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Local Sounds? Fieldwork, YouTube, and "Romanian" Cimbalom in Moravian Slovakia

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"Perhaps you've seen my things with U2?" the cimbalom player Petr Pavlinec asked me. I had certainly never heard of any Moravian musicians collaborating with such high profile Western musicians. After a half-hour or so of conversation about cimbalom playing in Pavlinec's hometown of Velká nad Veličkou, I had just been thinking that I was beginning to get a general idea of his career as a solo cimbalom player. While it is not common to make a living as a cimbalom soloist, it seemed unlikely to attract the attention of a world-famous rock band. I answered that I wasn't familiar with them, and our conversation continued. The question, however, stuck in my mind.

Later, Pavlinec showed me around his studio. As we walked into a back room, I noticed a large cimbalom in the center of the room and a second near a side wall. What attracted my attention most, however, was an expansive workspace in the left corner with a computer, a flat screen monitor, speakers, all surrounded by a mess of tapes, photos, and DVDs. After demonstrating a few pedagogical etudes on the cimbalom, he asked whether I was interested in seeing the films on "U2." I realized that, where I had heard "U2" before, Pavlinec had been saying "YouTube." "I've found clips of a famous Romanian singer," he continued, "a lot of great Gypsy musicians, some Budapest cimbalom players, and Slovakian musicians." It was obvious that he saw some connection between himself and a larger field of musical activity that stretched across central and eastern European areas and cultures. YouTube, it seemed, helped maintain this felt link between musicians in relatively distant places.

I would like to consider here how these media affect and inundate the lives of the musicians I talked with, as well as the significance of media for ethnomusicologists in the field. I am going to use two video examples and a historical comparison. To begin, I want to return to Velká, the location at hand, and consider why I was surprised to meet a tech-savvy musician in the rural Moravian countryside.

Visiting Velká in 2006: The Scene

The town of Velká nad Veličkou—Velká for short—perches in the southeastern corner of the Czech Republic in a region of southern Moravia sometimes called "Moravian Slovakia" [*moravské Slovácko*]. Velká is home to just over 3,000 people. My first experience of Velká came on a sweltering weekend in July 2006 when I visited the town's famous musical festival, the *Hornácké slavnosti*. From Brno—the city where I lived during my fieldwork stay in 2005 and 2006—I made a two-and-a-half hour trip by train. The track wound east and south, zigzagged through the low Chřiby hills, and dipped into the valley of the Morava River through the town of Kyjov. After transferring to a small one-car train, the tracks followed a slight but steady incline upward into the low hills of the Bílé Karpaty, winding through wheat fields before reaching the train station of Velká, perched on the edge of a valley formed by the Velička River.

The town lay peacefully below the station in the valley, but before going into the town, I backtracked a short bit around the bend in the tracks where a surprising vista opened up. While the grade up to Velká was not great, the generally low horizon beyond the languorous fields showed that we had climbed to an understated sort of plateau. Haze obscured the edges of the distant horizon and the thick air, darkening in the distance, was oppressively heavy with summer heat. Czech ethnographers dub the area *hornácko* (from the root word *hora*, "mountain"). The area was recognized in print as early as 1889 by linguist František Bartoš who claimed that only nine villages, all smaller than Velká, comprised the region (Jančář 2000, 19). The region is said to have one of the few "uninterrupted" folklore traditions in south Moravia.¹ The name *hornácko* inevitably calls up associations of musicians and gives the Velká festival its name.

Though somewhat indulgent, I could not help but thinking of a possible parallel between my visit to Velká with those of folklorist and composer Leoš Janáček a century before. Things had obviously changed since Janáček's time, but it was still a pleasing thought to see myself on the trail of an earlier ethnomusicologist. My imagination was fueled by a series of black-and-white photographs of Janáček's field collecting trips from the 1890s, images that had taken on sepia tones in my memory. The photographs show musicians in village

1 E.g., Plocek 2003, 42.

dress; many were taken when the musicians visited cities to perform in concerts organized by Janáček. Though his direct influence on the scene in 2006 was dim in local memory, the fact of his trips was certainly not lost, as far as I could tell, in the popular mythmaking about the traditional culture of this area. Velká has long been presented as a particularly significant center of folk music, and I suspected that its folkloric image and stature began to grow around the time of Janáček's visits. Janáček's Trips to Velká.

