

Musical Interpretation: Specifics of Working with Textual Statements and Other Aspects

Viktor Velek

Univerza v Ostravi

University of Ostrava

In searching for content for this study, I decided to use my experience gained during my publishing activities. In a way, it will be a kind of “medley” – inherently disparate in many ways, but at the same time always related to the issue of interpretation. A selection consisting of three topics: historical recording, reviews and mediaeval music.

Historical recordings

My initial reflection comes from my master’s thesis from 2005, i.e. the topic *Slavic Reciprocity in the Musical Culture of Czechs and Lusatian Serbs 1848–1948*.¹ As part of my interdisciplinary research, I explored historical recordings, particularly those made in Lusatia in 1907 by the Berlin Phonogrammarchiv.² As a “recording greenhorn” I was intrigued by the fact that two different recordings of the same song were always made in the field

1 Viktor Velek, “Slovanská vzájemnost v hudební kultuře Čechů a Lužických Srbů 1848–1948 [Slavic Reciprocity in the Musical Culture of Czechs and Lusatian Serbs 1848–1948]” (Thesis, Masaryk University in Brno, 2005).

2 Viktor Velek, “Historické nahrávky lužickosrbské řeči a hudby z let 1907–1938 [Historical Recordings of Lusatian-Serbian Speech and Music from 1907–1938],” *Lětopis – časopis za řeč, stawizny a kulturu Łužiskich Serbow / Zeitschrift für sorbische Geschichte und Kultur* 55, no. 2 (2008): 17–41; Viktor Velek, “Niedersorbische (Niederwendische) historische Aufnahmen / Lower Sorbian Historical Awards,” in *Schlagwort Wendisch. Historische Tondokumente sorbischer/wendischer Kultur*, ed. Sebastian Elikowski-Winkler (Cottbus: Schule für Niedersorbische Sprache und Kultur, 2016), 17–49.

at the time. The first recording begins with a focal tone (being indicated by a whistle or something similar), followed by a short verbal commentary introducing the song (e.g. *Wendisches Spinnstübelied Nr. 3 Matthes spann die Pferde an*) and finally the singing or playing itself. The second recording then begins directly with the singing or playing, followed by a verbal commentary, and finally the focal tone is given. According to ethnographers, this practice has its pros and cons. The main disadvantage – with regard to the interpretation practice – can be expressed succinctly as follows: if the tone is sounded first, it may disorient amateur singers, i.e. lead to dissonant singing in a different than natural vocal position or to singing outside of the singer's register.

Another observation from the field of historical or generally older recordings is something that the average listener might not consider. Old wax and gramophone records were significantly shorter in length than more modern media such as tapes, CDs or DVDs. In practice, this led to some pieces having to be interpreted faster than the composer intended when recording them, and faster than the normal performance in concerts. This is important for our evaluation of historical recordings, including the argument that “*they used to play it faster in 1925 than we do today.*” Such recordings must always be evaluated on a case-by-case basis as to whether the tempo was limited by the technical constraints of the medium or whether it reflected the artistic intention. In many cases, the composer's original intention can never be clearly determined.

Listening to historical recordings brings with it a certain natural need to surmise, supplement and imagine what the technology of the time failed to capture, such as the sharpness and clarity of instruments, colour, precise intonation, spatial sound, etc. It can thus be said that listening to historical recordings requires not only a significantly greater degree of active involvement by the listener, but also specific activity in the field of individual acoustic imagination. At best the listener can only get a glimpse of the actual interpretation, i.e. of “*how it really sounded in 1925,*” and even this is highly debatable. The quality of the original performance was only known by the participants in the recording, and with them it also disappeared, because the recording captured only a fraction of the overall sound spectrum. An interesting consideration in the field of music psychology is whether the contemporary listeners were closer to the original than all the following generations. Why? The contemporary listeners could compare the performance they heard in the concert hall with the recorded form. A similar

parallel can be drawn with the visual arts: even when we see, for example, a black and white photograph from our school years, our brains can automatically and authentically complete the colour continuum. Of course, this ability – whether in acoustic or visual perception – is developed differently in each individual, but objectively it is there. But back to music: it is clear that each generation has its own generational taste, or rather a certain palette of different variations of generational taste. Its application to older interpretations should always be justified and the question of meaningfulness should be answered first. There is nothing to prevent us from comparing several different interpretations from around 1920, for example, and here the comparison offers the hope of breaking away from today's ideas and making a more objective assessment in general.

