

Reflections of Choral Singing

by Jan Matys

Summer School of Early Music

In my school years (1951 – 1959) singing was a part of many activities: besides the music education itself, we sang also in the lessons of physical education, language teaching, as well as at various leisure-time activities like water sport, hiking, on the way to the mountains etc. Later on, at the technical college, there was no music education, but each Tuesday there was a practice of “*building-up*” songs¹; our class missed that because we had practice in the workshop that day. As I dwelt on the viola those times, so I didn't find time for singing.

In the year 1970, when I started work in Tesla Electronic Company at *Rožnov pod Radhoštěm*², I joined the local music band, which played Moravian folklore. I soaked up the Wallachian folklore and the harmony, but it wasn't good for my voice – one was singing loudly all the time. Later on, when I left Rožnov, I had to cure myself of bad habits.

In 1983, while I lived in Slovakia, I got to know of the *Early Music Society*, founded by Miroslav Venhoda, the pioneer of authentic interpretation of early music³. I had been fond of early music since my studies at University, so I decided to join this body. The Society started to organize the *Summer School of Early Music*, first at Kroměříž, later on at Valtice, South Moravia. The School took place at the end of every school year and lasted for two weeks. I missed the first cycle, but since then I was taking part at the School regularly. I always took with the viola (or viola d'amore) and a bicycle, so that I could go swimming in the nearby ponds.

Among the participants, there were advanced amateurs, as well as students of conservatory or Academy of Music, including foreigners. Classes of the baroque violin were given by three lecturers – Dagmar Zárubová from Prague, Sonia Monosoff from Cornell University (USA) and Catherine Mackintosh from UK. I had completed a few lessons, both in solo and ensemble playing the viola, but I was more attracted by singing – both choral singing and the Gregorian Chant.

There were 4 choir masters and the singers could choose the class and they could also participate in more classes simultaneously. Among the choirmasters the most popular was James Griffet; he was always encircled by a drove of boys and girls. The leadership of the courses was concerned about him, as the other choir masters were lacking singers – all of them would like to sing in Griffet's class. Finally, after a few years they said him that he wouldn't be invited for the next year.

Accidentally, I met Mr. Griffet in the wine cellar that time and he approached me. He was disappointed and asked me what was the matter. He said it could be settled; nevertheless, the leadership was intractable. I bought two CDs from him with his singing as a memento.

1 Budovatelské písně

2 Tesla Rožnov

3 stará, předklasická hudba

I always attended the class of German choirmaster *Hellmuth Franke*. We mostly studied Protestant sacred music. Mr. Franke spoke some Czech and he had a Czech wife. Each of us had to learn his music himself. The choir could sing by sight, individual voices were not rehearsed. In the last rehearsal and the concert the singers of various voices were mixed in such a way that not more than two singers of the same voice could stand next each other.

The *Gregorian Chant* is mostly for one voice, sometimes there are two voices led in fifths. We used the historical notation – rectangular notes in the four-line stave with interpretation signs (*neum*) under and above the staves. The ensemble (lat. *Schola*) is led by the first singer. We learned a lot about history of the sacred music.

Mixed-Voice Choir SUDOP⁴

Choral singing was an important component of the Czech National Revival. The first Czech chorus *Hlahol* was founded by *Bedřich Smetana*. In the end of 19th Century there were mostly male choirs, women were included when necessary. Consequently, in the choral singing repertoire of that time male choruses prevail. In the 70th years of last Century, there were still 3 male choirs in Prague⁵; now there is only one of them. There are no men among teachers now and music disappeared from the curriculum. The deficit of male singers could be partly remedied by boy's choirs. They are a little specific – boys have to stop singing during the change of voice.