Born in 1854, Janáček was working as music teacher in Brno by the 1880s. During summer vacations, he frequently traveled around the Moravian countryside and collected folk music and songs. Janáček began visiting Velká at the behest of Martin Zeman, a local teacher, whom Janáček met in 1891. Janáček's first visit to Velká in September 1891 and again in 1892, 1893, and 1907.

The composer was seemingly enchanted with the musical world he encountered in Velká.² "Without question, the little town of Velká is the most important center of the clean style [*čistý sloh*] of folk music [*lidová hudba*] in Slovácko," Janáček declared in 1892. "Up to this point," he continued, "I have not become aware of similar places even in Valachia or Lachia."³

Janáček was clearly seen as a principal mediator between the urban and educated space of Brno and the rural countryside, at least to the city community. Brno was the provincial capital and Janáček's primary place of residence, and its citizens appear to have been fascinated by Velká as well. Following Janáček's 1892 visit to Velká, the paper *Moravské listy* reported (9 November 1892): "Mr. Director Janáček lingered during his vacation this year in Velká in Slovakia; there and in the surroundings he found very beautiful national harmonic music [*krásná harmonická hudba národní*]. Five musicians always play: *primás* [lead fiddler], *kontrás* [second fiddle], bassist, bagpiper, and *cimbál* [cimbalom]."⁴

Velká Revisited: Rethinking the "Local"

Janáček's trips, usually carried out during his summer vacations, present a somewhat timeless view of "the folk" in Velká, and after my July visit to Velká it seemed almost possible that the town existed in an eternal present of summer. When I returned to Velká in December 2006, however, the gray skies and occasional whiff of pungent coal smoke reminded me how much this idealized vision had elided with reality in my imagination. With the major summer festival over, Velká's public face, looked slightly different. The festival was clearly an extraordinary event. Velká seemed less remarkable—another Czech village, albeit home to a famous cimbalom player and legendary "uninterrupted" folklore traditions. Local folklore did not seem to be eternally on the surface of Velká's cultural life, and the community seemed to be more in step with the "outside world" than it seemed in July.⁵

Yet my vision of Velká as summery haven was only one idealization that this visit shattered. My second visit caused me to engage with how I thought about "the local." Arjun Appadurai's discussion of the local (1996, 178) had significantly driven my initial research field proposal. He describes locality as a "complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts." This sentiment follows Appadurai's contention that "the imagination has now acquired a singular new power in social life" (53). The spread of mass media, he suggests, has facilitated larger spread of imagined possibilities, particularly for people who have not had

2 In 1892, he invited Velká fiddler Pavel Trn to perform in Brno; in 1893 he applied for a travel and research grant to visit Velká and collect local music (the application, to the Czech Academy of Emperor Franz Josef for Science, Literature, and Art, was denied.); and in 1895, he brought Trn's fiddle group to Prague for an appearance at the Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition.

3 He continues, "The industrial plants, which flooded the terrain along the Lubina and Ostravice rivers washed away the old-fashioned [*starobyly*] songs just as they did the dances." The statement was published in the article "Musical Synopses of Folk Dances in Moravia" [*Osnovy hudební lidových tanců na Moravě*], published in the Czech ethnographic journal *Český lid* (volume 3, 494–509). The study is reprinted in Vysloužil 1955, 186–200; see also Procházková 2006, 295. Valachia and Lachia are ethnographic regions north of Slovácko.

4 This was presumably publicity for a public concert that Janáček organized on 20 November 1892 that featured musicians from Velká. The passage is quoted by Vysloužil (1955, 40 n. 3) who notes that this is an "interesting group, the bagpiper is particularly surprising."

5 Thus, folklore in Velká might hew closer to the definition given in the *Czech Dictionary of Musical Culture* (the seeming mouthpiece of orthodox Czech musicologists), which defines "folk song" [*lidová píseň*] as song "with its genesis and primary function bound to plebeian space, that is, to the life of so-called base levels of pre-industrial, and to some extent also industrial, society" [*svou genezí i primární funkci vázána na lidové prostředí, tj. na život tzv. základních vrstev společnosti předindustriální a zčásti též industriální*] (quoted in Procházková 2006, 15). The definition leaves no room for technology or media.

considerable prior access to such imagined spaces.⁶ This looked good on paper, of course, but little of my previous field research had pointed in these directions, and I had not fully considered how such imagined spaces influenced me just as much as they may local residents.

