

Morava viděna z vnějšku
Moravia from World Perspective

I

Výběr přednášek z 22. světového kongresu
Československé společnosti pro vědy a umění

Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci,
26. června až 4. července 2004

*Selected Papers from the 22th World Congress
of Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences*

*Palacký University Olomouc,
June 26 to July 4, 2004*

K vydání připravili / Edited by Tomáš Motlíček & Miloslav Rechcigl, Jr.

Repronis, Ostrava 2006

Performing "Českost" (Czechness): Polka Music & Musical Ethnicity at Wisconsin Czech-American Festivals¹

Jesse Johnston (*University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI*)

The polka—despite marginalization and stereotyping in American popular culture—exists all over the world and is popular among many groups of people in many places: from Indonesia to the Southwestern U.S., from Central Europe to India, from Paraguay to Wisconsin. My purpose here is not, however, to discuss polka music as it exists around the world, but instead to focus on its recent role in Wisconsin's Czech-American communities. Previous studies of Czech-American polka have affirmed that Czech-Americans do indeed dance the polka.² In this interpretive study, however, I focus on two Wisconsin Czech-American festivals to see what they reveal about polka music, Czech-Americanness, and broader considerations of music and ethnicity. Most importantly, I hope to share with you one glimpse of modern Czech-American culture.

In June 2003, I attended two annual Czech-American festivals in Wisconsin to investigate the polka's role in these events.³ First, I attended Český den in Hillsboro. The small, rural town of Hillsboro lies near the Mississippi River in the hilly southwestern corner of Wisconsin. Český den (Czech Day) was held outdoors under two large tents and a long, covered pavilion that served as a dining area at one end and a dance floor at the other. Because of its large population of Czech-Americans, Hillsboro has dubbed itself the Czech Capital of Wisconsin. Signs on the road into town display the importance of the community's ethnic background. I also attended the Twentieth Annual Phillips Czechoslovakian Festival, held in Phillips. Phillips is in Wisconsin's "Northwoods", approximately one-and-one-half hours south of Lake Superior by car. The festival took place in the Phillips High School. Many areas of the school were used, including the gymnasium, auditorium, and two cafeterias. Polka bands performed on the main stage in the gymnasium alongside the artists' booths, the auditorium hosted musical performances and a talent competition, and the common area served as a second stage for performances as well as a space for polka lessons.

Festival goers were never more than a few steps away from the constant polka music at both festivals. In Hillsboro, polka bands played all day in the pavilion, and one could easily hear polka music from any of the three main tents. Excluding a one-hour break from four to five o'clock (during the polka mass), the polka music performances were non-stop. Polka music was also ubiquitous at the Phillips festival. Because the festival was indoors, amplified music overpowered conversations and even other performances nearby. Since sounds from the band performances in the gymnasium, cafeteria, and common area were not clearly insulated, polka music dominated festival space.

Polkas and waltzes are the core of Czech-American polka music. For example, during a half-hour performance at Český den, the Cleve Bellin Orchestra played only waltzes and polkas.⁴ This is consistent with the oft-noted distinction between "polka" the dance and the umbrella term "polka music". Many "polka" bands play a variety of European-derived dance music, and "polka music" as a genre includes waltzes, schottisches, ländlers, mazurkas,

obereks, marches, and mixers.⁵ Although “polka music” is associated with couple dances of European origin, it has flourished as a genre most widely in the U.S. Polka music thus connotes an American musical genre.⁶

Links between Czech-Americans and the polka, however, run deeper than the general popularity of European dance music in the American Midwest. These links help explain the music’s ubiquity at the festivals. Materials at both festivals claimed the polka as an ethnically Czech dance. The 1988 Český den button depicts Anna Chadimová, who according to the Festival’s “Memorabilia Booklet”, “originated the polka in 1830”.⁷ At the Phillips Czech Fest, the polka was also identified as a Czech dance; a detailed legend was recounted in a songbook: “Polka as we know it was... created by a Bohemian girl by the name of Anička Chadimová at the age of sixteen. She died on August 8, 1881, registered in the coroner’s book as: ‘pauper’”.⁸