I joined choir SUDOP in the year 1988, but I sang there for half a year only. It was only in 2004, when I stopped teaching⁶ that I turned back to SUDOP, which was now led by Dagmar Kohoutová, a former member of the Czech Philharmonic Choir. There was a very good party, but the rehearsals were very tedious for me – there were differently advanced singers, and each section of music must have been repeated many times, each voice separately. The repertoire included the Czech Christmas Mass by Jakub Jan Ryba, Christmas carols as well as songs by Dvořák, Fibich and other romantic composers. The choir appeared at various halls – at the Main Railway Station, at UNITARIA, at Castle Křivoklát and others.

When I found an announcement that the St James Choir⁷ is looking for new singers, I succumbed to temptation. In the period of “lack of freedom” under the Communist rule, St James Basilica was a Mecca of sacred music. The mixed-voice choir and orchestra under *Josef Hercl* performed masterpieces of sacred music here, attracting wide attention. The choir even gained some support from abroad. After passing of Josef Hercl the baton was passed to *Tomáš Čechal*, horn player in the FOK Symphonic Orchestra.

Nonetheless, the new times after the year 1989 brought new problems. The financial sources dried up and there was no money remuneration for soloists and players. After some conflicts with the church authority, the choir and the conductor left the Basilica. The baton was then passed to *Jakub Zicha*, the choirmaster of the Academic Chorus VUS.

4 State Institute of Transport Projecting

5 *Prague Teacher's Choir* (PSPU), *Smetana* and *Typografia*

6 See my Memories at www.technologie-kvalita.cz/honza

7 Svatojakubský sbor

8 Vysokoškolský umělecký soubor

St James Choir

I joined the choir in November 2007 and right away I started to sing on the gallery. There were about 20 singers in the choir, so we had enough place for walking or doing some gymnastic in the breaks between individual movements of the composition; some singers even read books during the service. The organ was a big one with many registers. At the organ there was a phenomenal improviser Ota Novák, who had played at the St Vitus Cathedral before.

Some of the singers came from the Academic Choir VUS, and some came from other church choirs; there were even professional singers. I was feeling quite well among them. There only was one older man who didn't like to sing next to me, saying that I was hissing. As a chamber musician, I probably had a more expressive delivery than the others, but the choirmaster had no objections as to me.

During the five years when I acted in the choir, we had prepared and performed a lot of compositions – *a capella* ones, with organ or with an orchestra. Masterpieces, such like the *Requiem* by Mozart or *Stabat Mater* by Dvořák, which needed a big choir and orchestra, were performed together with the VUS. All the performances were recorded and hanged on the WEB, so that we could replay and study them at home.

The rehearsals started with a thorough warm-up. If we studied a new piece, Mr. Zicha played a part of the score on the piano, and then we sang it through, all voices together. At difficult places only voices were practiced individually. Sight-singing capability was a prerequisite. Mr. Zicha didn't much dwell on pronunciation of Latin texts and the meaning of the compositions; this would probably have needed more time. Nonetheless, the listeners are able to recognize whether singers understand the text or not. This can be demonstrated by Talich's interpretation of *Stabat Mater* by Antonín Dvořák.

Once Mr. Zicha passed the study of one composition on the second conductor, who normally sang tenor in the choir. We studied the piece quite consequently under him and worshipers applauded during the service (which is unusual). I wished we had studied more compositions that way!

During the time, less and less believers took part on the masses and the Church collected less money. Possibly it was due to excessively long preaching of padre *Oldřich Prachař*, which sometimes made people laugh. Once again, there was little money for paying the soloist and musicians and Mr. Zicha had to choose such compositions only that could be performed with minimum musicians and without soloists (the *solí* were sung by the choir). Besides that, most rooms of the Basilica were rented to some agency that was giving receptions for influential businessmen. It happened sometimes, that our rehearsal room was occupied and we had to wait or practice on the gallery. Paradoxically – the Church was renting its sanctuary to rich businessmen and they had no money to remunerate poor and dedicated musicians at the same time.

The Prague Teacher's Choir

I was invited to join this oldest male choir by my friend, who acted in several Praguean choirs. The choir was led by the “*Golden Amos*” *Libor Sládek*, teacher of a grammar school; he had started his singing carrier right here, in this choir. In my 65 years of age I belonged to the youngest here...