The purpose of my visit was to meet cimbalom player Petr Pavlinec. I had known about Pavlinec for a few months, though his personality remained enigmatic. A reference came from a violinist in Brno with the caveat that Pavlinec did not flaunt virtuosity, but boasted a rich musicality "nurtured in the sun." Another musician's remarks, however, indicated that Pavlinec favored "Romanian melodies" because they were best suited to his "talent and ambition," which gave me a slightly different image of Pavlinec.⁸ I also learned that Pavlinec was highly trained, holding degrees in music performance and education; he also taught at a children's arts school in Velká.

Pavlinec, meeting me at the door to his house in jeans and a flannel shirt, seemed personable enough. Over hot fruit tea with lemon, a welcome tonic against the bitter wind outside, he was eager to tell me about the diverse musical history and cultural influences in Velká, and not just about Janáček's visits. During and after Janáček's time, music-making in Velká saw influences from various ethnic groups. Pavlinec made sure that I noted a few examples. Foremost was the violinist of Romani origin, Jožka Kubík. Kubík was a descendant of a violinist Janáček had identified in Velká by the name "Cigan" or "Gypsy." Kubík's family had a marked influence on local music. Kubík solidified the place of the cimbalom in local bands, Pavlinec told me, particularly due to his contact with other musicians during army service (see Holý 1984).⁹

Pavlinec noted a possible connection between himself and Romanian musicians via the "Carpathian crescent," a purported cultural connection between mountain peoples throughout the Carpathians, which stretch from northern Romania through modern Ukraine, Slovakia, and into Moravia, ending at the Bílé Karpaty.

The cimbalom itself connotes multiple histories and musical styles. It has a long history in the Czech lands, and its use in Moravian traditional music dates to the eighteenth century.¹⁰ Pavlinec's instrument, however, is a product of the nineteenth century. His large, 4-and-a-half octave instrument is based on the design of Josef Šunda, an instrument maker working in Budapest, who designed the expanded range, damper pedals, and added legs in the 1870s (see Kettlewell 2001). These instruments became highly popular in turn-of-the-century Budapest and similar instruments eventually spread to various points around the Austro-Hungarian empire. The instrument still carries "Hungarian" and "Gypsy" connotations in present-day Moravia.

These remarks and background formed my understanding of Pavlinec's cimbalom playing, at least up until he mentioned YouTube. I had not seriously considered the way that rural Moravian musicians might use media. I had heard of YouTube before, but I was not very familiar with it. In fact, the service had not even been founded until November 2005, months after I began my fieldwork. But it was ubiquitous when I returned home to Michigan: Time Magazine had just named "You" the person of the year for uploading "user-created

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- 6 Whether this translates into actual access, phenomenological reality, or even true possibility varies by each specific example, but the fact of the imaginary potentiality is Appadurai's focus. As he notes, the increased role of imagination does not mean that life conditions have necessarily improved for many people, but that "even the meanest and most hopeless of lives . . . are now open to the play of the imagination" (Appadurai 1996, 54). "Thus, the biographies of ordinary people are constructions (or fabrications) in which the imagination plays an important role," not just as a "simple matter of escape," but a place in which "imaginary communities" are actively formed, expressed, and lived in (as it were, almost reified) (ibid.). I would also highlight the possibilities of "expressive" here. While it is undoubted that the constructions are imaginary, they are in some way expressive of something deeper yet perhaps more real. Perhaps music is one way to glimpse what this deeper something is.
 - 7 I received a copy of Pavlinec's CD *Musica Folklorica* (2005) from violinist Bohumil Smejkal, former director of the Brno Radio Orchestra of Folk Instruments. The remark is a paraphrase of Bohumil Smejkal's commentary in the CD liner notes, but it reflects the conversation I had with Smejkal in fall 2006 just a few months before meeting Pavlinec.
 - 8 "He [Pavlinec] is an exceptional phenomenon among cimbalom players in Moravia. . . . His talent and ambition excel in virtuosic playing, which makes him a natural at Romanian melodies." The remarks, attributed to Jaroslav Juráček, are publicized on Pavlinec's Web site, <http://www.pavlinec.wz.cz/>, accessed 11 April 2007. Plocek also remarks on Romanian melodies as a common direction among cimbalomists inclined toward showmanship (in comments on Pavlinec's track, CD 2 of *Proměny v čase* [Brno: Gnosis, 1999]).
 - 9 It is rumored that the only statue of a Romany in the Czech Republic is a bust of Kubík in the town of Kuželov, a village adjacent to Velká. An asteroid is also named after Kubík.
 - 10 See Uhlíková in Jančák 2000.

