

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Urban Folk and Brass Bands: Pastoral and Urban Nostalgia in Prague

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Abstract

This article examines how popular musical practices in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Prague articulated and shaped Czech nationalist sentiment through intertwined forms of pastoral and urban nostalgia. In a rapidly modernizing city marked by migration, industrialization, and intensifying Czech–German antagonism, pubs, dancehalls and garden restaurants became crucial sites where everyday leisure intersected with the cultural politics of nationalism. These venues, many of which consciously evoked a rural atmosphere through architecture and repertoire, offered urban newcomers a symbolic refuge from the social dislocation of modern life. Here, brass bands and the emergent folk-like genre *lidovka*, alongside satirical *café chantant* couplets, became key media through which audiences negotiated the loss of traditional rural worlds and articulated desires for collective belonging.

Drawing on nearly two hundred pieces published between 1870 and 1920 in Czech periodicals including *Lumír*, *Světozor*, *Národní listy*, *Národní politika*, and *Právo lidu*, the article demonstrates how musical production and reception mediated an affective landscape of nostalgia tied to Czech nationalism. Brass band leaders such as František Kmoch transformed folk song into emotionally potent, urbanized music that celebrated an idealized Czech countryside, while couplet compositions captured the humour, sentimentality and anxieties of a city undergoing demographic and spatial transformation. Both genres projected mythicized images of rural harmony, lost youth and pre-modern communal life, yet they also fostered an urban patriotic culture that merged popular entertainment with national mobilization.

By situating these musical forms within contemporary debates on authenticity, morality and the hierarchy of cultural taste, this study shows how nostalgia operated as a chronotope through which Prague's inhabitants reimagined Czech history, space and identity. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on the politics of nostalgia in modern European cultural history.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Prague was a city where conflicting nationalist agendas shaped the urban experience of the population, who used at least two languages (Czech and German). Pubs and restaurants featuring musical performances were privileged

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sites of leisure and relaxation for the people of Prague. These social spaces were also where both patriotic pride and national hatred emerged. Many dancehalls were located in pubs with characteristic wooden facades. Despite their location in large cities, they sought to revive the atmosphere of the countryside through architectural and interior design.

These social spaces acted as a safe haven in a world that was changing beyond recognition. Rural–urban migration changed the traditional lifestyle and the rise of Prague as an important industrial and administrative city gave rise to a mix of anger, disgust and happy memories of the lost past. These emotions were evoked through pub music. The sadness for the loss of the rural community blended with the fear of being endangered by the Other, in particular by the culture and language of the German-speaking inhabitants of Bohemia. Large quantities of beer, music, and dance provided the atmosphere that reinforced the emergence of a nationalist Czech nostalgia. It was from these urban sites that a pre-modern rural nostalgia fed a national sentiment coinciding with the rise of non-state nationalism. This article explores how the popular music genres of *lidovka* (folk-like popular music) and *café chantant* couplets drove the urban desires about the future of Prague in relation to the nascent Czech national movement.

For many city-dwellers of Prague, life in the city was characterized by the desire to evoke and maintain their previous rural identity, as the city had been a hub for mass migration since the mid-nineteenth century. These urban desires were constitutive of Czech nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century. Music and language were two of the most salient cultural elements at play in the rise of this strand of non-state nationalism, which was developed in Czech, a minority language that evoked in its speakers the fantasy of a shared history and culture to great emotional effect. Musical expression was undoubtedly one of the pillars of this national sentiment and, as the examples selected in this article show, it often displayed a pre-modern rural nostalgia.

This article focuses on the nostalgic daydreams expressed by the popular genres of *lidovka* and *café chantant* couplets in relation to the emerging Czech nationalist movement among different social classes. We explore this repertoire in order to contribute to the European cultural history of Czech nationalism with a timely study of its expression through different forms of musical nostalgia, given the present-day currency of ‘the politics of nostalgia’.¹ The primary sources of this article are almost 200 pieces from between 1870 and 1920, extracted from periodicals from Czech Bohemia such as the literary review *Lumír*, the family journal *Světlozor*, the liberal and nationalist daily *Národní listy*, the popular newspaper *Národní politika*, and the social democratic *Právo lidu*.² The selection of the primary material of this work has been based on a series of keywords in Czech which have been subject to our semiotic analysis.³ These terms include *kapela* (band); Kmoč, the name of the most popular band leader of the time, whose name eventually became a synonym of civil brass bands; *kuplet* (couplet); and *šantán* (*café-chantant/tingel-tangel*), the venues specializing in performances by singers of couplets. Significant absences from the retrieved results include terms like *dechovka* (brass band) and *lidovka* (folk-like music), which only became commonplace later, and which had no occurrence during the 1870 to 1920 period. Likewise,

¹ Tobias Becker, ‘Regressing. The Politics of Nostalgia’, in *Yesterday. A New History of Nostalgia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2023): 60–118; Edoardo Campanella and Marta Dasù, *Anglo Nostalgia. The Politics of Emotion in a Fractured West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

² The primary sources were retrieved through the Kramerius database of the National Library of the Czech Republic. This research has been carried out with the valuable help of our dear colleague Jiří Andrs, a doctoral student of social history at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University and our fellow scholar at the Prague-based Centre for the Study of Popular Culture, to whom we are enormously grateful.

³ In the Czech context, see Vladimír Macura, *Šťastný věk: symboly, emblémy a mýty 1948–1989* (Prague: Pražská imaginace, 1992).

a relevant term in the context of this study like (*národní*) *zpěváčci* (little [national] singers) only appeared in memoirs dating from a later period.

Nostalgia and Czech nationalism

The term nostalgia originates from the Greek words νόστος (homecoming) and ἄλγος (sorrow). It is a relatively new term in the wide palette of human emotions, having been first conceived of as an illness in the seventeenth century. Its original meaning was closer to today's concept of homesickness: nostalgia referred to yearning for the distant home. Nostalgia is related to both spatial and temporal displacement, the former being closer to the original meaning. This article contributes to the goal of the special issue in its exploration of musical nostalgia regarding the urban–rural dichotomy.

Different languages have developed similar concepts to nostalgia, albeit each with its own history and nuanced cultural meaning. Examples of these concepts include the French expression *mal du pays*, the Italian *rimpianto*, the Spanish *añoranza*, the German *Heimweh* and *Sehnsucht*, the Portuguese *saudade*, the Russian *мечта*, and the Turkish *hüzün*.⁴ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the term nostalgia evolved to be commonly discussed also in the lexicon of emotions rather than only in the field of medical research, and thus it came to signify both an individual and collective experience that peaks when change happens too fast. Nostalgia mixes history, memory, remembrance and imagination. In the world of nostalgia, the facts do not matter as much as the narrative. For this reason, nostalgia is a particularly prevalent emotion in foundational myths as well as in any rhetoric that seeks to establish the origins of a nation.

The observation of the Other and its characteristics plays a role in most intellectual constructions of nationalism as well as in the evocation of nostalgia, as the nostalgic self can be said to have become an Other in their own surroundings. The nostalgic drive is, then, set out to reconcile the person with their context, thus allowing for the feeling of homecoming to emerge. In the case of the nationalist sentiment, the encounter with otherness functions as the primary site for the cultural politics of emotion that underpins the very category of the nation.⁵ The idea of the countryside as the cradle of the nation, which developed in the first half of the nineteenth century, was embraced by the new urban masses at the turn of the twentieth century. At the same time, brass music became a most popular vehicle of the nationalist sentiment.⁶

In her study of nostalgia, Svetlana Boym coined the concepts of reflective nostalgia, which is a creative reverie, and restorative nostalgia, which attempts to reconstruct the home, with its traditions and its truth.⁷ Restorative nostalgia is a greatly useful concept in studying the Czech nationalist movement and its ambition to rebuild the medieval and early modern state. The notion of a revival, a temporal return to the 'golden age' of the Czech nation in the sixteenth century (a period when the Czech language served as the primary medium of official communication and literature), was a central principle of the Czech nationalist project.⁸

⁴ Czech-born French writer Milan Kundera's novel *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* works with the concept of *litosť* that relates to individual feeling of sorrow and can hardly be equated with collective and culturally shared emotion.

⁵ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History – Lost and Found* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2011).

⁶ Vladimír Macura, *Známění zrodu: české národní obrození jako kulturní typ* (Jinočany: H & H, 1995).

⁷ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).