Such stories coincide with scholarly English-language definitions of “the polka” as a lively Bohemian couple-dance that originated as a round-dance sometime in the early 19th century.⁹ This standard polka history tracks the geographic diffusion of the dance outward from the Czech Lands. The first known polka sheet music was printed in Prague in 1837. By 1844, “polkomania” gripped Paris and London, and the dance was even seen onstage in New York.¹⁰ The dance was performed in Calcutta, India, in 1845 at a ball honoring Queen Victoria, and became the national dance of Paraguay in the late 1840s.¹¹

However, such a definition dulls our understanding of polka music, especially at Czech-American festivals. First, such a narrow definition seems unlikely. Ample historical evidence suggests that the dance represents a synthesis of many Central European dances rather than an indigenous Czech creation.¹² Also, what we know as the polka today is a post-1844 dance; it is possible that the dance looked quite different before Prague dance instructors commandeered it in the 1830s.¹³ Moreover, many modern American manifestations of the polka are hardly distinctive. The dance fits almost any quick, duple-meter music, and the steps, aside from the characteristic hope are relatively generic. Finally, and perhaps most damaging to further studies of Czech-American polka, the narrow definition encourages a tautological argument wherein Czech-Americans dance the polka because they are Czech. If this definition is accepted at face value, there hardly remains any need for further investigation of Czech-American polka.

A broader, more fluid view of the polka could address *why* Czech-Americans dance the polka and what it means to them.¹⁴ To me, polka music grants Czech-Americans access to an idealized version of how their ancestors lived, danced, and interacted.¹⁵ I adapt the term “Czechness” to describe this conception.

In addition to Czechness, musical performances at the festivals also established a Czech-Americanness, though clear priorities were established between Czechness and Americanness. At Phillips, festival organizers clearly considered themselves Americans first but are not ready to give up their Czech roots. The festival brochure states of Czech heritage, “in this melting pot of nations called America, this is who we are and where we came from. Although Americans first, it is right to honor our forebearers [sic] by remembering traditions and values of the past”.¹⁶ While evoking the melting pot, a symbol of America’s diverse ethnic roots melding together, the festival organizers also invoke the notion of the “hyphenated” ethnicity of many Americans, a more divisive metaphor. They are not only Americans, but also Czech-Americans. This was evident in musical performances as well. The Phillips Czechoslovakian Community Singers, a Phillips-based community chorus, included *God Bless America* in their repertory. Other songs, like *Krásná Amerika* (Beautiful America), indicate prominent American sentiment in the music of Czech-Americans even when sung with Czech lyrics.

Having safely established their Americanness, many other songs attested to the importance of Czech heritage.

To help clarify the ideas of Czechness and Americanness, I will focus briefly on the idea of ethnicity. What, after all, *is* ethnicity? Ethnicity deals with groups, and Milton Gordon's concise explanation of ethnicity as a sense of peoplehood is both simple and useful.¹⁷ Current views of ethnicity focus on process and practice: how ethnicity is iterated by individual actions and performances in everyday life.¹⁸ Anthropologist Fredrik Barth's 1969 essay on group boundaries pioneered this approach to ethnicity theory. He encouraged a look toward group boundaries rather than toward inherent biological or cultural characteristics.¹⁹ Focusing on group boundaries means that groups are defined in relation to other groups, and emphasizes the social construction of ethnicity. In this view, it is people and their performances that bring ethnicity into being. And if people establish whatever they believe their ethnicity is in moments of performance, then music is an important marker—a border guard—of ethnicity. Music is an important tool for people to shore up their ethnic boundaries.

