

“Zpěváček” Folk Singing Competition: Regional Identity and Heritage Performance in the Czech Republic

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“Zpěváček” is a competition for children singers of folk songs, which has been held in the Czech Republic since 1978 in several rounds, from regional to national. The article explores the ways in which the children act as performers of the (micro)regional identity and negotiate local cultural heritage. Accounting for both historical and contemporary contexts, the text draws from fieldwork including participant observation and autoethnography, interviews, and document analysis.

• **Keywords:** children’s folk singing competitions, cultural heritage, Czech Republic, folklore revival, regional identity

»Zpěváček« je tekmovanje otroških pevcev ljudskih pesmi, ki od leta 1978 na Češkem poteka na več ravneh, od regionalne do državne. V članku so predstavljeni načini, na katere otroci izkazujejo (mikro)pokrajinske identitete in lokalno kulturno dediščino. Besedilo upošteva zgodovinski in sodobni kontekst ter temelji na terenskem delu, vključno z opazovanjem z udeležbo in avtoetnografijo, intervjuji in analizo dokumentov.

• **Ključne besede:** tekmovanja otrok v ljudskem petju, kulturna dediščina, Češka, folklorni preporod, pokrajinska identiteta

Prologue

It is Sunday at the end of June 2022, about 1 pm and, as several times before, I am entering the Radost Theatre in Brno. I am representing the region of Bohemia as a juror in the national round of the “Zpěváček – Děti a píseň” (“Little Singer – Children and Song” in English) contest of children folk singers. The seventy finalists will start competing at 2 pm, and the jury needs to find ten best children singers between the ages 10 and 15 in the Czech Republic; their position in the contest will not be specified. Although the area of the Czech Republic is not large, completely different performances are impressive. The children represent various regions, sometimes they sing in their everyday clothes, other times they wear diverse folk costumes. Some sing in standard Czech and their voice has classical training, others catch the panel’s attention with dialect, a distinctive way of singing or hints of dance moves. A person unfamiliar with Bohemian, Moravian or Silesian folk songs would not know most songs in the repertoire. Four jurors, including me, are in casual-smart attire; only one juror from South Moravia, a distinguished folklore activist and leader of several folk music and dance ensembles, is wearing a folk costume from the Hornácko region and is stating that this is the way to support the contestants. Among the judges are well-known regional folk song singers, teachers from various levels of music schools as well as from the

Prague Academy of Performing Arts, and ethnomusicologists – including myself. Jurors whose anchor point are the principles of singing in Western art music disagree with the way of phrasing or the glottal attack of the children from Moravia-Silesia. This, on the contrary, is advocated especially by other jurors: Moravian-Silesian singers of folk songs, who defend the specifics of the regional style of singing. Over an hour long, and sometimes heated debate of jurors about individual performances follows the contest. No subpar children singers advance to the national round, therefore the main subject of criticism is how the so-called regional style and coherence between the identity of the song and its performer have been maintained. Personally, I take a moderate position, trying to evaluate the overall performance of each contestant; I don't stick to details. On the other hand, I am sympathetic to children who try to imitate the singing patterns of their models – adult folk singers.¹

Introduction

Competitions and festivals of amateur singers and musicians of different kinds, of both local pop and folk music, held in various parts of the world have gained the attention of scholars across many fields, including culture studies and ethnomusicology or social and cultural geography (Ó Laoire, 2000; Duffy, 2000, 2005; Tan, 2005; Wood, 2012; Ellis, 2013; Kearney, 2013; Rhodes, 2021). However, the regions of Central and Mid-Eastern Europe have only been explored to a smaller extent (Bohlman, 2011: 95–107; Szalay, 2017; Nowak, 2018). We can thus investigate the role and purpose played by a children's singing competition with a forty-five year history within the phenomenon of folklore revival. What does it say about the national, or more precisely regional identity, and about the treatment of local song folklore in the Czech Republic? Since 2018 I have been a juror in the national round of the “Zpěváček” competition. Therefore, the study takes into account data from my personal observation together with the method of autoethnography. Also, informal and formal semi-structured interviews² with participants of the competition at various positions, i.e., organizers of rounds on various levels, members of accompanying bands, panellists, previous children singers who repeatedly participated, all served as a source of data. The research is complemented with a content analysis of documents, mainly from contributions to the newsletter *Folklor* from 1993 to 2012³ which directly concern the competition.

