people (some of whom a bit drunk) and not only tourists: mainly Czechs, mostly young. A couple of dozen Roma.

Into the effective colorful lighting first come the black-clothed Surmaj brothers (a guitarist and an electric double-bass player), the violinist Vojta "Béla" Lavička, and finally – with the enthusiastic applause and whistling of the audience – the slight Radek Banga – "Gipsy" in a typical hip hop outfit: a jacket with a hood trimmed with fur, a cap and wide pants. During his arrival you could hear the refrain of his first song – *Romano hip hop*. It has a striking

34 www.triny.cz

Gipsy.cz, March 6, 2009. Photo by Zuzana Jurková.

and memorable melody with only a few words ("Romano hip hop in the house, šunen savore, Gipsy.cz in the house"); the musicians interpolate the words with rhythmic syllables (hop, hop, chit, chip) in off-beat, as is frequent in the traditional music of Vlach Roma and in the music of contemporary groups, e.g., Hungarian *Kalyi Jag*. The showy passages of the violin copy the melody; they are also sometimes heard in the interlude.

The refrain alternates with rapping, that is, quickly recited passages to the rhythm of musical accompaniment. "Come in the rhythm, whether you are a Rom or not. Dance savore! Piki piki piki piki piki pom! I want all to know that I am a Rom. That my band is Romani, dark, that it plays blackly. So come, chip hop, come with us, we don't care if you are a gadjo. But nobody is perfect, you f... idiot, it is all about romano hip hop." The second stanza is in Romani; he concludes again in Czech. Gipsy dominates not only in singing (in the refrains other musicians join in), but the whole stage: he moves easily, comments on songs and verbally and non-verbally communicates with the audience. Soon the first listeners begin to move to the rhythm, clap and join in the singing of the refrain...

Most of the songs from the latest CDs (*Romano hip hop* and *Reprezent*) have a similar character: they combine rapping with distinctive, but not trivial, melodies in the refrain or accompaniment, their texts (generally less playful but more aggressive than in *Romano hip hop*) alternate languages: Czech preponderates; after it their "Romani" is represented (which Romani scholars call the specific language of Gipsy.cz) and then somewhat oddly pronounced English.

The fact that *Gipsy.cz* was chosen to be the Czech representatives is not especially surprising: in the previous year the Czech minister for human rights

named Gipsy ambassador of the European Union's European Year of Equal Opportunities and shortly after the Get a Taste of Europe festival Czech television made public the fact that it chose the group (in contrast with the usual approach whereby the national representative is voted by television viewers) to represent the Czech Republic in the international Eurovision Song Contest. It seems as if *Gipsy.cz* and mainly Radek Banga, were chosen from the outside to be the representatives of the Romani community. They are popular enough among the majority (although sometimes their song texts are criticized) and at the same time they can seem to be a suitable example for young Roma to follow.

Gipsy.cz, March 6, 2009. Photo by Zuzana Jurková.

There is no doubt that the picture of the "good Rom everyone praises"[35] comes primarily from the love for Gipsy's musical style. From this point of view, the non-standard approach of Czech television was quite legitimate: none of the regularly chosen representatives of the previous years had advanced even to the semifinals. On the contrary, the official esteem of the CD *Romano hip hop*[36], along with a great number of votes for Gipsy in the national European round in the past years, enabled Czech TV to presume that this original and popular group would be successful. The fact that they finally were not any more successful than their predecessors in no way lessened the popularity of their style, which, however, has only little in common with hip hop.

Gipsy (this pseudonym has been used since their musical beginnings by the *Kalo rikonos* group) began, however, as a genuine hip hopper, more

35 Title of an article by Karel Veselý in *A2* 27/2008:13.

36 The CD was awarded the Golden Disc for the sale of 10,000 copies.

precisely a rapper (see below) in the group *Syndrom Snopp*. He recorded three CDs[37] with them (*Syndrom Snopp* – 1997, *Syndrom separace* – 2001 and *Syndrom Snopp 3.0* – 2003). They have the same basic features as the original hip hop of Afro-American ghettos of the 70s. His point of view was strong social and racial frustration for the expression of which aggressive recitation is more suitable than song (called *rap* – radical anarchistic poetry) to the rhythm of usually recorded music. This musical background arises most often with mixed music on a turntable, which is, along with *breakdance* and *grafitti,* a moving and graphic element, considered the main components of hip hop. Somewhat later *beatbox*, recorded rhythmic oral sounds, appeared.