⁸ Anthony D. Smith, 'The 'Golden Age' and National Renewal', in *Myths and Nationhood*, ed. Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin (London: Hurst and Co., 1997): 36–59.

Nostalgia – with its mythicized history and imagined geography – is a particularly pertinent lens for furthering our understanding of Czech nationalism in the nineteenth century and its musical expression. The nostalgic nationalism of late nineteenth-century Czech music can best be understood as a chronotope, a time-space compression used for (re)creating the atmosphere of the different times and places of the pre-modern countryside.⁹ The politics of popular culture and the development of the cultural industries have drawn extensively from the exploitation of the past, including musical motifs and themes.¹⁰ The relationship between mass culture and the formation of the category of the nation is especially important for our study. The Frankfurt School's monolithic vision of mass cultural production under capitalism was later nuanced by the idea of popular culture as a tool of resistance, developed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). With its semiotic approach, and its emphasis on identity, the method of the CCCS deviated from the Marxist sociology of culture. The CCCS's identification of popular culture as a hybrid of bourgeois and folk culture, which emerged due to the acculturation of various components of the urban population during the processes associated with the industrial revolution, is the frame under which we analyse Czech urban music of the late nineteenth century. We study how popular music evoked nostalgia through both bourgeois and folk culture. The latter, in particular, was regarded at the time as a mythicized art form, and it provided the city-dwellers of *belle époque* Prague with urban pleasures in the form of music making and listening.

Czech nationalists in the second half of the nineteenth century found themselves in a deep dialogical interaction with their German counterparts, who resided in the major urban settlements and some rural areas of Bohemia and Moravia.¹¹ These two Czech lands, together with a smaller part of Austrian Silesia, were a part of the Habsburg Empire (see Figure 1), dominated by its German-speaking component that partly embraced German nationalism. The maximalist vision of German nationalism aimed to unite all German-speaking people in one state, including Austria, Prussia, Bavaria, Saxony, and other smaller German *Länder*. The idea of the Czech lands becoming an islet in a future German Empire made many Czech nationalists feel threatened. Many thought that if this happened, the Czech language and culture would disappear into a 'German ocean'. The emancipation of the Czech bourgeoisie and its ambition to achieve political and territorial autonomy worsened the already problematic interethnic relations between Czech and German speakers.¹² Similarly, German nationalists felt threatened by this enterprise of the Czech nationalists. The integration of bilingual Jews, the third most important ethnic component of the Czech lands, was also a major point of discord between Czech and German nationalists. Their inclusion would mostly mean the crucial reversal of a relatively static interethnic balance.¹³ Bilingualism, however, was far from limited to Jews in Bohemia and Moravia. The gradual preference for both the everyday and official registers of the Czech or German resulted from the politicization of the language by the two nationalist programmes.¹⁴

Although a detailed discussion of Czech political life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that nationalism,

⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Friedlind Riedel and Juha Torvinen, eds. *Music as Atmosphere. Collective Feelings and Affective Sounds* (London: Routledge, 2021).

¹⁰ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).

¹¹ Jan Křen, *Konfliktní společenství. Češi a Němci 1780–1918* (Prague: Academia, 1990).

¹² Otto Urban, *Česká společnost 1848–1918* (Prague: Svoboda, 1982).

¹³ Michal Frankl, *Emancipace od židů. Český antisemitismus na konci 19. století* (Prague – Litomyšl: Paseka, 2007); Vít Strobach, *Židé: národ, rasa, třída. Sociální hnutí a 'židovská otázka' v českých zemích 1861–1921* (Prague: NLN, 2016).

¹⁴ Robert B. Pynsent, *Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (New York: Central European University Press, 1994).



Figure 1. Eastern Central Europe before 1914.

with more conservative or liberal nuances, was the main ideology of Czech political parties and that (especially after 1880) these underwent a gradual fragmentation caused by the workers' movement.¹⁵ In this study, we follow Miroslav Hroch's analysis of the social preconditions of the 'national awakening' among several so-called 'small nations', including the Czechs, and his theorization of how nationalism became a mass political programme encompassing a wider range of political actors in fin-de-siècle Czech culture.¹⁶ Engaging with the recent work by historians Andreas Stynen, Maarten Van Ginderachter and Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, our study bridges the gap between the discursive and the affective in studies of European nationalism by defending the idea that an analysis of the production, dissemination and reception of music reconciles these two dimensions.¹⁷

Collective singing has often been used throughout history as a symbol of a united society. It has thus also been a recurrent feature of nostalgic and utopic expressions of the nation in

¹⁵ See Urban, *Česká společnost*; Aleš Valenta, *Politické dějiny českých zemí a habsburské monarchie 1848–1914* (Hradec Králové: Gaudeamus, 2002). For further references, see Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Program, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Otto Urban, *Kapitalismus a česká společnost: k otázkám formování české společnosti v 19. století* (Prague: NLN, 2003).

¹⁶ Miroslav Hroch, *V národním zájmu: Požadavky a cíle evropských národních hnutí devatenáctého století v komparativní perspektivě* (Prague: Univerzita Karlova, 1996).

¹⁷ Andreas Stynen, Maarten Van Ginderachter and Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, eds, *Emotions and Everyday Nationalism in Modern European History* (London: Routledge, 2020).

music.¹⁸ Patriotic songs, such as *Hlahol* (Festive Song), were sung in gatherings hosted by citizen associations. *Umělecká beseda* (Artist Gathering, founded in 1863 by a group of artists of different fields, including composer Bedřich Smetana) is an example of such grassroots participatory movements devoted to literature, the visual arts, and music. Eventually, many collectives of this type became new political parties.¹⁹ Other types of associations linked to music had their own bands to perform at assemblies and parties. And even those associations whose activities were not directly linked to music (they were, for instance focused on tourism or crafts), or which did not have their own band, often accompanied their activities with folkloric and patriotic songs. The perceived closeness of music to what is imagined as the soul of the nation is a recurrent trope in the scholarship on music and nationalism.²⁰ We argue that nostalgia is a particularly relevant and productive lens to further our knowledge of Czech nationalism and its musical expression. Key to this discourse is the metaphor of the awakening of the sleeping nation, including its language and culture, which draws from the idea of the revival of a mythical past and the promise that the rural identity of the Czech nation would be preserved through an urban pastoral idyll.

Prague Society

The ideal setting of this urban yet pastoral idyll was social spaces like dance halls and garden restaurants, each catering to a different type of clientele. The former gathered a popular audience best represented in the figure of the *Pepíci*, one of the main subcultures at the end of the nineteenth century in Prague, consisting predominantly of young urban working-class males (*Pepíci* means Little Joes). The latter rather catered to the bourgeoisie. These spaces were also political meeting points and from them emerged different images of the city that were then sung about through brass bands, a most important musical institution in the cultural life of Prague. The following section aims to contextualize the nostalgic daydreams of *lidovka* and *café chantant* couplets within the modernization processes of the urban space of Prague in the last third of the nineteenth century.

Like in the major cities of Europe, industrialization in Prague caused a profound change in urban demographics. Between 1870 and 1890, the overall population of the Prague agglomeration doubled, mainly due to the incoming migration from the Czech-speaking countryside.²¹ This new city needed a significant intervention and, as in many other European cities, an ambitious project was undertaken to rebuild the large areas of downtown Prague deemed to be unhealthy due their high population density. This process took place in the last decade of the nineteenth century and received the name of *asanace* (Czech for 'decontamination'), drawing from the contemporary vocabulary linking hygiene and morality in the city. This term was based on the nineteenth-century idea of a society saturated with its culture in analogy to the human body being contaminated with a disease; in both cases, the treatment required hygienic care. Influenced by contemporary medical diagnoses of European culture, such as the influential publication *Degeneration* by the physician and publicist Max Nordeau in 1892, the idea was taken up by the Czech intelligentsia and the emerging educational associations.²² As a result of *asanace*, the Jewish ghetto was entirely reconstructed, and some of the popular pubs and dancehalls disappeared from the centre of Prague.

¹⁸ Lola San Martín Arbide, 'Music and Nostalgia', in *The Routledge Handbook of Nostalgia*, ed. Tobias Becker and Dylan Trigg (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025): 108–20.

¹⁹ Jiří Malíř, *Od spolků k moderním politickým stranám: Vývoj politických stran na Moravě v letech 1848–1914* (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 1996).

²⁰ Philip V. Bohlman, *The Music of European Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2002): 10–11.