¹ The prologue is based on my fieldnotes from the “Zpěváček – Děti a píseň” national round held on 19. 6. 2022 in Divadlo Radost, Brno (Skořepová, 2022a: 2).

² Audio recordings and transcripts of interviews are available in the archive of the Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences.

³ Due to the lack of financial resources, the newsletter ceased to be published after 2013.

Competition history and propositions

The predecessor of the current “Zpěváček” competition was the radio show of the Brno Radio Orchestra of Folk Instruments⁴ “Děti a píseň”. In the 1970s, BROLN’s dramaturge Jaroslav Jakubíček addressed, in the press and on the radio, children who like to sing to record their songs on cassettes and send them to the Brno radio station. The best recordings were selected, and their performers were invited to the studio to sing with the accompaniment of the BROLN. From the compilation of these recordings, the show “Děti a píseň” was eventually created and held annually since 1978 (Bukovský, 2007: 22)⁵ as the only children’s competition in singing folk songs in Czechoslovakia. At that time this was a regional, *de facto* Moravian thing: the repertoire and performers came from various areas of Moravia, less frequently from Silesia. This circumstance stems from the fact that – compared to Bohemia – in the areas of Moravia-Silesia, there was and still is a much higher frequency of singing folk songs and engaging in folklore activities in general (cf. Kučerová et al., 2019; Uhlíková, 2020).

After the fall of communism, the competition became an all-national contest. Its organization was then taken over by the newly-founded nationwide⁶ Folklore Association of the Czech Republic (*Folklorní sdružení České republiky*, further as FoS ČR). Because of concern from the Bohemian side about the predominance of Moravia, representatives of the regional folklore associations in Bohemia have been involved in the organisational aspects of the competition since the early 1990s. Bohemians have insisted on the competition’s nationwide character, which would not leave Bohemian regions behind. The change in the concept was also reflected in the name change. In 1995, the competition was renamed to “Zpěváček”. Nonetheless, due to financial bankruptcy and dissolution of the FoS ČR, the Moravian orchestra BROLN has been the forefront organizer again since 2014. The intention to express continuity with the original phenomenon can be seen in the re-inclusion of the words “Děti a píseň” in the name of the competition, which is now called “Zpěváček – Děti a píseň”.

Since the beginning of the competition, the organizers have expressed the aims of the original non-competitive show and the current competition as: 1) strengthening children’s relationship to local folk songs; 2) recognition of singing traditions from various regions and a chance to establish cooperation with key folk music ensembles and musicians – prominent personalities of the Czech folklore movement (Stavělová et al., 2021) in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. The over forty-year history of the competition

⁴ Brno Radio Orchestra of Folk Instruments (further as BROLN) was founded in 1952 for the needs of the Czechoslovak Radio broadcasting (Pavlicová, Uhlíková, 1997: 139–140).

⁵ According to the current chairman of the competition organizing committee, the first proof of the show’s realisation dates back to 1972 (Skořepová, 2022c). However, various years of the first year of the competition can be found in document sources.

⁶ Thus including Bohemian, Moravian and Silesian scope.

might have brought partial changes into its propositions,⁷ but the main declared requirements continue (Skořepová, 2022c): competitors are requested to perform two folk songs at a different pace, the songs are to be – both musically and textually – adequate to the child’s age and voice disposition. According to the organizers of all rounds,⁸ one of the songs is to be sung *a capella* and must at the same time come from the region the child represents. The second song is to be accompanied by a folk music ensemble. The spectrum of accompanying ensembles varies; however, the main requirement is still the compatibility of the regional origin of the competition songs and their instrumental accompaniment. Therefore, competing children from Bohemian regions are accompanied by various Bohemian bands, while children from Moravia and Silesia were accompanied by their local, mostly Moravian music ensembles, though in the last years it has been exclusively the BROLN. The selection of accompanying bands is generally limited by time constraints of involved musicians and their willingness to accept very low or no financial compensation. If a participant wears a folk costume from their region, it brings a declared advantage in the evaluation of their performance.