In the musicological literature there is a type of text that is devoted to the description of historical recordings. Publications describing recordings of the music of the founder of Czech modern music Bedřich Smetana have an important place in Czech music. Mirko Očadlík, the author of the anthology *Smetanovská diskografie. Kritický soupis gramofonových snímků Smetanovy hudby* [Smetana Discography. A Critical Inventory of Gramophone Recordings of Smetana's Music] (Prague, 1939), concentrated on the basic description of the form, the quality of the performance and the technical aspects, and also assessed the adherence to the intended interpretation. To give an example, a recording of Lukáš's aria in D major from Act II of Smetana's opera *Hubička* (The Kiss) is described as follows:

Richard Kubla, accompanied by the F. O. K. Orchestra, conducted by Dr. Václav Smetáček. Esta 7159 (2995). From 1938. B-side: Aria from Smetana's *Dalibor*. – As flawed as the previous recording, especially unbalanced in declamation and at times dropping in intonation. Otherwise sung quite conventionally, with a tendency towards rubato, and vocally leaning towards creating large tones that ultimately fall out of the overall framework of the performance. The orchestra is flexible, though a little loud. Recorded clearly.³

Such an assessment does not pertain solely to the performance itself but also, to a large extent, to “*how the performance sounds on the recording*.” For example, the loudness of the orchestra may have been caused by poor placement of the microphones, and the imperfections in intonation may

3 Mirko Očadlík, *Smetanovská diskografie. Kritický soupis gramofonových snímků Smetanovy hudby* [Smetana Discography: A Critical Inventory of Gramophone Recordings of Smetana's Music] (Praha: Orbis, 1939), 84.

have been due to the technical aspects of the recording process. One could argue that an experienced evaluator of recordings at the time (for example, the aforementioned Mirko Očadlík) was better equipped to distinguish between what was technically imperfect and what was an artistic flaw. Specifically, regarding the famous Czech opera singer Richard Kubla (1890–1964), we have a brief mention of how he perceived the old way of recording. The following quote of a letter to his sister begins with an assessment of how satisfied he was with the recording of his memoirs for Czechoslovak Radio in early 1955 and goes on to recall the recording process he experienced in the studios in the interwar period (records for Ultraphon, Esta and His Master's Voice):

It was quite good, except for the orchestra, which always 'whined' at the end of each part!!! That was because it was recorded the old-fashioned way, still in that trichter [gramophone horn] where you had to step back when you played the piano and the matrix wheel didn't spin precisely.⁴

Reviews

In the field of musical interpretation, a completely distinct chapter is that represented by critical publishing. Reviews are, and always will be, often the only source for forming an idea of how this or that piece sounded, what kind of performance the performer gave, what kind of audience response they received, etc. By definition, all reviews are subjective statements, which cannot be denied, although the pursuit of objectivity is one of the main principles of professional reviewing. However, history provides countless examples where the reader has reason to doubt the objectivity of a review. There is no point in documenting the various motivations for such a lack of objectivity in detail here, as each of us has certainly encountered a reviewer's varying attitudes towards the chosen singing technique, tempo, expression, stage movement, degree of talent, portrayal of style, etc.

Let's focus on a specific artistic personality: Richard Kubla, a tenor who, thanks to his talent, was able to complete his studies at the Vienna Academy on an accelerated track, and while still a student was offered an engagement at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, where he was set to earn 800 dollars per performance – in 1915. Remarkably, at that point, Kubla's experience was limited to singing excerpts of longer works during his

4 Viktor Velek, *Hudební umělci mezi Ostravou a Vídní. 2, Český Caruso Richard Kubla = Tonkünstler zwischen Ostrau und Wien. 2, Richard Kubla, der tschechische Caruso* = *Musica Bohemica Viennensia*; volume VI (Praha: NLN, s.r.o., 2021), 548.

school practice. Against his teacher's wishes, he performed several times in the spring of 1914 at the theatre in Graz, where he completely fascinated the local critics with his performances as Rodolfo in *La Bohème* and as Cavaradossi in *Tosca*.⁵ Since the Czech press had reported on the American offer in March 1914, Kubla must have impressed audiences in Graz with the performances of *La Bohème* on 7 and 14 February. All indications are that it was the excellent reviews of Kubla's interpretation, together with the recommendation of the director of the Vienna Music Academy, that attracted the famous Berlin agent Norbert Salter to "check out" Kubla for himself in the Austrian capital. And Kubla clearly impressed Salter with his performance of an excerpt from Rodolfo's part as well as the opening aria from Wagner's *Lohengrin*. Kubla sang throughout the war at the Viennese Volksoper, to which he was recruited from the barracks by the director Rainer Simons. After the end of the war Kubla sang first at the New German Theatre in Prague, then for many years he was a regular guest at the National Theatre, and also sang on many other stages at home and abroad and recorded many gramophone records.