At the time of authentic hip hop, however, in Gipsy's music the tendency already appeared that it is possible to ascribe both to his extraordinary ambition (also expressed verbally – both in song texts,[38] and in interviews[39]) as well as to the long-past tendency of Romani musicians to manage easily with stylized and genre borders. In 1999 – that is, between two hip hop CDs – he recorded with the prestigious publishing firm BMG the CD *Ramonis,* characterized as a "soul pop hip hop disk with a gentle breath of jazz."[40]. In 2005[41] he then recorded in the style of R 'n' B the album *Rýmy a blues* (besides: with extraordinarily vulgar texts, which is typical of rap rather than of R 'n' B). After them follow the two popular CDs mentioned earlier: *Romano hip hop* and *Reprezent*.

It was actually these – with their gentle criticism and acceptable originality – that earned Gipsy such popularity.[42] At the same time, however, there was a void among authentic hip hoppers.

Still, that tempting question remains: Is the image of the social situation of the Czech Romani and the Afro-American ghetto reflected in similar musical expression? A positive response seems obvious in so far as some authors

37 For suggestions relating to Gipsy, mainly his time with Syndrom Snopp, I am grateful to my student Tomáš Dočkal – viz Dočkal 2007.

38 For example, in the song *I can* "In Prague and almost in all Bohemia I proved to many ones that I can be same and even better than millions!" CD *Ya favourite CD Rom*. Besides, this album, sung entirely in English, has the obvious ambition of penetrating further than only Czech listeners.

39 From them all, one recent example: "Do not categorize me anywhere; I did not lower myself... in short an entirely new species in evolution." *Lidové noviny* 6. 12. 2009.

40 http://skola.romea.cz/cz/index.php?id=hudba/28 (7. 10. 2009)

41 The date is not mentioned on the CD; I took it from Dočkal. It is also confirmed in an Internet review of the same year.

42 It seems to me significant, besides, that on www.gipsy.cz (7. 13. 2009) none of their preceding CDs is even mentioned.

simply consider it as a given.[43] The reality, though, is different. In contrast with Slovakia, where the hip hop scene is dominated by the recognized Romani rapper Rytmus with the group *Kontrafakt,* in the Czech lands there is nobody similar. Nor in various types of contests or workshops has any outstanding Romani rapper talent[44] appeared – and those who do rap do it mainly in Czech.

At the same time one cannot disregard the large number of Romani children and young people (mainly boys) who have taken up breakdancing and beatbox. When I once asked a certain breakdancer from Rokycany how often he practiced, he answered: "We practice all the time – in school and afterwards, too." Field workers confirm the omnipresence of both hip hop elements and, actually, they are from the socially most difficult places. It seems, so to speak, that a certain part of the hip hop soundscape of the American ghettos has found resonance in a similar environment in our country and fulfills a similar task, while its rap element has successfully joined the broad stream of popular music.

Coda

As is clear at first glance and hearing, the term "Romani music" can be found in today's Prague in the most varied (and sound) forms and in the most varied environments. For the most part it is imbued with those mythical qualities which are attributed to it – and to the Roma in general – by romanticism: from emotionality to passion, individuality or love of freedom, and also the basic connection of Roma to music. At the same time, however, as is also confirmed by ethomusicological research in other urban environments (REYES 1982) this label does not correspond to a clear-cut genre definition. The configurations of various shapes of the above-mentioned qualities, and also of the expectations of the public, create various musical images – *soundscapes*.

But it is basic that all – musicians and audience – and also those who are in other ways connected to the rise and existence of these images, for instance the restaurateurs of "U 7 andělů" – are right with their concept. The phenomenon of Gypsy/Romani music is thus unravelably interwoven in our nets of relations and consequences to which Clifford Geertz (1973) compares culture.

43 Radostný more naively formulates it in an exemplary way (2008).

44 Viz e.g., the Brno contest Street Sounds (www.street-sounds.cz) or the workshops mentioned above by Dočkal in Ústí nad Labem (Dočkal 2007:83 – 84).

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