Shape Notes, Gospels and Spirituals: Rediscovering Spirituality in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Spirituals, gospels and Sacred harp songs (recorded on paper with the help of specific form of shape notes) represent a strong 19th century American cultural tradition. Their lyrics contributed to the originality of the independent American literature. In the 20th century, these songs left Church environment and made themselves at home in popular culture too. In the Czech lands, their acceptance was given mainly thanks to the strong rhythm and emotional performance. The Czech Republic is a post-communist country with the highest percentage of atheists. Despite that, Czechs like sacred music, especially American spirituals and gospels. In the following lines I would like to show where modern roots and limits of this interest are and what challenges the Czechs have had in facing the perception of American sacred music after 1989.

I.

With the communist coup of 1948 and the cold war, contacts of Czechs and the Western world were restricted. Ideologically suitable acts were supported only. Paul Robeson (1898 – 1976), who performed at the Prague Spring Music Festival of 1949[1], was a famous African American personality, sportsmen, actor, and charismatic singer with an extraordinary bass voice, activist and Communist. This was his second visit to the country in the 1940s. Accompanied by Bruno Raikin on piano, Robeson sang thirteen songs, among them "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot", "Scandalize My Name", "Over the Mountain", and "Ol´Man River". A special newspeak developed for spirituals behind the Iron Curtain over the years: songs of oppressed black working class people. The religious message of songs was diminished in favour of that of fighting against bourgeoisie and capitalistic masters, and the medium was stressed: a black singer with a low voice. Robeson recorded a collection of 20 songs in Prague, and later an album was released in 1955. In the meantime, the popularity of black spirituals was conveyed by a young opera (baritone) singer and translator Jiří Joran (born 1920) through performances and a collection of spirituals. They were

published in various songbooks with Czech and English lyrics and piano/guitar accompaniment in 1956[2].

In 1961, a thick book of *Americká lidová poezie* (American Folk Poetry) was published by SNKLU in Prague, edited by Lubomír Dorůžka. Dorůžka addressed many respected translators, including Josef Škvorecký, Josef Hiršal, Jan Zábrana, František Vrba, Jiří Joran and others, distributing among them his huge pre-war collection of American songs. In the final volume, a chapter on religious songs is called Dřevěné kostely (Wooden Churches). Within the 23 songs in it there are songs like "Deep River", and "Swing Low", to "Study War No More". The quality of Czech translations is very high, sometimes the Czech lyrics are even given in a ready to sing version. Each chapter starts with a short introduction, one song with lyrics and notation, to be continued with lyrics only. The book was crucial for the young generation of the 1960s and contributed to the Czech version of the folk song revival in many fields. One of the most prominent new groups, Spirituál kvintet (est. 1960, first performance 1962), used 'spiritual' not only in their name; spirituals formed an important part of their repertoire too. The message of "fighting against the masters" was silently present at their concerts, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. With an exception of their early SP recordings, Spirituál kvintet used Czech lyrics, so their listeners could easily identify with the words and interpret them for themselves. From Paul Robeson and Jiří Joran, through Spirituál kvintet and their followers, the idea which linked spirituals with black oppressed people was promoted in the Czech lands.

II.

Despite the popular belief, the origin of spirituals is not solely African American. As scholar Eileen Southern writes in her prestigious volume of *The Music of Black Americans, A History*, focusing on the place of origin of spirituals, the camp meeting, "its participants were common people, black and white", and further on "the camp meeting was primarily an interracial institution". (Southern, 82-83). The interracial logic comes from the time and place, the American frontier at the turn of the 19th century. At a time of religious movement called "Second Awakening", white settlers and their black slaves were attracted by Protestant ministers to take part in "a continuous religious service spread out over several days" (Southern, 82) in forests and woods. These religious camp meetings started as strictly organized, but over the years their own life and songs evolved.

Out of all Protestant denominations, Methodist started to lead the movement. Their sensitivity to emotions and music within religion allowed participants to change church songs previously used, hymns and anthems, to a newer and less strict genre, spirituals. Within the first three decades of the 19th century, spirituals became a vital part of camp meetings, and soon their existence was enhanced by printed songbooks.