The musical question I would like to ask is, can we hear Czechness?²⁰ And if so, how is ethnicity audible? Sounds alone are not in themselves ethnic, but the festival-specific context transforms certain sound elements into vehicles for ethnicity.²¹ Three elements were especially important in distinguishing the Czech music at the festivals: melody, language, and instrumentation.²²

The melodies heard in the Czech-American polka tradition are often described as folksongs or attributed to Czech composers. It is dangerous, though, to place too much emphasis on melodies alone. A melody's meaning is usually established discursively rather than by the notes themselves. Coupled with language and instrumentation, however, ethnicity becomes more audible.

While language symbolizes ethnicity, it alone is neither an exclusive nor reliable indicator. In Czech-American music, Czech lyrics have often been translated into English or completely re-texted in English. The *Song of Bohemia*, which was sung by choruses at both festivals, will illustrate. The melody is from Karel Hašler's (1879–1941) *Ta naše písnička česká* (Our Czech Song), but the English lyric we will hear is a poetic translation of the Czech lyric. So, the lyric's Czechness is not established because it is in Czech, but because it has a Czech subject. Without the interaction of melody and language, the melody itself would not sound "Czech". However, the interaction of the music and lyrics leaves a clearer impression of musical ethnicity. The translation of the lyric from Czech to English may also indicate that fewer people in Czech-American communities actually speak and understand the Czech language. The recording we will hear is by the Yuba-Hillsboro Czech Singers and was available for purchase at the Hillsboro festival.²³

Every band has unique instrumentation, personality, and style that can influence what stands out to listeners. However, instrumentation can also link modern bands to older musical practices. Many immigrants brought town band traditions to America, where wind bands continued as an important part of nineteenth-century Czech-American communities.²⁴ The polka—a mainstay of Central European band literature—was thus a part of the culture Czech immigrants brought with them. Such community ensembles live on among Czech-Americans. Modern Czech-American bands, such as the brass-heavy Cleve Bellin Orchestra (heard at the Hillsboro festival), or the accordion and tuba accompaniment of choral groups, continue to signal Czechness for many Czech-Americans.

Muziky Muziky Polka will illustrate how melody and instrumentation distinguish Czech-American polka from other ethnic American styles. The melody is based on a Czech folksong,

and the performance augments a small brass ensemble with banjo and accordion. The melody is taken from the march *Muziky Muziky* by Czech composer František Kmoch (1848–1912). Kmoch's music, drawing on folk and nationalistic themes, was familiar and appealing to many Czech and German immigrants; this march sold 120,000 copies of sheet music.²⁵ However, the instrumentation of this performance by Brian and the Mississippi Valley Dutchmen indexes more than just Czechness: the banjo might recall the Slovenian tradition, and the accordion and tuba might easily mirror German influences.²⁶ We will hear a 16-bar melody played twice by the accordion, and two harmonizing trumpets take over at the end. Noting the prominent tuba and trumpets, we might also hear the town band influences in this recording through the brass instrumentation and the repeated, clearly-declamed march trio melody.²⁷

Have we really just heard Czechness? Sounds must be carefully contextualized—certainly in far greater detail than I had time for here—to decode their possible meanings. I hope, however, I have illustrated that music can be an integral, though complex, marker of ethnicity. Wrapping up, I want to re-stress a few points.

The polka is one remaining resonance of the Old Country in the New World. The polka's history reveals direct and real links between the polka and the Czech lands. Yet, there are also links to other groups in Central Europe, notably Poles and Germans. Thus, especially when considering polka music in America, a fluid definition of the polka is more accurate than a narrow, hard-and-fast definition stressing the dance's Czechness.²⁸

Polka is not static, but a living element of modern Czech-American communities. As the "native" languages of immigrants fall away in America, there is seemingly less and less "heritage" for a community to hang on to. Each polka moment, however, can enliven ethnicity. This power to perform ethnicity and reinforce community gives polka significance. Yet as we heard, such aural expressions are morphing: texts that accompany melodies are often translated into English or other languages, and the remaining "Czechness" of a melody lies in themes by Czech-born composers, their basis in "folksong", or the instrumentation. Perhaps this is akin to ethnomusicologist Charles Keil's observation that "polka becomes more important to the community as community support for it declines."²⁹ As European-American communities undergo continuous processes of fragmentation and change, polka studies can track one form of cultural expression to see if its potency does increase and if its symbolic power is distilled. We might ask how many Czech-Americans feel they should favor the polka because it is Czech. Will they let go of polka music in the future, or will Czech-Americans cling to it? Such questions not only address Czech-American studies, but could bring us to more incisive understandings of American culture.