While the number of competitors is not limited in local and regional rounds and there are also more age categories, an advancement key is applied to nominations from individual regions into two land rounds, the Bohemian and the Moravian-Silesian. Eventually, 20 children in one age category of 10–15 years compete in the nationwide round; 8 of them come from the Bohemian land round and 12 from the Moravian-Silesian one.



Figure 1: Contestants in the national round of the competition *Zpěváček*, 19 June 2022. Photo: Milan Zelinka, source: BROLN Archive.

⁷ For instance, age limitations of competition categories, demarcation of borders for individual regions and numbers of competitors – representatives of particular regions. Also the concept of the semi-final, winner’s status and their position changed. In 1993–2013 one Gold, between two to three Silver and Bronze little singers were awarded in the nationwide round. This approach was dropped and from 2015, ten best little singers from the Czech Republic are chosen without specifying the position in the contest (*Folklor*, 1993–2012; Skořepová, 2022c).

⁸ In the period when the *Folklor* newsletter was published, the propositions were repeatedly published here every year. Today they are available on the website of the BROLN: <https://broln.com/ke-stazeni/pravidla>.

Regional identities: Mutual rivalry and fragmentation of “sub-identities”

Since the beginning of its activities in the 1990s, FoS ČR has proclaimed its aim to strengthen relationship to folklore, promote it to the youngest generation and support its interest in folk songs, both of its own region and the folklore nationwide. However, the conception of the competition and its course during various rounds from local to nationwide reveals that regional diversity is strengthened, yet the micro-regional identities are further fragmented. In connection to this, the persevering antagonistic and stereotypical delimitation of the Bohemians, Moravians and Silesians is embodied in images of “ours” versus “theirs” song repertoire and the style of its rendition.

One should realize that the concept of “a region” is disputed and difficult to delimit (cf. Applegate, 1999: 1158). With respect to the context of the competition, which is localised in the nowadays Czech Republic, it is possible to think in terms of micro- or at the most of meso-regions (Roth, 2007: 18–19), but primarily of cultural regions (ibid.: 21, 26). In the Czech context, ethnologists or social geographers call them cultural-historical ethnographic or folklore regions. Regarding this, we can look for connections with ethnologic research in Central Europe, which – not only in the German speaking areas – attempted to define culture areas or culture regions (Wiegelmann, 1968; Woitsch, 2012) on the basis of folk culture (Roth, 2007: 21). Their borders do not fully overlap the borders of formal and administrative regions of the Czech Republic and even in their case, the process of institutionalisation has not been finalised (Paasi, 1986). Nevertheless, they can be recognised in everyday actions and in minds of local inhabitants (Chromý, 2003: 172) who themselves feel that they belong to ethnographic areas, i.e. folklore regions.⁹ However, it should be recalled that the borders and characteristics of folklore regions have been set up and defined by ethnologists (Woitsch, Bahenský, 2004; Woitsch, 2012). Their range included researchers from the field of music folkloristics and ethnochoreology, where the first institutionally backed attempts to collect and categorise music and dance materials date back to 1819 in connection to the so called *Sonnleithner Sammlung* (*Guberniální sbírka* in Czech) in Austria-Hungary (cf. Tyllner, 2018).

When defining ethnographic areas or folklore (micro)regions, Czech ethnologists based their definitions on the frequency and uniqueness of living traditions. In Bohemia, they generally distinguish amongst three larger regions: the West, the North-East, and the South. Contrary to this, especially Moravia displays a much deeper diversity. While in Bohemia with 52 065 km² ethnologists delimit 12 ethnographic areas, we can find as many as 22 of them, including distinctive sub-areas, in the territory of Moravia and Silesia which covers the area of only 26 801 km² (Woitsch, Bahenský, 2004).

⁹ In 2003 Czech sociologists surveyed the importance of historical and ethnographic regions. While for 41 % of respondents these regions are “only partially important”, 56 % consider them to be important for strengthening identity. For 78 % the regions are important due to the development of cultural traditions and folklore (Kunštát, 2003).