In my monograph on Richard Kubla, I described in detail how he dealt with criticism of his interpretations. A notable example is the evaluation by the Ostrava critic Milan Balcar (1886–1954), coincidentally Kubla's classmate from the Ostrava gymnasium. Balcar had unsuccessfully pursued a career as a composer, and Kubla responded to his critiques by pointing out Balcar's own lack of musicality. Over time, Balcar's critiques became increasingly harsh, and unlike other critics he was unable to write a purely positive review; he always felt compelled to provoke with some minor remark.

Let's go back in time to the performance that took place at the Ostrava theatre on Tuesday 8 September 1931. It was Antonín Dvořák's opera *Rusalka*, about which Balcar wrote a day later a review (published on 10 September):

Regarding Mr. Kubla as the Prince, it must be said as a matter of principle: guests should only be invited when they offer more than the home singers. This principle was not observed in this instance. And if anyone needed a confirmation of the opinion I expressed about Mr. Kubla's performance in Smetana's *The Bartered Bride* [19 May, 1931], namely that 'lyrical tenderness and passionate emotionality are not, and have not been, Kubla's strongest qualities', then Tuesday's Prince unfortunately

5 Ibid., 131–8.

provided a very convincing proof. Furthermore, Mr. Kubla's acting performance displayed significantly less ease and immediacy than the audience would expect from a singer with many years of stage experience.⁶

Stung by his classmate's criticism, Kubla eventually wrote a private letter to Balcar on 11 September 1931:

I kindly yet firmly request that you cease any further criticism of me once and for all. I know your level of intelligence, especially in terms of music, well enough from the time of my studies at the gymnasium in Ostrava. Your subsequent failures and futile efforts in seeking higher education, both at the technical school and at the conservatory, are also no secret. After these two setbacks, you have definitely veered off course and become 'also a music critic'. Criticism from a complete layman, written in a style that would fail a second-year student, is not beneficial if it is good, and cannot harm if it is bad. In my case, the reasons are different – I know where the wind is blowing from. I hope that these few lines will suffice to ensure that you never write any more criticism about me. Otherwise, I would be forced to seek other means to ensure that your ailing mind receives the rest it deserves, and does not needlessly exert itself on my account. 'There is no smoke without fire,' and therefore: 'Stick to your trade'. Richard Kubla.⁷

What does this imply? Without the knowledge of context, circumstances and private sphere, we would accept Balcar's critical reviews as much more objective than they really are.

I would now like to turn to the great Czech soprano Eva Hadrabová-Nedbalová (1902–1973), whom I have "immortalised" in the form of a monograph.⁸ Her path to the Vienna State Opera led through engagements at the Olomouc Opera and then at the Bratislava Opera. That was where Richard Strauss noticed her talent and did everything he could to draw her to Vienna. She soon became one of the main opera performers, and then a world-class star who successfully performed in Salzburg (Salzburger Festspiele), in the USA and in London. However, her "Viennese period" was not without its ups and downs. In her case, the researcher is offered the opportunity to confront two sources: the first is – as expected – the reviews

6 M. B. [Milan Balcar], "‘Rusalka’ s Nordenovou a Kublou [‘Rusalka’ with Norden and Kubla]," *Moravskoslezský deník* 32, no. 247 (10 September 1931): 4.

7 *Ibid.*, 370.