content" on Web services like YouTube. As they optimistically patted "us" all on the back, Time justified their choice as perfectly logical. "Who else?" they cajoled readers in a blurb.¹¹ Though largely unaware of these developments until returning to the United States, I wrote in my notes to the interview: "You really can find anything on YouTube."

Technology and the Local in the Field

The encounter significantly changed how I thought about people I had been interacting with for over a year. I had assumed that YouTube—and, to be honest, the Internet in general—had little impact on my research. One friend in Brno who used the Internet every day told me that she had also heard of YouTube but suggested that Czechs didn't use it much. But after learning that two other students of my cimbalom teacher in Brno had also uploaded videos of their cimbalom playing to YouTube, the phenomena seemed more intriguing. And after meeting Pavlinec, I no longer saw Czech villages as quite such small and self-contained worlds as before. They now seemed to be crisscrossed by myriad information networks,¹² mediascapes unseen to the casual observer but perhaps only a few steps beyond the front door.

As a demonstration, Pavlinec pointed out a video of Romica Puceanu, a Romanian singer. In the background you can hear the Romanian gypsy ensemble with two accordions, clarinet, cimbalom, and violins. What Pavlinec pointed out to me, and what we will hear in the second clip, was the cimbalom's polyrhythms: you will hear the cimbalom's generally triple subdivision of the beat contrasting with the overarching duple rhythm.¹³

While idealized visions of the past—which this grainy black-and-white clip might be yet another example—had in some ways informed my initial perceptions of Velká, these were challenged when Pavlinec mentioned YouTube in our conversation. The situation seemed to reverse the typical vision of the ethnomusicologist in the field, an image shaped by another family of sepia-toned photographs. Photographs of ethnomusicologists and phonographs—such as Bartók recording the songs of Hungarian peasants in 1907—seem most iconic of the mediated field encounter. A similar photograph from Moravia shows a collector operating a phonograph recorder, probably around 1912. This photograph may "tell" different stories, but it is doubtlessly in some way "about" the encounter with technology in the field and clearly places the collector as authority.¹⁴ Certainly, the subjects being recorded are never operating the equipment.

My field encounter with YouTube during my interview with Pavlinec seemed to reverse the situation. My informant was the bearer of the media and technology. (I had brought my minidisc, but my small condenser mic and battery-powered recorder seemed positively "low-tech" when faced by someone who had recorded multiple CDs, was at home in recording studios, often performed on amplified festival stages, and uploaded videos.) It certainly caused me to revise my impression of people living in small rural Moravian towns. Before my conversation with Pavlinec, I was more interested in why he integrated "Romanian" styles into his cimbalom playing, what these styles were, what they might mean, and how he learned them. Now I was most interested in how he used the Internet.¹⁵

Interactions with mass media by those we might term "locals" are often conceived of in terms of the "local" and the "global." Along these lines, it certainly seems that Pavlinec's computer is a portal to what might be called the "outside world." He is ensconced in a culturally rich community with a long history, but he is able to interact fluently with outside influences. He is able to communicate at some level with musicians outside Velká using high technology.

11 This was the lead-in for the Table of Contents of Time's December 25 issue (2006, vol. 168, no. 26), as if the choice were self-evident: "This was the year the people took control of the media. You changed the way we see ourselves, and the world we live in, forever."

12 The theory of global flows—operating in technoscapes, ideoscapes, ethnocapes, mediascapes, and finanscapes—comes from Appadurai 1996. Taylor adds the "infoscape" (Taylor 2001, 117).

13 At this point, a portion of the video of Romica Puceanu that Pavlinec had played was shown (<http://youtube.com/watch?v=N1rkKqdcck8>).

14 That is, perhaps the phonograph establishes the collector's authority, perhaps the photograph establishes the male in a dominant role, or perhaps we might see how the collector is somewhat enslaved by the boxes of equipment and paraphernalia required for the undertaking. For more on these issues, see Bohlman 2002, 23–26, 140–143, and Brady 1999, chs. 3 and 4.