²¹ Ludmila Fialová, *Dějiny obyvatelstva českých zemí* (Prague: Mladá fronta, 1996).

²² Pavel Janáček, *Literární brak: operace vyloučení, operace nahrazení, 1938–1951* (Brno: Host, 2004): 38.

The hygienic vocabulary of the time, asserting cleanliness and protection from pollution and disease as a necessary condition for the healthy progress of a nation and its culture, defined the intelligentsia's struggle against popular culture and was close to both a nationalist and racist discourse. The cultural elite, spearheaded by teachers' and enlightenment associations, initiated a struggle against various forms of emerging commercial popular culture. This included the sensational press, risqué magazines, popular literature and cinema productions. They sought to restrict the dissemination of these cultural forms, if not prohibit them altogether.²³ Popular and widely circulated books perceived to pose a threat to public morality were publicly burnt to prevent the moral contamination that their dissemination among the general population would have induced.²⁴

A specific nostalgia for Prague's disappearing downtown before *asanace* is a theme developed in the literary production and the urban folk and folk-like music production of the period consumed by the *Pepíci*.²⁵ The collective figure of the *Pepíci* embodies a nostalgic link to folk-like music and vanished spaces of pre-*asanace* Prague, where their presence evoked both the everyday vitality of suburban rural idylls and later attempts to resurrect that lost atmosphere in different retro-waves. Popular places that survived *asanace* included the pub U Bubeníků, close to the right bank of the river in Prague's New Town. The pub was named after the successful entrepreneur Vincenc Bubeníček, a wood merchant who had invested in many of the buildings in the area in the 1860s.²⁶

The following numbers illustrate the importance of brass bands and orchestras for the cultural life of Prague. For a population of approximately 600,000 in 1912, there were around 30 performances by civil brass bands and 56 by military brass bands in 26 venues situated in parks, garden pubs, restaurants, and on river islands over the course of only one week in summer.²⁷ Brass bands performed at the dance halls that acted as meeting venues for radical democrats, anarchists and, later, communists. A significant number of dancers in the brass band dancehalls were also students at the Charles-Ferdinand University, which in 1882 split into separate Czech and German-taught branches. Alongside the predominantly working-class *Pepíci*, many students enjoyed the ecstatic dancing and performance of the myriad Prague-based brass bands.

The emergence of the working class *Pepíci* owes much to the general context of the growing cultural industry, particularly the press and clothing industries, as well as urban popular culture and subcultures. Eventually, the imaginary of the *Pepíci* acquired the status of a national symbol. *Pražský Pepík* (Prague Little Joe) became an important figure both in the press of the period and in the actual urban setting of the lower-income neighbourhoods of Žižkov, Košíře, and Holešovice, with new working-class districts springing up on the outskirts of what was then Prague. The *Pepíci* were characteristically apprentices of manual professions, drop-outs from vocational schools, or people who had not had the opportunity to acquire a formal education.²⁸ Some *Pepíci* were day-labourers, while others lived a life of petty crime and were no strangers to violent behaviour.²⁹ The *Pepíci* were also characterized by their fashion preferences, body language and behaviour (see Figure 2).

²³ Ivan Klimeš, 'Děti v brlohu', in *Kinematograf!* (Prague: NFA, 2013): 128–67.

²⁴ Janáček, *Literární brak*, 35.

²⁵ For example Gustav Meyrink, *Der Golem* (Leipzig: Wolff, c.1915).

²⁶ 'Nájemní domy Myslíkova čp. 257 a čp. 258/6 a 8, Náplavní 10', in *Encyklopedie Prahy 2*, encyklopedie.praha2.cz (accessed 23 December 2022).

²⁷ Josef Kotek, *Dějiny české populární hudby a zpěvu*, vol. 1 (Prague: Academia, 1994): 216.

²⁸ Mirjam Moravcová, 'Flamendr, Švihák, Frajer a Pepík: subkultury mládeže v Praze poloviny 19. – počátku 20. století', *Podcast of the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University*, soundcloud.com/fhsuk (accessed 23 March 2021); full text: tarantula.ruk.cuni.cz (accessed 23 December 2022).

²⁹ 'Zábavy pražských uličníků', *Národní listy* (20 December 1891): 3.



Figure 2. A cartoon with two *Pepíci*. Not signed; probably by Karel Krejčík (1857–1901), chief illustrator of *Paleček* magazine. *Paleček* 14/8 (1886): 62, digitized by National Library in Prague, copyleft.

Due to this aesthetic repertoire, which was distinctive from that of the mainstream culture, it is possible to conceptualize the *Pepíci* as a young male-dominated working-class subculture.

Among the many forms of entertainment that brightened the everyday life of the big city were marching brass bands and the regularly erupting national clashes associated with anti-German and anti-Jewish riots, with the *Pepíci* often at their forefront, followed by repeated declarations of a state of emergency over Prague. Contemporary commentary found both similarities and differences in many of their counterparts in different metropolitan zones across Europe.³⁰ In comparison, the variety of youth gangs in Prague was considered rather modest and unproblematic. On the pages of the Prague-based satirical press, the Czech-speaking *Pepík* was often confronted with the German-speaking *Wenzel*. Later, *Pepík* also became synonymous with Prague's inhabitants, Czechs from Bohemia or even Czechs in general.

Urban ethnologist Mirjam Moravcová has stressed that an important identity marker of the *Pepíci* was their identification with brass band music.³¹ They often hung around the working-class dancehalls where these bands performed. The image of a *Pepíci* marching with a brass band became a stereotypical representation of them in magazines, and the lyrics of couplets characteristically portrayed them in this fashion (Figure 3).³² Indeed, it is difficult to find any mention of a *Pepíci* that does not also mention a marching band or their enthusiastic dancing. The *Pepíci*'s incarnation of the genuine cultural expression of the marginalized people of the city made of brass band music an important cultural pillar of the Czech workers' movement.

Alternative musical places in *belle époque* Prague that contrasted with the venues associated with the *Pepíci* included garden restaurants. These were typically frequented by a

³⁰ 'Feuilleton', *Národní listy* (15 March 1891): 1.

³¹ Moravcová, *Flamendr*.

³² For example Josef Ulrich's drawing 'Promenade of Prague's *Pepíci* with brass band' from 1892. See Figure 3.

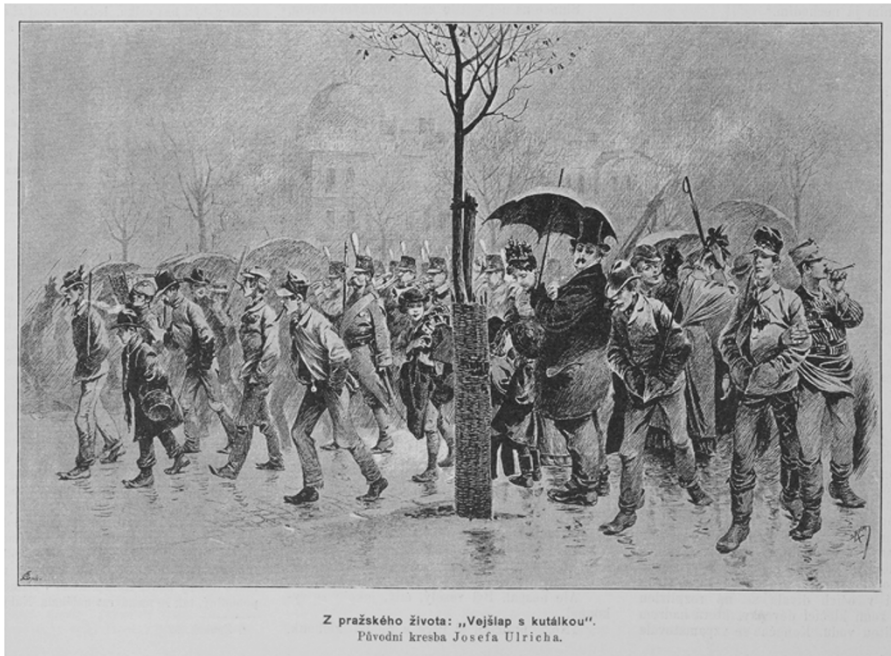


Figure 3. A cartoon 'Promenade of Prague's *Pepíci* with brass band' from 1892. *Světazor* 26/9 (1892): 104.³³

radically different clientele extracted from the higher socioeconomic classes. Bourgeois restaurants with panoramic views of the city, such as Belveder on the left bank of the river or those in Riegrovy sady, a park in the city centre created in 1902, chose their musical repertoire according to tastes that were different from those of the *Pepíci*. Military brass bands and also non-military bands playing brass band music performed in many such garden restaurants. In the Šlechtova excursion restaurant in Prague's biggest city park, called the 'Royal Preserve' on the left bank, 'gigantic concerts' were organized with several bands performing 'under the baton of one musical director'.³⁴ These prestigious and upscale concerts were characterized as the antithesis of the noisy and sweaty *jouissance* of the brass band dancehalls, either disappearing or reappearing on the outskirts of the city and frequented by the *Pepíci*. Other garden restaurants were accompanied by the regular performances of national singers whose repertoire included nostalgic patriotic or more subversive couplet songs.