8 Viktor Velek, *Hudební umělci mezi Ostravou a Vídní 3 = Tonkünstler zwischen Ostrau und Wien. 3, Lída Mašková-Kublová, Eva Hadrabová-Nedbalová = Musica Bohemica Viennensia; volume VII* (Praha: NLN, s.r.o., 2019).

of professional critics, the second is the “diary” in which an anonymous frequent visitor to the Vienna State Opera wrote down his impressions.⁹ He dedicated a number of entries to Eva Hadrabová-Nedbalová. I have devoted a whole chapter to these observations in the aforementioned monograph.¹⁰ Often in just a few words, the unknown author mentioned performances of roles in the operas *Twilight of the Gods*, *La Traviata*, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, *The Iron Saviour*, *Das Rheingold*, *The Magic Flute*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, *The Queen of Spades*, *Aida*, *Parsifal*, *Ariadne auf Naxos* and *The Evangelist*. The author of the notes followed Eva Hadrabová-Nedbalová from late 1933 to early 1936. Thanks to his observations we know, for example, about her pneumonia (I could not find any mention of the illness in the press). Only rarely did the anonymous visitor evaluate her interpretation positively; more often he chose phrases such as *she sang disastrously* – *she squeals horribly* – *she sings and plays impossibly* – *she is getting worse* – *she sang horribly* – *she looked funny*. Unlike most music critics, the author had the advantage of not having to seek a more diplomatic expression for his feelings. During the Second World War, specifically from 1939 to 1944, Eva Hadrabová-Nedbalová worked at the Nuremberg Opera.¹¹ Thanks to the archival material in the City Archives there, it is possible to reconstruct how she managed in this institution.¹² There is no space to go into detail and explain the reasons for her actions, so in summary she tried to leave Nuremberg (a very Nazi city, “Stadt der Parteitage”) to go to Vienna or Graz. In fact, she did a lot to encourage the managers of the Nuremberg Opera to dismiss her. She was often ill (and did not hurry with her recovery), she complicated the fulfilment of her contract with demands for a higher fee, she suggested being replaced by another singer, and she even deliberately sang poorly – yes, with deliberately wrong intonation! And here we come to the question of the testimonial potential and relevancy of contemporary reviews. Their writers quite naturally and correctly assessed the performance and cannot be blamed for statements such as that she was no longer accurate in her pitches and that her acting was not good. It is worth pointing out, therefore, that these statements were about a specific performance but may not have been true in general. What is the conclusion to be

9 Available from: http://www.operinwien.at/chronik/Material/staatsoper33_36.pdf.

10 Velek, *Hudební umělci mezi Ostravou a Vídní* 3, 467–9.

11 Ibid., 536–59.

12 Stadtarchiv Nürnberg, shelfmark C 45/II No. 822–4, shelfmark C45/999 No. 59, 61, 64, 65, 69, shelfmark C 21/IX 1440, shelfmark C 21/XI No. 30, 84, 145, 242, shelfmark C 21/IX No. 340.

drawn from this? It cannot be concluded on the basis of reviews that the singer failed to control her art, etc. This means that reviews have only limited explanatory power.

Old Bohemian spiritual mediaeval songs in Czech

The third and final part in this study is devoted to the issue of the “correct version,” and I will immediately explain what is meant by this rather ambiguous phrase. The “Old Bohemian spiritual songs” have a significant place in the history of Czech music, and I would like to focus on two of them, namely the songs *Svatý Václave* (Saint Wenceslas) and *Ktož jsú Boží bojovníci* (Ye Who Are Warriors of God).

The first of these, also known as *Saint Wenceslas Chorale* / *Song of St Wenceslas*, dates from the 13th century. It is one of the earliest surviving songs sung in Czech and had a state-representative character from the beginning. Initially associated with the Přemyslid dynasty, its importance was also recognised by Emperor Charles IV and all subsequent rulers. The second song – the Hussite chorale *Ye Who Are Warriors of God* – represents the body of Hussite spiritual songs and their vernacular production. From 1420, the Hussites aligned themselves with the legacy of Master Jan Hus, a theologian and rector of Charles University in Prague, who was burned at the Council of Constance in 1415 because he did not recant his beliefs. From 1420 onwards, there was a period of anarchy in the Lands of the Bohemian Crown, many monasteries and churches were plundered, and a new reformed Hussite church emerged, with its own liturgy and related music in the Czech language. *Ye Who Are Warriors of God* is a special, unique type of song: its content is essentially a military code, instructing each group of the Hussite army on their duties.

What do the two songs have in common? It is the various versions of the melody and, to some extent, the rhythm.