Although ethnographic (micro)regions can be understood as a certain historical and paradigmatic construct of researchers, the persistence and frequency of local folk music and dance activities in micro-regions of Moravia-Silesia is generally higher than in larger regions of Bohemia. However, to this date there has not been a clear consensus on exact borders of the ethnographic (micro)regions in the Czech Republic. This is naturally related to the criticism of Culture Area Research. The critique points to elusiveness, not accounting for cultural change, focussing on the dominant ethnic groups and excluding various marginal groups, and establishing of regions with rigid and time-less borders and characteristics.

Aspects of the competition reveal that even a small and ethnically nearly homogeneous Mid-Eastern European country as the Czech Republic still maintains its diversities across regions. They are manifested here in the singing heritage people can relate to as an abstract form of the (micro)regional cultural symbols (Šifta, Chromý, 2017: 105). The regional diversity of the Czech Republic is already determined by historical circumstances: Moravia had a rather peripheral position in relation to Bohemia. Due to a certain transport isolation, different pace of urbanisation and industrialisation, and the stronger position of the church and conservative values, forms of traditional folk culture have been preserved here to a greater extent, therefore there is also a larger number of distinctive micro-regions (Jančář et al., 2000; Doušek, Drápala, Novotná, 2015). Additionally, the folklore movement that started from the 1950s developed in different ways in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia (Pavlicová, Uhlíková, 1997; Vondrušková, 2000; Stavělová et al., 2021).

In connection to the “Zpěváček”, it is important to emphasize that not only organizers of the competition but all Czech “folklorists”¹⁰ refer to the conceptualization of ethnographic regions created by ethnologists, including music and dance folklorists. Music teachers or leaders of folk ensembles who prepare children for the competition control the choice of their competition repertoire. They pay attention to the belonging of the song to the local folklore repertoire and try to provide the children with an appropriate way of interpreting the song with respect to the regional style. There are children from smaller villages, where there is an awareness of regional folklore and some practices even take the form of living traditions (Toncrová, 2017: 70; Uhlíková, 2020: 78). The situation is different for children who are members of folk ensembles established in urban contexts of Prague or Brno. Such ensembles perform non-local folk music and dance repertoire due to the disappearance of local folk traditions in cities. Competing children from city folk ensembles may thus perform the repertoire of their ensemble even when the origin of the song does not match the region the child represents.

¹⁰ The term “folklorists” is used by members of folk ensembles, but also by other active agents and those interested in the sphere of folk music and dance, to denote themselves. Therefore, “folklorists” as actors in the so called folklore movement in the Czech Republic can be perceived as a specific cultural cohort (Turino, 2008) of folklore lovers in general.



Figure 2: A contestant from South-East Moravia in the national round of the *Zpěváček* competition, 19 June 2022. Photo: Milan Zelinka, source: BROLN Archive.

The significantly different numbers of children advancing according to the advancement key in individual regions are already mentioned above. The advancement key respects the so called “folklore potential”¹¹ of a particular region. Negotiations about the number of children delegated to represent individual regions were the subject of numerous disputes in the past: only 2 children advance from regions with a “low folklore potential”, mainly from Prague, Brno, or North-Eastern Bohemia. In contrast, from Slovácko¹² alone – a small but the most distinguished folklore region – 13 children advance. Each of the two Silesian regions is represented by 6 children.¹³ The numbers set this way are still perceived as contradictory; on the one hand Bohemians fear that Bohemian children will be disregarded or even eliminated from the competitions, on the other Moravians and Silesians criticise negligible competition in the Bohemian regions. While as many as several hundred children will go through local rounds in the “folklore-rich” regions in the south and the east of the Republic, there may be only a dozen competitors in Prague and Central Bohemia. This means that practically each child from that region competing in the “Zpěváček” will advance to a higher round.

¹¹ The wording is used by the authors of the competition proposals.

¹² It covers a substantial part of South-Eastern Moravia. Slovácko is also one of distinctive ethnographic regions of the Czech Republic (Woitsch, Bahenský, 2004: 51–55).

¹³ Partial numbers of children delegated on behalf of individual regions have slightly changed over the thirty years of the competition in the contemporary Czech Republic, but the fundamental folklore contrast between the “low potential” and “high potential” regions still persists.