The Question of National Music

Czech patriotic society remained predominantly bourgeois in the second half of the nineteenth century, but patriotic fervour and agitation gradually and successfully expanded among the popular classes. Music was, of course, used to pursue the nationalist ambitions of Czech patriots, with a preference for folk and patriotic song.³⁵ This was especially true after the failed revolution of 1848, when Czech bourgeois society began to define itself more

³³ Josef Ulrich, 'Promenade of Prague's *Pepíci* with Brass Band', *Světazor* 26/9 (1892): 104, digitized by National Library in Prague, copleft.

³⁴ Lukáš Berný, 'Letohrádek zmoklého císaře', *Hobuleť* (1 Nov 2019), www.praha7.cz (accessed 24 December 2022).

³⁵ Kotek, *Dějiny*, 9.

strongly against German culture. As elsewhere in Europe, the folk was produced by educated nationalists in order to represent the new cultural nation.³⁶ In European peripheral nations, 'folk music as specifically (locally) "national" capital was, since its conception, a ticket to international recognition on a stage dominated by others'.³⁷ Depending on its origin, (national) music was divided into folk music and art music.³⁸ Composers such as Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák drew from the folk tradition to cater to bourgeois society with works such as the former's polkas like 'Georgina', 'Luisina' and 'The Country Woman', and the latter's 'Prague Waltzes' and 'For Prague Students' polka, to cite but some examples.³⁹ These works exemplify how the identification of bourgeois music with the concepts of classical or art music underwent a gradual dissolution towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The programmatic commitment to finding national roots played a fundamental role in shaping the national discourse of the time. Whenever the national character was hard to discern from the instrumental compositions, explanatory titles and subtitles mentioning the local or national roots came to assist audiences in their understanding of compositions.⁴⁰ Tim Carter notes 'music's relatively weak ability to signify – music rarely communicates precise meanings'.⁴¹ These meanings are ascribed to music externally, either through the lyrics or the context in which the piece is performed and its intended purpose. The demand for national character in music was not confined to music promoted by the elites. It also began to play an important role in music with a more widespread appeal, a phenomenon which this study focuses on.

Brass Band and Folk-like Music

Brass bands that had evolved from military bands dominated the Czech musical taste of the broadest social strata for most of the twentieth century and became the main purveyors of national music. These bands were influenced by the most popular of all, that of František Kmoch.⁴² The bourgeoisie originally listened to the energetic sound of brass instruments at various state and church festivities, but also at promenade concerts by garrison orchestras. The repertoire of military brass orchestras was primarily based on marches, which were performed during parades, manoeuvres, and various tribute events. However, these orchestras also gave regular concerts, sometimes on a daily basis during the changing of the guard or at summer promenade concerts. Their repertoire included a variety of arrangements, fantasies, and *pot-pourris* derived from opera, operetta and symphonic works by composers such as Mozart, Beethoven and Liszt, performed by professional musicians.⁴³ The works of contemporary composers were also regularly played during promenade concerts by military orchestras, contributing to their popularity among city-dwellers. Since the 1880s, these ensembles promoted Czech composers such as Smetana and Dvořák by including a variety

³⁶ Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of 'Folk Music' and 'Art Music'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 196.

³⁷ Gelbart, *Invention of 'Folk Music' and 'Art Music'*, 227.

³⁸ Gelbart, *Invention of 'Folk Music' and 'Art Music'*, 15.

³⁹ Matěj Kratochvíl, "'Our Song!' Nationalism in Folk Music Research and Revival in Socialist Czechoslovakia', *Studia Musicologica* 56/4 (2015): 399; Kotek, *Dějiny*, 136.

⁴⁰ At the time, 'beseda' was used to describe a type of neighbourly chat and it also referred to a set of dances. Examples of Czech, Moravian and Silesian Besedas include Ferdinand's Heller's 'Česká beseda', Richard Kaska's 'Moravská beseda', Eduard Bartoníček's 'Slezská beseda', as well as a plethora of Slavic dances by numerous authors (from Antonín Dvořák to brass band leader Václav Vačkář).

⁴¹ Tim Carter, 'The Sound of Silence: Models for an Urban Musicology', *Urban History* 29/1 (2002): 14.

⁴² Unfortunately, Kmoch's pieces are undated. There is no comprehensive catalogue of his works, only a list of preserved compositions which do not include dates.

⁴³ Kotek, *Dějiny*, 136, 137.

of their overtures, arias, and medleys into their programmes. They also rearranged concert pieces such as the *Slavonic Dances*, disseminating the works beyond the concert hall context.⁴⁴

The popularity of military bands led to the establishment of civilian bands in the second half of the nineteenth century. These were most often associated with various enterprises and societies, ranging from miners' and veterans' associations to nationally oriented gymnastic and firemen's clubs. Their mobility and distinctive loud sound assured that these bands were particularly well-suited to perform in the open-air spaces of the city. This type of musical ensemble gradually became representative of civil society, from the associations mentioned above to the town orchestras established at the end of the nineteenth century as an expression of the city's prestige.⁴⁵

Kmoch's Sokol band performed a repertoire similar to that of a military band and was highly praised from its founding in 1872.⁴⁶ The earliest traceable reference to it in the press dates back to the periodical *Národní listy* in October of 1875, when the band's repertoire was still mainly based on Kmoch's own polkas and art music, though it was not yet Czech (i.e., it still had a contemporary Italian, French and German romantic repertoire). This first article from *Národní listy* notes the great success and several repetitions of some of the pieces played, and shows a close connection between the band and (small) town social life.⁴⁷

František Kmoch sensed and capitalized on the nostalgia of his era and the shared sense of loss regarding the Czech folk song. Collections of Czech folk songs had been collected during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and in Kmoch's time they were being phased out by new musical genres that emerged as a result of industrialization and urbanization. The intensifying national resentment against German domination, together with the gradual acceptance of the music of Bedřich Smetana as the creator of the Czech musical style (inspired by the ideas of Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner), led Kmoch to focus exclusively on Slavic and Czech compositions. In addition to popular South Slavic marches and operatic medleys, in the 1880s Kmoch's band also played folk-inspired works by Bedřich Smetana and Antonín Dvořák. Modest compositions of rural and military bandmasters intended for their rural audiences, on the other hand, continued to play an important role within Kmoch's repertoire.

From the 1900s onwards, Kmoch advanced his approach to folk melodies. He started arranging a selection of folk songs to suit contemporary taste, which favoured fashionable rhythms such as marches, waltzes and polkas. These new versions formed the backbone of his band's repertoire at the turn of the century.⁴⁸ Concurrently with Kmoch, different revival groups also re-created the folk music and dances in ways that the cultural elites deemed more authentic and respectful to the originally collected versions.⁴⁹ However, Kmoch's adaptations met with immediate success and displaced most of the original versions from collective memory due to the stronger emotional effect obtained by his new arrangements.⁵⁰ These modernized versions became instrumental in the consolidation of a

⁴⁴ Jan Kapusta, *Dechové kapely, pochod a František Kmoch* (Prague: Supraphon, 1974): 86.

⁴⁵ Kotek, *Dějiny*, 140–42.

⁴⁶ The Sokol was a Czech nationalist gymnastic organization, the counterpart of the German Turnvereins. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century it became the most popular Czech bourgeois association. By gradually opening up to the lower classes and later to women, it became the main representative of the Czech nation, even with the ambition of functioning also as a kind of (unarmed) paramilitary organization. It was used as police and to some extent military force at the time of the declaration of independent Czechoslovakia in 1918.

⁴⁷ 'Z Kouřimi', *Národní listy* (15 Oct. 1875): 3.