The ancient *Saint Wenceslas Chorale* has continuously permeated the entire history of Czech music without any restrictions (for example, by the government or the church) until today. Given its widespread popularity, it is understandable that different variations of intervals or rhythm would emerge over time.¹³ Composers faced a choice: “*If I quote the song in my own composition,*

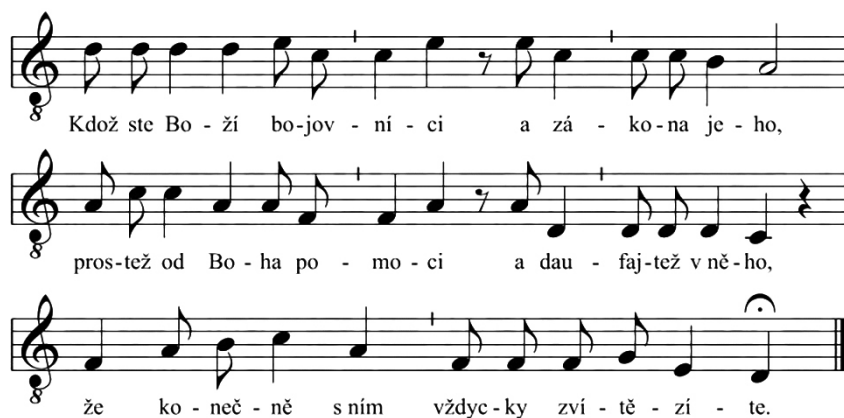
13 Karel Církle, “Nejstarší české lidové duchovní písně: k melodickému vývoji Hospodine, pomiluj ny a Svatý Václave [The Oldest Czech Folk Spiritual Songs: On the Melodic Development of Lord, Have Mercy on Us and Saint Wenceslas]” (PhD Dissertation, Masaryk University in Brno, Faculty of Arts, 1968).

which version should I use?” Several factors influenced the decision. Some prioritised the criterion of antiquity, opting for the mediaeval version. Others might have chosen the version that they “grew up with” or that was familiar in the environment for which they were composing, for example the baroque version. Sometimes regionality played a role in the decision.

With the Hussite chorale *Ye Who Are Warriors of God*, which I will discuss in greater detail, the situation is considerably more complicated, though there are only two versions to choose from. It should be noted that at the time of the recatholization of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown, the song was forbidden and gradually fell into oblivion. At the beginning of the 19th century only the lyrics were known, and even then, they were familiar to only a few linguists! It is possible that the Napoleonic Wars revived interest in its musical aspect – some Czech pro-monarchist anti-Napoleonic songs apparently work with its melody and partly with its lyrics. However, it seems to have been a passing fashion, as after the defeat of Napoleon these songs fell into oblivion.¹⁴ Quite logically, the song is also absent from the musical repertoire of the revolutionary year 1848. It was not until the early 1860s that the chorale resurfaced, reintroduced through arrangements for voice and piano or choral adaptations. This was a clear manifestation of the process of searching for old Czech musical heritage, the impetus being the liberalisation of social relations after the announcement of the October Diploma (1860). This is how the public came to know the younger version of the chorale, namely the one printed in a songbook from 1530.¹⁵ Many composers worked with this version, believing it to be the only and oldest version of the song. The unique semantic and semiotic content of the work is due to the fact that Bedřich Smetana worked with it at the end of the cycle of symphonic poems *My Country*, i.e. in the Hussite parts *Tábor* and *Blaník*.

14 Viktor Velek, “Hussitism in Modern Czech Musical Culture: The Roots of Myths (1800–1848),” [chapter in a collective monograph by the team members of the international scientific project EXPRO GA ČR Old Myths, New Facts: Czech Lands in the Centre of 15th-Century Music Developments], eds. Hana Vlhová-Wörner and Jan Ciglbauer (2025), forthcoming.

15 [Anon.], *Zpráva a naučení křesťanům věrným, jak by se v těchto časích nebezpečných při spasení božím řídit, zpravovati a v něm růsti měli, ano i při těžkostech nynějších, přicházejících od násilí Tureckého, jak se míti a zachovávatí mají* [A Message and Instructions for Faithful Christians on How to Act, Conduct Themselves and Grow in their Salvation in These Perilous Times, and Also in the Face of Current Difficulties Arising from the Violence of the Turks, Providing Guidance on How to Live and Preserve Themselves] (Mladá Boleslav: Bratrská tiskárna Jiříka Štyrsky, 1530), 166–8.