15 Of course, there are other avenues of distributing information via the Internet. Pavlinec also maintains personal Web pages, one devoted to his solo playing and another dedicated to information about the cimbalom. In addition, he is the webmaster for three bands that he plays in, and he was one of the most responsive email correspondents that I have contacted in the Czech Republic.

Yet the example may actually problematize the global/local dichotomy. By focusing too much on large-scale implications, details and actual local responses may be overlooked. Studies of "media effects," suggests Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi (2002, 350), often omit discussions of "deeper shifts in cultural orientations and patterns of sociability, in modes of perception and information processing, that the advent of media create everywhere, albeit in different forms relative to the pre-existing local culture." On the other hand, ethnographic investigations of local media usages "warn us against generalized assumptions about media/cultural effects" and ultimately point out "different pairs of relations in which the site of the 'local' and the image of the 'global' are differently defined" (Sreberny-Mohammadi 2002, 351-352).¹⁶

Media effects in Velká negotiate more community-specific cultural and musical dichotomies, such as tensions between Western Europe/Eastern Europe (or, recast in more local terms, Bohemia/Moravia), established EU member states/new EU member states, our Europe ("domestic")/Other Europes ("exotic"). In musical terms the dichotomy might be characterized as average/virtuosic. In one of the videos Pavlinec uploaded we might hear some of these dichotomies playing out. You can hear that he is adopting an agitated rhythm to emulate the cimbalom in the Romanian video.¹⁷

Conclusion: Implications

If Pavlinec's media usage may be taken as at all representative of other local musicians in south Moravia, this case shows at least three major functions for the Internet. First, it is a forum to present, disperse, transmit, and access information. It allows audiences outside small towns access to sample performances, information about artists, and general information about local folklore, including events and descriptions. In this way, media is playing a role in keeping local identities vital. These forums generally speak to Czech, or specifically Moravian audiences, including specialists. Second, it presents new social spaces of interaction. For example, Paul Gifford a North American scholar who has written a global history of dulcimer-type instruments, has left short comments at Pavlinec's Web page and at his YouTube videos. It seems, however, that Moravian musicians do not necessarily desire two-way communication with Romanian musicians. Third, Internet media allow publicity a broader regional reach that allows musicians in small towns to market their recordings to larger audiences. Pavlinec's Web pages present not just musical information, but also "teasers." Mp3s are available for download, and his CDs are described. Videos of live performances are available, which may clinch a gig with an audience who needs an extra nudge to choose his band over another to play at a Moravian-themed company wine-tasting party. Moreover, the videos Pavlinec makes available on YouTube all feature the URL for his Web page.

Ethnographic perspectives offer alternative interpretive frames for local media effects. Even in seemingly isolated communities where older ideals are present, encountering media in the field may influence field approaches and personal expectations. After my encounter in Velká, I realized a significant and seemingly vibrant community of Internet users who were also folklore enthusiasts, some of whom were interested in using new media options as a way to expand their experience of folklore. While these media may not offer forums accessible to all, my experience has been that Czech-language folklore-oriented Internet communities and Web pages are surprisingly diverse, extensive, and active.¹⁸ In this case, it is not the "fact of YouTube" that seems significant, rather its saturation and usage in unexpected communities.¹⁹

16 In a survey of case studies, Sreberny-Mohammadi shows how localized media effects consistently reveal the "complex (re)negotiation of identity(ies) *vis-à-vis* the 'dominant' and the 'foreign' cultures, both of which shift in focus depending on the specific locale of the actor" (2002, 351). This, in her pre-Internet age study, deflates the hegemony of what she identifies as the "cultural imperialism" hypothesis, that First World media will gradually iron out cultural differentiation toward flat cultural homogenization.

17 At this point, a clip of Pavlinec's performance of "Hora si breaza" from YouTube was played (<http://youtube.com/watch?v=785VjY084Bg>).

18 Taylor notes that the Internet "tends to be a tool of the relatively affluent, educated, Western European, English-speaking male" (Taylor 2001, 208 n. 13). My example shows that locals in other places may use the Internet (albeit less than the average American) and consider its existence important.

19 The phrase is a paraphrase of the "fact of television," attributed to Cavell (quoted in Sreberny-Mohammadi 2002, 350).

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