⁴⁸ Kapusta, *Dechové kapely*, 118–19.

⁴⁹ Kratochvíl, 'Our Song!', 403.

⁵⁰ Kapusta, *Dechové kapely*, 146.

national music when regional differences were put aside for the sake of building a national music project.⁵¹

The success of these new folk music versions led to the next step in its development: the creation of the *lidovka* (folk-like genre). Rather than modified versions of folk music, new songs were created that imitated folk music and were fully adapted to the new urban audience. This shift was closely linked to the urbanization of new residents from rural areas, the consequences of which only became fully apparent at the turn of the twentieth century, when commercial popular culture began to develop in Prague and the Czech lands.⁵²

A new urban culture emerged from the rural exodus of the nineteenth century. Its closeness to the folk tradition and its typical characteristics were key factors for the survival of this new city culture.⁵³ The new, commercial urban culture mixed the traditions of oral culture with the written culture of the elite. Its musical component was thus based on the sentimental imitation of folk themes with current musical trends, ranging from the waltz and polka in the second half of the nineteenth century (and the tango in the early twentieth century) to the inspiration of jazz in the interwar period.⁵⁴ The underlying nostalgia, the sense of a lost simple rural life, of a childhood and parents gone, and the longing for the rural picturesque landscape, was declamatory in these songs:

I remember a beautiful land
Which is like a precious diadem in my heart
I see my village in the dark lap of the mountains
and I do not think what tomorrow will bring me
I pray to you, forests, fields, hills
may the golden hands of the Lord protect you
I remember and silently ask the heavens
I love you, my dear country.⁵⁵

The peak popularity of Kmoch's band was related to his transition towards a folk-like genre during the early twentieth century. His compositions and arrangements were published in large editions, allowing other bands throughout the Czech lands to perform them.⁵⁶ After 1900, the Czech character of Kmoch's band was also persistently emphasized and appreciated in the majority of texts mentioning the band. The press even unambivalently equated Kmoch with Czech music. Celebrated for the inventiveness, wit and tastefulness of his adaptations of folk songs, Kmoch has been hailed as the saviour and popularizer of Czech national songs.⁵⁷ According to an article published in the newspaper *Národní listy* in 1909, his music 'is characterized by a purely Czech spirit', and thanks to him Czech listeners 'do not have to resort to imported, German goods that are mostly worthless to us'.⁵⁸ In addition, the comparison that 'Kmoch was to Prague what Strauss was to Vienna' made of him the musical incarnation of the city. Other bands followed Kmoch's successful approach, and advertisements for the programme of restaurants and music halls often included a description of the orchestra or concert 'à la Kmoch' omitting the actual name

⁵¹ Kratochvíl, 'Our Song', 403.

⁵² Jakub Machek, *Počátky populární kultury v českých zemích* (Příbram: Pistorius & Olšanská, 2017).

⁵³ Martin Conboy, *The Press and Popular Culture* (London: Sage, 2002): 23–5.

⁵⁴ Machek, *Počátky populární kultury*, 47.

⁵⁵ 'Píseň o vlasti', in *Zpěvníček Kmochovy hudby* (Kolín: Klub přátel Františka Kmocha, not dated). The non-rhymed translations from the Czech are the authors' own.

⁵⁶ Kapusta, *Dechové kapely*, 131–3.

⁵⁷ 'Vraný koně', *Národní politika* (2 September 1905): 7.

⁵⁸ 'Kmochovo populární album tanců a pochodů', *Národní listy* (15 August 1909): 4.

of the performing band.⁵⁹ The use of such bourgeois orchestras at national festivities, from anniversary celebrations and funerals to national rallies and association gatherings, was also important in establishing this link between music and the national spirit in the public consciousness.

An extreme example of this is the trips of national organizations like gymnastic *Sokol* or *Czech Tourist Club* accompanied by brass bands, to areas predominantly inhabited by Germans. These trips were frequently documented in detail in the press, contributing to the integration of the visited area into the collective mental map of Czech regions. These were perceived by Czech nationalists as originally Czech areas that had been Germanized. Consequently, the music performed on these occasions evoked a sense of nostalgia for the Czech past of the territory. The sound of loud Czech bands playing Czech songs in areas predominantly inhabited by Germans and imitating the music troops played during campaigns contributed to the imaginary domination of the territory.

The Kmoch Orchestra's productions were hailed as the pinnacle of urban entertainment: 'The audience always applauds his delightful melodies. Kmoch has become their darling. ... Kmoch conquered a popularity with his compositions that no one before him had ever achieved. He is our king of the merry Muse.'⁶⁰ His adaptations of folk songs were especially praised for having saved Czech folk song from foreign influence. 'Kmoch bears great merit in the popularization of the national song, and his compositions have displaced many worthless foreign compositions from the programme of our bands', *Národní politika* published in 1905.⁶¹ Commentaries like the following appeared after Kmoch's death in 1912: 'The name of Kmoch used to act as an electric spark in all those who love our national melodies, national music, merriment and singing'. Thanks to him, the Czech song was once again 'anchored in the hearts of the vigorous Czech people'.⁶² Following the logic of nostalgic rhetoric and seeing Kmoch's music as home and listening to it as healing return, his compositions were described as characteristic of a 'distinctive Czech spirit and an unusually healthy musicality'.⁶³ The hygienic language was featured here again to praise healthy Czech musicality as opposed to the sick or contagious German hits (*Schlager*).

Kmoch skilfully combined the popular rural and metropolitan tastes of the time, fully suiting his audience and allowing the band's popularity to spread quickly throughout the Czech lands and beyond. However, it was the somewhat ambiguous nature of his music that eventually led to his rejection by the cultural elite. Despite being lauded as a saviour and popularizer of national songs among the broader population, the national and cultural elite still perceived him as a popular musician, an entertainer rather than a cultural great, a title that was reserved for the artists of academic culture.

Even though Kmoch's role in defining and popularizing Czech patriotic songs had been decisive, the boundaries separating high and lowbrow music shaped the news about his death in 1912. While the deaths and funerals of national greats were habitually featured on the first page of newspapers, Kmoch's passing appeared only on the third or fourth page. He had championed the 'light muse' like nobody else, according to the period press, but this did not suffice to subvert the old and elitist hierarchy delineating high from popular culture.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ For example *Národní politika* (4 December 1906): 9; *Ibid.* (21 December 1907): 15.

⁶⁰ 'Kmochovy skladby', *Národní politika* (9 July 1905): 2. Henceforth all translations from Czech are the authors'.

⁶¹ 'Vraný koně', *Národní politika* (2 September 1905): 7.

⁶² 'Kapelník a dirigent sokolské hudby Frant. Kmoch zemřel', *Národní listy* (1 May 1912): 4.

⁶³ 'Kapelník a dirigent'.

⁶⁴ 'Kapelník a dirigent'.

Urban Folk Song as the Counterpart of Genuine National Music

The popularity of folk songs in this period was limited to carefully selected and edited versions that were stripped of anything that might be considered low, vulgar or otherwise aesthetically or morally unsatisfactory by bourgeois society. Urban folklore was perceived to be even more problematic.⁶⁵

The gory and risqué themes of commercial songs (disseminated by merchants and vendors) or the more vulgar forms of folklore rejected by cultural elites for their lack of authenticity formed the basis of another highly popular music genre.⁶⁶ This type of song was marginalized by the elites and was only collected in a limited way (mostly in unpublished private collections) in the twentieth century, during the period between the two world wars. This happened only when this music also became a source of nostalgia after the commercial *Schlager* had wiped it from the cultural sphere, just like it had happened to the rural folklore of the previous decades.