Finally, as in any living music, Wisconsin's Czech-American polka tradition is in constant dialogue with its environment. Ethnic traditions do not require or necessarily imply stasis. Ethnicity may take shape in modern performances that reinforce historical memories, but as Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan put it, "ethnic groups are continually recreated."³⁰ Thus, in "old country" melodies, we hear an ever-changing, through-composed counterpoint—perhaps we could call it heterophony or even cacophony at times—as Czech-Americans "perform" their ethnicity through the polka.

Notes

¹ My understanding of musical Czechness, and my use of the word *českost*, is based on M. BECKERMAN, *In Search of Czechness in Music, 19th Century Music* 10, No. 1 (1986): 61. See also Beckerman's *Smetana, Dvořák, Janáček, and 'Czechness'*, in *Papers from Czech Music in Texas: a Sesquicentennial Symposium*, 2nd edition, ed. Clinton MACHANN (College Station, Texas: Komenský Press, 1987), 17–28.

- ² James P. Leary's articles are the most substantial contributions to Wisconsin Czech-American polka scholarship: *Czech American Polka Music in Wisconsin*, in *Musics of Multicultural America: a Study of Twelve Musical Communities*, ed. Kip LORNELL and Anne K. RASMUSSEN (New York: Schirmer, 1997), 25–47; *Czech Polka Styles in the U.S.: From America's Dairyland to the Lone Star State*, in *Papers from Czech Music in Texas: a Sesquicentennial Symposium*, 2nd edition, ed. Clinton MACHANN (College Station, Texas: Komensky Press, 1987), 79–95. Two books form the core of polka studies: Charles KEIL–Angeliki V. KEIL–Dick BLAU, *Polka Happiness* (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 1992); Victor GREENE, *A Passion for Polka: Old-Time Ethnic Music in America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1992). The former combines ethnomusicological and journalistic approaches, and the latter supplies important historical background on polka music in the U.S..
- ³ For background on Czech-Americans in Wisconsin, see Karen Johnson FREEZE, *Czechs*, in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan THERNSTROM–Ann ORLOV–Oscar HANDLIN (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980), 261–272; and Kazimierz J. ZANIEWSKI–Carol J. ROSEN, *The Atlas of Ethnic Diversity in Wisconsin* (Madison, Wisc.: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1998). a concise musical survey of Czechs in America is offered by Philip V. BOHLMAN, *European-American Music, Sec. III, No. 5, Czechoslovak*, in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music*, ed. H. Wiley HITCHCOCK–Stanley SADIE (London: Macmillan, 1986), 2:79.
- ⁴ For more on the Clete Bellin Orchestra, see LEARY, *Czech American Polka Music in Wisconsin*, 42–44.
- ⁵ LEARY, *Czech American Polka Music in Wisconsin*, 26; see also GREENE, *A Passion for Polka*, 2; LORNELL, *The Early Career of Whoopie John Wilfahrt*, 51.
- ⁶ For a partial map of the genre's distribution, see BOHLMAN, Philip V., *World Music: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 86. For other implications of "polka music", see *ibid.*, 85.
- ⁷ Český den, *Český den Memorabilia Booklet*, Hillsboro, Wisc., 1997, 7.
- ⁸ KURTH, Frances A., *Zpívejte lidičky, ty naše písničky, z Moravy, Slovenska, z Čech* (Phillips, Wisc.: n.d.), ix. Victor Greene recounts a similar story, though he identifies the story as "legend" and only gives the details in his endnotes (*A Passion for Polka*, 50, 267 n. 4). The "facts" of this case are questionable; cf. Čeněk ZÍBRT, *Jak se kdy v Čechách tancovalo: Dějiny tance* (Praha: F. Šimáček, 1895), 335; H. Oskar KOLBERG, quoted in Janice KLEEMAN, *The Origins and Stylistic Development of Polish-American Polka Music* (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1982), 18–19; Bruce B. BOETTCHER, *A Polka Music Story*, *The Polka News*, 23 November 1988, 4; KEIL et al., *Polka Happiness*, 10–11; Richard MARCH, liner notes to *Deeper Polka* (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, SFW CD 40140, 2002), 2–4; LEARY, *Czech American Polka Music in Wisconsin*, 30.
- ⁹ A standard definition is Gracian ČERNUŠÁK–Andrew LAMB–John TYRELL, *Polka*, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edition, ed. Stanley SADIE and John TYRELL (London: Macmillan, 2001), 20: 34–36.
- ¹⁰ SQUIRE BARCLAY, William, *Polka*, in *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. George GROVE (London: Macmillan, 1890), 3: 8, may be the first academic use of "polkomania". Information on the polka's appearance in America is in Richard CRAWFORD, *An Introduction to America's Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 146 ff.
- ¹¹ KEIL et al., *Polka Happiness*, 9.
- ¹² See KLEEMAN, *The Origins and Stylistic Development of Polish-American Polka Music*, 13–27. Modern polka resembles many dance styles known in early-19th century eastern Bohemia, including *krakowiak* and *schottische*, even Czech dances—e.g., *strašák*, *břítva*, and *skočná*; ČERNUŠÁK et al., *Polka* (2001), 34.
- ¹³ Dance master M. J. RAAB, for example, "turned the simple Czech polka into a dance with five figures" at the time of its popularity in Paris, 1844 (W. G. RAFFE, *Polka*, in *Dictionary of the Dance* [New York: A. S. Barnes, 1964], 390).