Picture and transcription 1: "1530 version" – transcription by Jan Ciglbauer¹⁶

16 The original is taken from the 1566 edition (National Library of the Czech Republic, shelfmark 54 G 000725/adl.3). The transcription is taken from the study of the forthcoming collective monograph of the scientific project Old Myths, New Facts (EX-PRO GAČR, planned publication 2025).



♩ = 1 (♩)

Ktož jsá bo - ži bo - jov-ní - ci a zá - ko - na je - ho, pros -
Kris - tust' vám za ško - dy sto - jí, sto - krát více sli - bu - je, pak -

tez od Bo - ha po - mo - ci a u - faj - te v ně - ho,
li kto proň ži - vot slo - ži, věč - ný mie - ti bu - de,

že ko - neč - ně vždy - cky s nim svi - tě - zi - te,
bla - ze kaž - dě - mu, ktož na prav - dě sen - de.

Sequitur repetitio

Tent' pán ve - lit' se ne - bá - ti zá - hub - cí tě - les - ných, ve -
lit' i ži - vot slo - ži - ti pro lás - ku svých blíž - ních.

Picture and transcription 2: *Jistebnice Cantionale* – transcription by Jan Frei (music) and Petr Nejedlý (lyrics)¹⁷

- 17 The original is taken from Collection of the National Museum of the Czech Republic, National Museum Library (Czech Republic), shelfmark II C 7, fol. 50r. The transcription is taken from: Hana Vlhová-Wörner, ed., *Jistebnický kancionál: Praha, Knihovna Národního muzea, II C 7: kritická edice. 2. svazek, Cantionale = The Jistebnice kancionál* [Prague, National Museum Library, II C 7: Critical Edition. Volume 2, Cantionale] (Chomutov: L. Marek, 2019), 212–4.

The problem arose in 1872 when the Jistebnice Cantionale, a manuscript source from the first half of the 15th century, entered the scene. It is an older, unique and more authentic source, different in details from the younger “1530 version,” which had been in use up to that point. Very soon, composers embraced this older version, either harmonising it or working with it as a quotation. However, after 1872 every composer had to solve a dilemma, because using the older version meant not having it connected with the patriotic legacy of Smetana. Some critics were even of the opinion that to quote the older version was to distance oneself from this renowned composer! It can thus be said that the younger version survived precisely and only thanks to the performance of Smetana’s *My Country*. The question of how the choice of a younger or older version would have an extra-musical effect was addressed not only by composers when creating their own original works, but also by choirs or solo performers when performing the chorale in their concerts. Here, then, the dramaturgical and interpretative issues are clearly linked.

Conclusion

This paper presents three different perspectives on musical interpretation and offers many concrete examples. They all have in common the fact that they fall within the field of Czech music. Focusing on historical recordings, I offer a number of suggestions with regard to specific topics. The aim is to highlight the need for caution when forming evaluative judgments. Consideration of the technical aspects of recordings is essential, and the first section uses both amateur (folk) and professional (opera) recordings for demonstration. The recordings of the Czech opera singer Richard Kubla, and the contemporary critiques of them, serve as a “bridge” to the second section, focused on reviews. The career of Kubla was again used as a case study. At first glance, the reviews by the Ostrava music critic Milan Balcar may seem objective. However, the discovery of a letter written by Kubla to Balcar, i.e. the performer’s response to the critic’s assessment, suggests that Balcar may not have been objective when writing his reviews and that he was perhaps settling personal scores with his former classmate. This finding sheds a completely different light on the published reviews of interpretations. A probe into the life of the soprano Eva Hadrabová-Nedbalová highlights two interesting matters: the first is the confrontation of professional reviews and the handwritten notes of a frequent visitor to the Vienna State Opera between the wars, and the second is her time at the Nuremberg

Opera during the Second World War. Her desire to leave Nuremberg at any cost led her to intentionally perform poorly – a fact the critics were, of course, unaware of. This raises the point that reviews often focus solely on the performance presented, without taking into account the background, motivations or reasons behind it. A review is thus an unconscious evaluation of a “simulation” rather than the real situation. The third section deals with the dilemma of choosing between different melodic variants of two important mediaeval Bohemian spiritual songs. For illustration, one of the most important treasures of Czech music, the Hussite war hymn *Ktož jsú Boží bojovníci* (Ye Who Are Warriors of God) was chosen. The late discovery of the older version raised the problem of how and whether to continue working with the younger version, which is still in use and which Bedřich Smetana firmly and forever anchored in the history of Czech music.

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