The choir, continuing old traditions, sang mostly Czech classics, i.e. works by Smetana, Dvořák, Janáček, and especially the choral works by *Josef Bohuslav Foerster*, at whose grave the choir regularly sang on the day of his death. Another regular act was the manifestation at the grave of *Jan Palach*, the student who committed suicide as a protest against resignation of the society on the values of Prague Spring 1968. The act consisted of a speech delivered by a historian and then we sang the Czechoslovak National Anthem for memory of our former state. There was an old member of *Sokol* on the *Guard of Honor*, standing at the grave.

There were not many people present; lately Jan Palach got an official honor by the Parliament and a memorial was built in his native village *Všetaty*. But God knows, what would this young man, who “*burnt for the truth*”, would feel in the present society, where “*Truth and Love*” are (for many people) dirty words.

Another traditional undertaking of Prague Teachers was musical accompaniment of the laying of wreathes in front of the students hostels, where the Nazi dragged Czech students away on *November 17th 1939*. The students were then sent to concentration camps and their leaders were executed. On memory of this event, this date has been celebrated all over the world as *International Students' Day*. Originally, there were male choirs singing there, recently the baton has been passed to the *Mixed Voice Choir of Charles University*. The *November 17th* is also celebrated at other places in Prague – it's the *Velvet Revolution* that is being celebrated there. Once there were reporters of the Chinese TV at that action and they asked me about my motivation to come here.

When I joined the Teacher's Choir, it was still at full strength; during the next years however, the singers started to drop off. One of our last performances was participation in a display of male choirs at the *Prague Academy of Music*⁹. When we prepared the music for the concert, I passed from the baryton voice to the 2nd tenor group to help them. However, at the stage I was not quite sure to sing so high. As we started one polyphonic piece, I relied on my colleagues and they relied on me. As a result, we stood silent on the stage. Luckily we caught up in the following measures. On our last performance we sang together with junior choir *Boni Pueri*. We performed the composition “*Spring is opening*” by *Zdeněk Lukáš* for male choir and violin, and the piece *True Love* by *Leoš Janáček*.

Some of us took part at various public actions, e.g. singing the Czech Christmas Mass at the Charles Bridge or in the *Czech Museum of Music*. Once in the summertime I participated in a concert of works by *Bedřich Smetana*. There were presented his early, less known compositions as well as his rape works there. I participated in performing the last piece, the *Czech Song*¹⁰ for mixed-voice choir and symphonic orchestra.

9 Akademie múzických umění

10 Česká píseň

The Mixed-Voice Choir of Hvozdnice

When I settled at Sloup¹¹, in 2009, I got the information that there was a mixed-voice choir at Hvozdnice (about 2 km away), seated at the Evangelic chapel. There were 3 Fatal Sisters at its origin: the parish priest *Vendula Glancová*, the conductor *Veronika Kopecká* and the mayoress of Hvozdnice *H elena Kučerová*. I joined the choir in the year 2012 and I tried to catch up on my three years' delay. In the choir's repertoire, the sacred music and negro spirituals prevailed. The performing of the Czech Christmas Mass in the Church of Jan the Baptist at Štěchovice with participation of soloists of National Theater was a great success, and it is then repeated every year. The choir also organizes a *New Year's Concert* at Hvozdnice and a display of amateur choirs at Štěchovice¹². It is being invited for performances in the nearby towns and villages.

Davle-Sloup, May 3, 2020



Hvozdnický smíšený sbor / Mixed-voice Choir of Hvozdnice

11 A part of Davle

12 Štěchovické zpěvobraní



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Sbor/ Chorus SUDOP



Svatojakubský sbor/Saint James Chorus



Pěvecké sdružení pražských učitelů/ Prague Teachers' Choir



Letní slunovrat ve Vojanových sadech/Midsummer in Vojanovy sady, Prague