Unlike the folk-like *lidovka*, which emphasizes a rural idyll, the lyrics of commercial and urban folk song (which dealt with themes such as unrequited love, loss of virginity and the departure of a loved one abroad) were mixed with epic, satirical, risqué, vulgar or scatological themes drawn from the military songs popularized in dance rooms and folk pubs in the 1860s.⁶⁷

The majority of this so-called urban folklore was considered tasteless, lacking 'Czechness' and devoid of its idealized rural roots. Associations for popular education, such as Svaz osvětový (Culture Enlightenment Union), even demanded the right to lawfully ban inappropriate music in municipalities, including a ban on gramophones and mechanical pianos: 'This proliferation of worthless singing and music, the often-poor programmes of our folk-friendly evenings and productions, must be stopped so that folk singing can bloom again'. The *café-chantants* were considered to prevent the flowering of folk songs.⁶⁸ There was also growing concern about German *Schlager* spreading from Vienna.⁶⁹ In the inaugural address to the Folk-Song Society in London in 1899, 'common popular songs' were considered to be the 'enemy at the doors of folk-music', whereas folk music was described as one of the 'purest products of the human mind'.⁷⁰

The urban tradition continued with the national singers (*zpěváci*) such as the Wolfs brothers, the Hartmanns brothers, and František Leopold Šmíd, who visited folk restaurants and brewery pubs during the evenings in the 1860s.⁷¹ Their rise in popularity was a symptom of the gradual commercialization of urban entertainment that underlaid the development of popular culture. From the 1870s onwards, they began to manage their own

⁶⁵ In the tradition of Czech folklorists, the concept of urban folklore pertains to musical expressions that are situated within the relatively discrete spheres of classical music, musical folklore, and popular music. Urban folklore is often characterized as being on the borderline of folksiness. The primary function of the term was to distinguish these hybrid folk musical expressions from the patriotic ideal of rural folklore that had been predominantly collected up to the mid-nineteenth century. Věra Thořová, Jiří Traxler and Zdeněk Vejvoda, *Lidové písně z Prahy ve sbírce Františka Homolky*, vol. 2 (Prague: Etnologický ústav Akademie věd České republiky, 2013): 10–11. The term 'urban folklore' or 'urban folk song' was used in the collections of Czech folklore from the first third of the nineteenth century, usually as the last part of the editions. Sometimes it was also labelled half-national; Thořová, et al. *Lidové písně z Prahy ve sbírce Františka Homolky*, vol. 1 (Prague: Etnologický ústav Akademie věd České republiky, 2011): 10–11.

⁶⁶ The English term for '*Kramářské písně*', employed by Czech ethnologists, is somewhat inconsistent. They are referred to as broadside ballads, merchant songs or vendor songs.

⁶⁷ Kotek, *Dějiny*, 117–19.

⁶⁸ 'Šestý lidovýchovný sjezd český v Plzni', *Národní politika* (7 May 1912): 2.

⁶⁹ Kapusta, *Dechové kapely*, 118. The same feeling that commercial musical production was threatening folk music was also experienced elsewhere in Europe.

⁷⁰ Gelbart, *Invention of 'Folk Music' and 'Art Music'*, 261.

⁷¹ Kotek, *Dějiny*, 117–19.

singing hall businesses in breweries and restaurants as *U Bucků*, *U Rozvařilů* and *U medvídků*, which became the embodiment of Prague's folk and petit bourgeois entertainment. This paved the way for the emergence of a new Prague phenomenon: the *šantány* (*café-chantants*), which were similar to Berlin and Vienna's *Tingel-Tangel*.⁷² Since the 1890s, a number of popular venues specialized in satirical couplets (*kuplety*)⁷³ concerning current affairs, such as *U Zlatého soudku*, *U Lhotků* and *Dvorní Pivovar*.

The couplet was originally based on a repeating verse, the meaning of which was skillfully developed in the following strophes. A supporting melody, to be sung with gusto by the whole audience, accompanied the verse, while the melody of the rest of the song was secondary to the lyrics. This repetitive, melodically distinctive verse gradually became a precursor to the later stand-alone chorus that became typical of the *Schlager* production of the interwar period. The couplets drew musically on urban and rural folklore as well as brass band music.⁷⁴ Their popularity grew in the early twentieth century thanks to the appearance of hundreds of large-scale editions publishing thousands of songs. These collections replaced the market for printed commercial songs and became the precursors to the huge success of the *Schlager* sheet music market in the 1920s and 1930s.⁷⁵

The couplet was characterized as problematic beginning in the earliest traced references to it. For instance, the highbrow and elitist literary review *Lumír* voiced its contempt in its first number from 1873. According to its critics, couplets in theatrical farce comedies eclipsed the play, becoming the main attraction, often while being unrelated to the play.⁷⁶ *Lumír*'s repeated criticism of the role of couplets within theatrical farce comedies was presumably motivated by its desire to shield high culture from lowbrow practices.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, couplets were most often associated with insults, usually national ones. The Czech press mentions German nationalists applauding anti-Jewish and anti-Czech verses, as well as insults against particular individuals. The couplet became associated in the more elite press with decaying, lowbrow entertainment and small-town culture, and was described as a low art that insulted humanity, patriots in particular. The music of couplets was considered by the critics in *Lumír* as too sweet and sentimental.⁷⁷ According to journalists and associations for popular education and enlightenment, like *Svaz osvětový* mentioned above, the widespread success of couplets and evenings spent at *café-chantants* prevented the cultivation of the popular and working classes and impeded their appreciation of true Czech music (namely Smetana's works). For example, the social democratic daily *Právo lidu*, which aimed to uplift the workers materially

⁷² Kotek, *Dějiny*, 186–8. The French designation of an institution, derived from the German context, represented a prevalent strategy to address the strong, albeit logical, reliance of the Czech society on the prevailing German models. The adherence to French culture and language as a counterpoint to the rejected German one became a convenient method for Czech society to circumvent the general dominance of German culture and education. Nevertheless, this was merely a formal acknowledgement of French culture in most cases. The majority of the Czech population, except for the most educated elite, had only a limited familiarity with French culture. In contrast, the German milieu continued to serve as the primary source for the adoption of global cultural models well into the twentieth century. Consequently, in the case of German and Austrian *Tingel-Tangel*, the Czech name was indeed based on French, but apparently without any context or deeper knowledge of French *café-chantants*. This is evidenced by a close (even personal) continuity of *café-chantants* with earlier singing halls that featured national singers who were initially inspired by the Prague performance of the German group 'Leipziger Coupletssänger'.

⁷³ Couplets as simple songs with a topical theme had existed since the eighteenth century, when they were often part of theatre plays and singspiels, but only began to flourish in the late nineteenth century with the development of civil society.

⁷⁴ Kotek, *Dějiny*, 188–200; Thořová, Traxler and Vejvoda, *Lidové písně*, 2:21.

⁷⁵ Václav Pletka and Vladimír Karbusický, *Písně lidu pražského* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1966): 93; Thořová, Traxler and Vejvoda, *Lidové písně*, 2:21.

⁷⁶ For example Anonym druhý, 'O kupletu – slovo včas?', *Lumír* 1/2 (1873): 19–20.

⁷⁷ 'Listy z venkova', *Lumír*, 10 June 1886, 272.

and culturally in accordance with elite notions of the hierarchy of art, voiced its concerns in these terms: 'Where should workers get an idea of real art music? What can our working people learn from the music of Smetana, for example?'⁷⁸ While concert halls' entrance fees excluded the working class from attending their concerts, newspapers – including the Social Democratic ones – were full of advertisements for printed couplets. The couplet and *café-chantant* productions thus joined other forms of emerging popular culture, which became the subject of rejection by cultural elites.

The Characteristics of Urban Music Production and the Response of the Audience

Thanks to the changes brought about by the parliamentary system and the moderate relaxation of censorship at the end of the nineteenth century, couplets often served as commentary on contemporary social and political events, new inventions (the telephone, automobile, airplane, X-rays), and social changes (mainly women's emancipation). They drew on shared popular values and beliefs and undermined the romantic ideal of the elites. Despite all their irony and parody, they remained anchored in the idyll of good-natured mockery suitable for petite bourgeois consumption. Interpersonal and especially familial relationships remained the most frequent theme: women's infidelity, men's drunkenness, wicked mothers-in-law, pregnant maids, old maids, spoiled students, embezzlers and ballerinas as typical kept women.⁷⁹

The authors of the couplets were in tune with the taste and mood of their (petit) bourgeois audience. In addition to the conventional humorous subjects, satire also addressed political issues, particularly those pertaining to Prague.⁸⁰ These included deficiencies in the city's governance, the politicking and corruption within the municipal administration, or the disorganization of Czech political parties. The subject of national (all-Austrian) politics, specifically the dominance of German political representation in Vienna, the regularly occurring national clashes, and perceived national oppression (which was similarly felt from the German side), was much less discussed.⁸¹ This was likely due to the threat of censorship. All sung productions were subject to approval by the censors, and some of the couplets did not pass or had to be edited.⁸²

This state practice was often referenced by the coupletists in the popular last stanza – the so-called censorship stanza – which highlighted the singer's desire to continue the

⁷⁸ 'Padesátý populární koncert Umělecké besedy', *Právo lidu* (17 January 1899): 1.