The lyrics of these new songs, as Southern says, were "a stringing together of isolated lines from prayers, the Scriptures, and orthodox hymns, the whole made longer by the addition of choruses" (85). Lyrics of spirituals refer primarily to the Bible, mostly to the Old Testament. Anonymous authors and listeners alike identified with simple stories about traveling in the search of the promised land, overcoming obstacles, following strong leaders, and reaching peace and justice.

If the songs came from a black congregation, the language was reflected in print. For a contemporary reader, such lyrics represent quite a rich text: in several lines, they contain direct allusions to the Bible (Joshua, Jericho, Moses, Egypt, Pharaoh, Jordan), they are written partly in archaic English ("Thus saith the Lord"), and partly in African American variety of English ("Dere's a Han' Writin' on de Wall", "Joshua fit de battle of Jericho and de walls come tumblin' down"). The structure of spirituals itself, with "call and response" practice, stanzas, repetitions, refrains and choruses and shouts completes the originality of this genre.

First black churches started to gain independence in the 1820s, but a real split came with the abolition of slavery in 1863 and the end of the Civil War. After that, religious songs visibly developed in two lines, "black" and "white". Today, you can hear them in Protestant churches which can also be mostly distinguished as "black" and "white". Contemporary Americans are able to specify the song difference: even if the lyrics refer to the same book, the Bible, the atmosphere in white churches is more sober, perhaps even stricter, more organized. The atmosphere in African American church services is more relaxed, people share their worries and joys with others; there is physically more movement, and church services are longer. It was similar in the days of camp meetings. A white musician from Mississippi confessed a similar experience to me a few years ago: "I was already home for two hours from Sunday services, and African Americans were only slowly leaving their church on the other side of the street."

In the Reconstruction era, when blacks could freely move from country to towns and separate black and white Protestant churches existed, new religious songs were needed to reflect the new situation, both in white and black congregations. In the second half of the 19th century gospel songs evolved. Gospels as such are part of the New Testament; the four

gospels, according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, refer to the life of Jesus and the spread of Christianity. Gospel songs, unlike spirituals, give more space in lyrics to personal experience with Christianity. Authors address Jesus, speak about their feelings and troubles, and use examples from everyday life. Even if the line between spirituals and gospels in lyrics may merge, American public is able to distinguish (unconsciously) between older rural spirituals and younger urban gospels.

Religious songs which have originated within Protestant churches throughout the end of the 19th and in the 20th centuries, up to these days, are now generally called gospels. In the 1920s gospels reached audiences outside the churches as well. This is an influence of the media: commercial radio stations and recording industry were selling gospels easily. Preachers recorded their sermons, gospel composers and singers gained popularity, gospel quartets had their hits in radio charts. In the middle of the 20th century, the popularity of popular sacred music was reflected in music institutions. Grammy Awards (est. 1957) introduced their first category for religious music in 1961. Among the early winners you can find Mahalia Jackson (with "Every Time I Fell the Spirit"), country singer Tennessee Ernie Ford, or Staple Singers (with "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"). There were seven Grammy categories for religious music in the anniversary year of 2007, for best gospel song, best gospel performance, and for albums in rock or rap gospel, pop/contemporary gospel, Southern, country or bluegrass gospel, traditional gospel, and contemporary R&B gospel album.

In 1964, Gospel Music Association originated in the USA. Among other things, they organize music festivals and give Dove Awards. In 2008 Dove Awards were presented not only for gospel song and gospel album of the year, but also for best gospel instrumental, children's gospel, gospel in Spanish, Hip Hop gospel, best producer, video, album notes etc., altogether in 34 categories.

The popularity of sacred music reflects general interest in religion in the USA. "In God We Trust" is an official motto of the USA, "Where do you go to church on Sunday?" is a politically correct and neutral question for strangers. Still, southern states tend to be more religious than the rest of the USA.

III.

At the turn of the new millennium, the popularity of American sacred music was revived by films. Among them, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) had an enormous success with a soundtrack album as well. The CD

gained a Grammy Award for the best album of the year, leaving behind in the same category rock band U2. A simple plot set in the 1930s South allowed the authors (the Coen Brothers) to use many Southern stereotypes and focus on a wide range of music genres, including spirituals and gospels, black and white alike. The plot of *Cold Mountain* (2003), based on a 1997 novel by Charles Frazier, is set in the time of the Civil War. The selection of period music is narrower than in *O Brother*, nevertheless, the authors managed to introduce on silver screen one of the best kept secrets of American sacred music, shape note singing.