- ¹⁴ The importance I attach to a broader definition of polka may not be deemed appropriate in all cases, but it seems essential to any study of ethnic-American polka music.
- ¹⁵ This, of course, is only one possibility.
- ¹⁶ "Czechoslovakian Fest 2003", festival information brochure (Phillips, Wisc.: Czech Fest).
- ¹⁷ GORDON, Milton M., *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), 23–30. Ethnicity is a contentious topic, and I have chosen Gordon's definition for its simplicity, though it is not a scholarly standard. "Ethnic groups" have also been called a "real Americanism" (SLOBIN, Mark, review of *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Vol. 8, Europe, Notes 57, No. 3 [March 2001]: 654), and the body of research on ethnicity in America is daunting. VECOLI, Rudolph J., *Ethnicity and Immigration*, in *Encyclopedia of the U.S. in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stanley I. KUTLER, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1996), 1: 161–193, provides an introductory historical essay. An older but thorough review of American theoretical approaches to ethnicity is Werner SOLLORS, *Theory of American Ethnicity, or: 'S Ethnic?/Ti and American/Ti, De or United (W) States S SI and Theor?'* *American Quarterly* 33, No. 3 (1981): 257–283. Key background readings are in Werner SOLLORS (ed.), *Theories of Ethnicity: a Classical Reader* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1996); and a broader selection of readings on ethnicity is offered in John HUTCHINSON and Anthony D. SMITH (eds.), *Ethnicity* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996).
- ¹⁸ My understanding of performance and musical applications of performance theory is based on Kelly M. ASKEW, *Performing the Nation: Swahili Music and Cultural Politics in Tanzania* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002).
- ¹⁹ BARTH, Fredrik, Introduction to *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, ed. Fredrik BARTH (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), 9–38.
- ²⁰ My conception of music and ethnicity has been shaped by many sources, but especially Martin STOKES, Introduction to *Ethnicity, Identity, and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, ed. Martin STOKES (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 1–27. For an introduction to ethnicity in North American music, see Philip V. BOHLMAN, *Ethnic North America*, in *Excursions in World Music*, 3rd edition, ed. Bruno Nettl et al. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall), 274–313.
- ²¹ While discussing Czechness in "classical" music, Michael Beckerman notes, "there is in fact no single musical detail that can be shown to occur in Czech music and nowhere else" (*In Search of Czechness in Music*, 64). This is certainly true in a wide sense, but at the festivals and in ethnic-American polka music generally, certain sounds index historical lineages, current practice, and community beliefs. Beckerman points in this direction—that such aural connotations are culturally situated—saying "the Czech composer creates within a rich web of associations and traditions", (71), and "to understand 'Czechness' fully we must have both an almost abstract awareness and at the same time an attentiveness to specific cases. Hence the 'Czechness' we are seeking must come about as the result of a *process*" (72; emphasis in original). However, though Beckerman tantalizingly points to such cultural (I would even say cosmological) realities, he describes them as illusory "metaphysical speculation" or incoherent (72).
- ²² This is neither a hard-and-fast nor universal classification, but useful for illustration. Although I created it for my own purposes, it mirrors Bohlman's description of early folk music classifications in *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988), 34–37.
- ²³ A one-minute excerpt of "Song of Bohemia", Yuba-Hillsboro Czech Singers, *Český den Memories* (RY Productions, RY-99011), track 12, was played at the presentation.
- ²⁴ In pre-World War I America, amateur wind bands were often formed around specific ethnic groups; see GREENE, *A Passion for Polka*, 15–30; see also LEARY, *Czech Polka Styles in the U.S.: From America's Dairyland to the Lone Star State*. One explanation of the high number and persistence of these ensembles is that they "eased the [immigrants'] lingering homesickness for the old country" (Freeze, "Czechs", 268).
- ²⁵ GREENE, *A Passion for Polka*, 267 n. 9, see also 50–52.