⁷⁹ Josef Kotek, *Šantán s červenou lucernou aneb Ať žije Baj-Kaj-Laj* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1985): 27–8.

⁸⁰ To illustrate, the anonymous couplet 'About the Prague Town Hall' (1893): '3. The Old Town Square/is not very pretty now/What is said of it/is just the tittle-tattle', 4. What's the use of walking slowly around it?/You want to poke us?/We're the wise fathers of the town/We'll tear it down!'

Then the author goes on to criticize the union of the two main Czech parties at the town hall (otherwise the main rivals), which have thus ensured their peace and inactivity, in the text associated with sitting together in a brewery: '12. Where the beer is brewed/it's a good place to be/our compromise in the brewery/makes for a good care'. Václav Pletka and Vladimír Karbusický, *Kabaretní písničky* (Prague: Státní hudební vydavatelství, 1961): 71. The selected excerpts are drawn from straightforward couplets. It is regrettable that the more textually imaginative couplets, which are characterized by a playful use of language, are almost untranslatable.

⁸¹ The criticism is considerably vaguer in this instance. To illustrate, we may cite the 'General Litany', signed by Fr. L. (1895): '3. That the representatives in the Imperial Council defend the interests of the people!/That the Germans should vote together with the Czechs in the accident insurance!/That the government should also grant subsidies to beggars!/That the peasants be forgiven their contributions!/That the little baroness should sell matches in the street!/That the binders should grow fat on their wages!/[Chorus sung by all:] It's never been done before!' Pletka and Karbusický, *Kabaretní*, 78.

⁸² In Prague alone, nearly 6,000 couplets and other concert pieces were censored in 1898. 'Z pražské policejní statistiky', *Právo lidu* (22 January 1899): 5.

theme but their inability to do so without risking censorship or imprisonment.⁸³ The judicial response to the couplets encompassed a broader range of offenses than merely insulting the state, the monarch, or, most frequently, individual nationalities. Additionally, transgressions of morality were habitually manifested in overt eroticism. Insults directed at private individuals were also subject to legal scrutiny. The ensuing lawsuits were regularly documented in the press. For example, a plethora of articles were published in response to an incident in which the celebrated operetta diva Mařenka Zieglerová felt offended by a couplet. Karel Hašler, the author of the lyrics, had likened her popularity in Prague to that of female murderers from Central European cities. This episode made the couplet, originally sung at an actor's gala, even more famous, especially after Hašler sang it in court.⁸⁴

Exaggerated sentimentality and ironic humour defined how urban folklore portrayed reality.⁸⁵ The creation of couplets was not only based on urban folklore, but often remained a part of it, with successful couplets circulating in the popular urban environment in various adapted versions. Commercially printed pamphlets were more likely to capture the humorous aspects of couplet production, as they were designed for a variety of social entertainment events. In contrast, manuscript compendia often disseminated sentimental songs that were less timely but more enduring, and which persisted for decades.

The performance of itinerant national singers, which was associated with Prague districts, pubs, and Prague characters, like the *Pepíci*, was filled with the nostalgia associated with ageing, memories of youth, the unfair fate of life, and the poverty of these wandering musicians. The imagined historical geography of Prague was musically reconstructed, mythologizing the lower-class past as a form of communal fellowship that resembled an idealized rural community. The most renowned song, which effectively became an emblem of this urban folk-like environment, was the anonymous 'Gone, Oh Gone Is Everything' (mid-nineteenth century).⁸⁶ This song was attributed to a legendary Prague character, a trained lawyer and former MP who was impoverished due to unhappy love and subsequent alcoholism. The song proliferated rapidly due to its appearance in a short playlet *Batalion* (1893) performed in František Leopold Šmíd's chantant 'U zlatého soudku' (At the Golden Barrel) about the fate of this vagabond and the defunct legendary underworld *Batalion* pub:

I shed tears for you that you don't love me
I feel sorrow in my heart that you are going away from me
Gone and gone is everything, gone is my hope
now I weep like a child
what good is it to me?⁸⁷

Another popular anonymous song from the late nineteenth century that also expressed a strong connection to Prague sung the verses 'I am an orphan born in Prague/I have no father/I don't know my mother/I am abandoned.// ... // Prague, my Prague/you are the mother of cities/you have thousands of children/I am an orphan'. (1890s)⁸⁸ The image of townspeople sitting over a beer and moved to tears by a song sung together is a

⁸³ Anonymous: 'Every citizen be taken aback' (Early twentieth century): 'I would sing to you even more/but I have to stop/I could easily be jailed for this song'. Pletka and Karbusický, *Kabaretní*, 82.

⁸⁴ 'Episoda z cirku', *Národní listy* (7 October 1911): 2; "'Nad naší Prahu není'", (14 October 1911): 2; 'Ku procesu pí. M. Zieglerové proti p. K. Hašlerovi', *Národní listy* (18 October 1911): 4; 'Ještě ku procesu paní. M. Zieglerové proti panu K. Hašlerovi', *Národní listy* (19 October 1911): 4; "'Nad naší Prahu není'", (31 October 1911): 2; 'Paní Marie Zieglerová proti p. K. Hašlerovi', *Národní politika* (1 November 1911): 11.

⁸⁵ Pletka and Karbusický, *Písňe*, 93.

⁸⁶ Kotek, *Šantán*, 118.

⁸⁷ Pletka and Karbusický, *Písňe*, 29, 30.

⁸⁸ Pletka and Karbusický, *Písňe*, 27.

frequently recurring motif in literature. It is often presented as a satirical portrayal of the petite bourgeoisie's lack of taste, written from a culturally elitist perspective. Both songs refer to childhood and motherhood, two unavoidable symbols of the return within nostalgic reflection.⁸⁹

Authors of couplets were inclined to integrate the nostalgic with the humorous in their works. Large exhibitions were an important social event in Prague at the turn of the century and were often associated with songs that were sung *en masse* in a specially built restaurant for each particular exhibition. These songs remained in the memory of the people of Prague as music that brought them together in a moving collective experience.⁹⁰ The most popular couplet of the Prague Jubilee Exhibition of 1891, which initiated this series of popular exhibitions, was Jaroslav Prager's 'For Once We Are in the World'. This song alternates between humorous verses about spending money in pubs and the mournful, nostalgic refrain on the passage of time: 'For once we are in the world/youth like a bud will blossom/old age is coming to meet us/so young we will meet no more!'⁹¹

This nostalgic tone characterized the music of cabarets in the period preceding the First World War. Of particular note is Karel Hašler's series of Old Prague Songs, which strongly evoke the spirit of old Prague as a kind of pastoral idyll eroded by industrialization and urban renewal. These songs achieved considerable popularity and became part of popular music well into the twentieth century: 'On the old castle steps/on the stone steps/every evening a maiden walks/holding hands with a boy/her heart is deceived/.../Up the stairs he leads her/to the Golden Lane/and there, in a house painted with mud and clay/he kisses her' (1900s).⁹² Jiří Červený's songs from Hradec, such as 'On the old ramparts' (1910s), evoke a similar mood of youthful longing: 'On the ramparts of Hradec/to you, my love/I remembered how you betrayed me/.../and every tear/grew into a primrose/and so my pain was gone'.⁹³

An even stronger nostalgia distinguished the repertoire of Kmoch's band, with folk-like music where a sense of longing for the innocence of childhood merged with an idealized vision of youth (most often located in a rural environment). This mythical pastoral past became a source of mourning and yearning for the new urbanites. These nostalgic affects were frequently associated with lost loves⁹⁴ as well as with the figure of the mother.⁹⁵ This was juxtaposed with a patriotic discourse that celebrated the unity of old Czechs, their fighting spirit, their patriotism, and the beauty of the Czech lands in other songs from Kmoch's band repertoire.⁹⁶ Furthermore, as it often is the case in moments of nostalgic

⁸⁹ See Dylan Trigg, 'Nostalgia and Childhood', in *The Routledge Handbook of Nostalgia*, ed. Tobias Becker and Dylan Trigg (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025): 201–12.