Shape note singing has New England roots, and flourished in the South and Midwest from the 1830s on. It touched some blacks, but is connected predominantly with the whites. It is a community practice. People gather for singing occasions at various places, not always church buildings. Songs for shape note singing come from different sources, from old church hymns, spirituals, gospels, and even folk tunes. Many priests, composers and collectors are connected with the 19th century movement in shape note singing. A very popular songbook, compiled by Benjamin Franklin White and E.J. King in 1844, is called *Sacred Harp*, so the term Sacred Harp singing/singers are used as well.

The notation in shape note singing uses a normal five-line staff, but note heads have special shapes: apart from round, there is triangle, square and diamond. As Harry Eskew and James C. Downey explain, each of the shapes is "assigned to each of the solmization syllables fa, so, la, mi (in the four-syllable 'fasola' system) or do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si. [....] They are intended to help singers with little musical expertise to sing at sight without having to recognize pitches on the staff or understand the key system" ("Shape-note hymnody").

For a European observer, shape note singing may look and sound strange. Each song opens with melody practicing in 'fasola' syllables, the four voices in harmony are independent, crossing each other, the melody line is carried by the tenor voices. Singers sit in a square form, each side representing one voice. As suggested above, the system developed as a certain simplification within isolated settler communities. In the end of the 20th century, American university students created many revival shape note singing groups.

In *Cold Mountain* movie, folk singer Tim Eriksen arranged scenes with shape note singing, and then, due to the popularity of the movie, organized workshops for the public. In the summer of 2008, his tour stretched from Croatia to Poland. In the Czech Republic, he taught shape note singing at festivals, such as Folkové prázdniny in Náměšť nad Oslavou and Colours of Ostrava.

IV.

African American spirituals and shape note singing represent two distant forms of American sacred music. While they differ in many things, their religious message is evident. What would a transformation to another culture do? It seems that the general Czech public these days is happy with the uplifting atmosphere of American religious songs and pays little attention to their message. Listening to American sacred music or even singing it in English at various festivals and workshops, they take the lyrics as part of the foreign song, not as representing themselves. Quite often, Czech words to these songs are completely new, with secular lyrics. During one of my American trips I asked bluegrass musician Ronnie Bowman about his comments to this contradiction. I am glad that he solved the problem easily, saying: "As long as they are happy with the songs, it is O.K."

Notes

. 25. 5. 1949, 21:30, Rudolfinum, Prague.
2. *Černošské spirituály*. Praha: SNKLH, 1956.

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Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans. A History*. New York and London: Norton, 1971, 2nd. ed. 1983.

Eskew, Harry and James C. Downey. "Shape-note hymnody." Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online. [accessed 27 Oct. 2008], available at: <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/ music/25584>.

Song examples

Trad. "Joshua Fit de Battle", 2:21, performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, from CD *African American Spirituals: The Concert Tradition, Volume I*, Smithsonian/Folkways 40072, 1994.

Trad. "Death's Black Train Is Coming", 3:11, performed by Reverend J.M. Gates. From CD *Roots N' Blues (1925-1950),* Disk 1, Columbia Legacy/Sony Music CK 47912, 1992.

Trad. "Winter", 0:52, performed by Tony Trischka and Norhampton Harmony, from CD *Tony Trischka: Glory Shone Around: A Christmas Collection*, Rounder 0354, 1995.

Bill Monroe. "Mansions for Me", 3:15, performed by Bill Monroe and the Blue Grass Boys, from CD *Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys 1945-1949*, Columbia Legacy/Sony Music CK52479, 1992.

Charles A. Tindley. "Stand By Me", 3:21, performed by Lou Bell Johnson, from CD *African American Gospel: The Pioneering Composers*, Volume III, Smithsonian/ Folkways 40074, 1994.

Trad. "Down to the River to Pray", 2:53, performed by Alison Krauss, from CD *Soundtrack O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, Mercury 170-069-2, 2000.

Trad., arr. by Tim Eriksen "I'm Going Home", 2:30, performed by Sacred Harp Singers at Liberty Church, from CD *Music from the Miramax Motion Picture Cold Mountain*, DMZ/Columbia/ Sony Music Soundtrax CK 86843, 2003.

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