- ²⁶ More information on the “Dutchman” style of “Whoopie” John Wilfahrt (1893–1961) is given by LORNELL, *The Early Career of Whoopie John Wilfahrt*, 51. Brian and the Mississippi Dutchmen performed at Hillsboro in 1990 and 1997 (*Český den Memorabilia Booklet*, 14–15). See also James P. LEARY–Richard MARCH, *Dutchman Bands: Genre, Ethnicity, and Pluralism in the Midwest*, in *Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Ethnic Life*, ed. Stephen STERN and John Allan CICALA (Logan, Utah: Utah State Univ. Press, 1991), 21–43; Richard K. SPOTTSWOOD, *Whoopie John Wilfahrt Discography: 1927–1941*, *JEMF Quarterly* 21, Nos. 75/76 (1985): 54–58.
- ²⁷ A one-minute excerpt of *Muziky Muziky Polka*, Brian and the Mississippi Valley Dutchmen, *Deeper Polka* (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, SFW CD 40140), track 20, was played at the presentation.
- ²⁸ Moreover, a fluid definition does not create a constrictive polka ontology. Since “polka” can mean the dance or the music, polka music and dance are not clearly separable. Musing on the relation between music and song, Gilbert Rouget says, “we would be hard put to say” for many groups “where music begins for them, where it ends, what borders mark the transition between speaking and singing” (quoted in Jean-Jacques NATTIEZ, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music*, trans. Carolyn Abbate [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1990], 47). Substituting “polka music” for “singing” and “polka dancing” for “speaking” in Rouget’s observation would not change its truth. What, then, are polka’s boundaries? Perhaps a reformulation along the lines of Jean-Jacques Nattiez’s model for the definition of music is preferable. Thus, “polka is whatever people choose to recognize as such”.
- ²⁹ KEIL et al., *Polka Happiness*, 9.
- ³⁰ GLAZER, Nathan–MOYNIHAN, Daniel, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), in *Ethnicity*, ed. HUTCHINSON and SMITH, 138. For a discussion of ethnicity, history, and change, see Craig CALHOUN, *Tradition, But Not Mere Inheritance*, *Ethnicities* 1, No. 1 (April 2001): 9–10.