⁹⁰ For instance, the title (and refrain) of the most renowned of these compositions, *Baj-Kaj-Laj* (1908, by Jiří Chocholouš and Karel Pospíšil), which celebrates both Prague and beer consumption, has, to a certain extent, become synonymous with period songwriting (see the title of the cited Kotek's book *Chantan with the Red Lantern or Long Live Baj-Kaj-Laj*) and is, in the present day, albeit in a parodic context, quoted in popular songs of the last few decades (for example 'Jinej svět' by Hudba Praha or 'V Praze v místech, kde jsou Kotce' by Jiří Vodňanský and Petr Skoumal).

⁹¹ Kotek, *Šantán*, 106.

⁹² Pletka and Karbusický, *Kabaretní*, 128.

⁹³ Pletka and Karbusický, *Kabaretní*, 132.

⁹⁴ 'Green groves, you were once mine/you were once my heart's delight/But now for a long time/I have not heard a bird's voice/the sky has shown a sad time'. František Kmoch, 'Zelený hájové', in *Zpěvníček*.

⁹⁵ 'And the beautiful native land is our true mother/everyone will be happy to return to her/as he would to his mother/and she protects her family/she will not let you perish/you should live there as in your garden'. Saša Ražov and Jiří Červený, 'Vždy milá', in *Zpěvníček*.

⁹⁶ 'Small castle, small castle/you're on a nice little hill/That's where I spent my youth/among my friends/with the small castle beer//Czechs, Czechs, you were once heroes/Love your country and your nation/don't let them perish/Czechs and heroes'. 'Kolíně, Kolíně', in *Zpěvníček*.

retrospection, nostalgia was here coupled with an implicit feeling of dissatisfaction with the current state of affairs.⁹⁷ This is clearly evident in the still-performed piece 'Czech Music':

We will not let them take away our rights and our language
 whoever dares to attack us, we will show him (literally: we will play him)
 Czech music has always played well
 it has never been afraid
 Let's start the forte now, enough of all these worries
 what musicians we are, let the whole world know.⁹⁸

The patriotic themes are particularly pronounced in the waltz 'By the Silver-Foamed Elbe', which was conceived by Kmoch as a musically Czech variation on Richard Strauss's 'The Blue Danube' (literally in German 'By the Beautiful Blue Danube'):

The Elbe flows through the meadows of flowers
 the sun shines on its path/high above our heads
 The ears of corn are ripening
 the lark is singing a happy song about that beautiful Czech land
 where I have my cradle
 Where a man has spent his youth
 there he will always see his earthly paradise
 The land of your birth beckons you to return
 the grove welcomes you with its song
 and May blossoms again in your heart
 And if your life is short, you'll be glad to come home again
 The Elbe flows through.⁹⁹

The nostalgic patriotism in this case takes full force with the invocation of Prague, the mother of Czech cities, as it appears in the song 'Our Golden Prague': 'An ancient song tells us/that the city of stone hills is golden on all sides/when May comes down on its wings'.¹⁰⁰

The patriotic tone of these songs, performed by the Kmoch orchestra at various national festivals, elicited a fervent response from listeners and dancers. Throughout Kmoch's career, references to the enthusiastic response of the audience (an aspect that was notably absent from the reviews of symphonic music concerts) regularly appeared in the press. The audience often requested the repetition of the most popular songs, as the reports show:

The popular march of his 'Bands, Bands' was demanded by the audience on both days and cheered until it was repeated. But a particularly sensational success was achieved by the march 'Hey, Gretel', whose sung trio has a charming text and a delightful melody, and whose last verse provoked such a burst of applause from the audience that it had to be repeated three times. And the willing Kmoch played, and the choir sang: 'We have enjoyed a May evening in the bloom of youth, better than after death in paradise are the joys'.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ 'Czechia is ploughing there/our dear mother/she wants to plough up our ancient rights/Our ancient rights are buried there/trampled into the ground by cruel enemies/They were buried there in that unequal struggle/Lord grant that the nation's wound may be healed/Only our mother, plough on and on'. Karel Tůma, 'Sokolský den', in *Zpěvníček*.

⁹⁸ 'Česká muzika', in *Zpěvníček*.

⁹⁹ František Kudrna, 'Na stříbropěnném Labi', in *Zpěvníček*.

¹⁰⁰ O. L. Štastný, 'Naše zlatá Praha', in *Zpěvníček*.

¹⁰¹ 'Všestudentská slavnost', *Národní politika* (30 May 1905): 5.

In other reviews of the band's concerts, the ecstatic effect of Kmoch's music was mixed with reports on the affective response of young Slavic patriots:

Concert piece after concert piece, song after song, all impressively performed, powerfully effective. Our national anthems, the anthems of the various Slavic nations, and especially the French Marseillaise, captivated the crowds. Their performance was always rewarded with long, thunderous applause, and a hundred shouts could be heard calling for the performance of a particular anthem to be repeated. ... Imagine that you can hear the frequent deafening clapping and cheering of a hundred and a hundred young heroes. ... The most cheerful atmosphere, however, was in the great hall. This is where Mr Kmoch and his band took refuge. The enthusiasm and exuberance of the whole island were now concentrated here.¹⁰²

One of the aforementioned national train journeys by Czech nationalists to the German-inhabited border region was described in detail in a multi-part report in *Národní listy* in August 1889. The journey, which culminated in a conflict between German workers and Czech visitors in a factory where the Czech patriots had arrived unannounced, was accompanied from morning to evening by the sounds of Kmoch's band, which played at all stops, during the evening entertainment, and the morning wake-up call. In addition to the habitual enthusiasm for Kmoch's music, which was complemented by the passionate speeches of the politicians, the atmosphere led to scenes of mass emotion. For instance, in Kdyně, a city on the Czech–German border, where the mayor spoke about the local early medieval victory of the Czech duke's troops over the armies of the German Empire: 'The train was also received very warmly in Kdyně. At the station, the Sokol [association] of the town of Kdyně assembled under its banner and its mayor, Mr. Fr. Tšída, co-owner of a machine embroidery factory, addressed the excursionists with such enthusiasm that many were moved to tears'.¹⁰³

Conclusion

The important processes that Czech society was undergoing during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century – including capitalist modernization, industrialization, urbanization, democratization of everyday life, and national exclusion – found expression in and were accompanied by two distinct forms of music that were popular among the lower and petit bourgeois classes. The first of these is brass band music, which gradually specialized in the performance of folk-like songs. This new type of urban folklore was inspired by former folkloric expressions that had been deemed outdated by the social elite and their highbrow culture. Brass band folk-like music, like that made so popular by Kmoch's band, became thus the nostalgic vehicle for audiences to externally manifest the emotional effect caused by the rapid transformation of the Czech lands, particularly in the city of Prague. The image evoked in this repertoire is that of an idyllic pre-modern national society, based on a peaceful rural life in harmony with nature.

This musical repertoire, discussed in this article, created an array of images that evoked patriotism and nostalgia for the heroic Czech nation, the dominance of the Czech language, and the idyllic Czech landscape. In popular songs, lyricists created a mystical image of the lost paradise of the Czech countryside, its simple rural life, first loves of life, and memories of beloved parents and, in general, the close, uncomplicated interpersonal relationships of the past. A comparable adoration was also articulated in songs concerning Golden Prague,

¹⁰² 'Oslava svátku studentstva na Žofíně', *Národní listy* (25 May 1891): 2.

¹⁰³ 'Výlet na Šumavu', *Národní listy* (21 August 1889): 3.

yet in its former, pre-modern vanishing state, which was idealized and mourned as the lost country had been before. The sense of loss experienced in relation to this idealized version of national, personal and social life was often associated with the memory of deceased ancestors and increased the nostalgic recreation of a lost paradise in the studied music.

Prague's coupletists also recalled the legendary human types of Prague's pubs and corners, and poignantly evoked the feeling of experiencing the loss of youth. Prague cabaret musicians consolidated these topics in the repertoire of the era by establishing a distinct genre of old Prague songs, which evoked a serene life in a vanishing city. They did so in a similar manner as brass bands mystically depicted a pre-modern rural idyll. As the twentieth century progressed, brass band folk-like music was widely embraced as authentically national, a feeling that peaked during the interwar period and remained popular even under socialism. Urban popular genres like *Schlager*, though commercially successful, were then dismissed as cosmopolitan and decadent. Communist cultural policy in the 1950s largely erased urban genres, replacing them with socialist music and later global pop, leaving *Schlager* to be remembered mainly through nostalgic revivals. In contrast, brass bands endured as symbols of Czech national identity through their nostalgic appeal and their promise of preserving traditional values amid modernization.

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