Last but not least, local and regional rounds are administratively organised within the boundaries of ethnographic (micro)regions. Nevertheless, during the forty-five years the competition has been running, delimitation of competing regions and children's affiliation to them have slightly changed. The fundamental role has been played by pragmatically conditioned and sometimes purposive and supported fluctuation of competitors. For instance, the competitors from the border of two regions participate in the local round in this particular region, which is more accessible to them by transport. In some cases, competitors are purposefully invited "to support" a neighbouring region. These individual pragmatic strategies then disrupt the essentialist and rigid conception of folklore regions and reveal their certain permeability.

Competition song repertoire as a symbolic indicator and a negotiated heritage of cultural-historical (micro)regions in the Czech Republic

The discourse of organizers and other participants at the competition "Zpěváček" is grounded in a presumption that each individual (micro)region has its own particular repertoire of songs. This presumption, however, omits the fact that folk song repertoire and the definition of its regional origin was often uncritically constructed by folklorists and other authors of influential editions of local music and dance folklore, gradually published in the course of the 19th century.¹⁴ Organizers and part of jury members tend to view song repertoire as a historically formed local cultural heritage that reflects ethno-national aspects. At the same time, it defines and symbolically represents (micro) regional identities (Smith, 2006: 30) manifested in a sum of songs, a specific style which is rendered through singing and also through performing in a properly chosen regional folk costume. Although this is unofficial heritage, which is not recognised by official forms of legislation (Harrison, 2013: 15), a process of authorized heritage discourse (Smith, 2006: 11–13) is manifested here. Such a process is applied by leading personalities in the Czech folklore movement, who come from specialists in ethnology, but mainly in ethno-musicology/choreology as well as committed and enthusiastic amateurs. Therefore, "folk costumes and folk songs acquired new standardised and stereotyped meanings and a moral value as identity-markers" (Köstlin, 1999: 34) in the Czech Republic, as well as for instance in neighbouring Austria.

As my informal questioning of children at the competition reveals, children do not primarily think about their regional identity.¹⁵ It is the adults who try to emphasize and

¹⁴ For example, František Sušil's chief and monumental collection of Moravian folk songs was published in 1835. For other collections see Brouček, Jeřábek, 2007: 885–888.

¹⁵ For example, at the national round held on 19 June 2022, the children I approached answered as follows: "I am just looking forward to singing", or "I came to sing the songs I sing with my dad", etc. (Skořepová, 2022a: 3).

motivate them to represent it. One juror from a Bohemian regional round described it eloquently:

When we sent the children from our regional round to the national round, we lent them folk costumes. Because it was obligatory basically, even though it's not explicit in the rules, but those kids felt like it was stupid that they were dressed in civilian clothes and the others were in these beautiful folk costumes. (Skořepová, 2022b)

As is evident from the implicit requirements arising from the competition's propositions, and from my observation of the jury members' attitudes directly at the competition, the children participate mainly to duly perform the heritage (Haldrup, Bærenholdt, 2015: 55–58) and identity of the region they represent. They do so not only through a corresponding choice of the repertoire, “proper” interpretation of the style and adherence to the dialect, but to a large extent also thanks to the attire – the folk costume.¹⁶ In the Goffmanian sense, at that particular moment and in the setting of the competition, this is a performance in the “front region” (Goffman, 1956: 66–67). It should be added that in the case of the children coming from cities, this exhibited identity is often purposefully chosen and acted out at the competition. However, for the contestants coming from the Moravian-Silesian (micro)regions with the so called strong folklore potential this frequently originates in their inner experience and encountered daily reality. Especially in some Moravian micro-regions, people's willingness to wear folk costumes and sing folk songs during local festivities is based on their spontaneous decision.

With regard to the historical cultural heritage of song folklore and the national identification of contemporary inhabitants, regions with the so-called lost identity present a certain problem (Chromý, 2003: 172). About 3 million Germans still lived in the territory of the present-day Czech Republic, mostly in the borderland, in the period between the wars, i.e., 1918–1938. However, their presence here dates back even to the 19th century during which fundamental collection of both Czech and German folk song and dance repertoire took place. Firstly, it was through the so called Gubernatorial collection, subsequently followed by initiatives of individual collectors and by the state¹⁷ controlled activities, which lasted until the inter-war period. “Folklorists”

¹⁶ This incoherence has been the subject of verbal and written complaints: “It proves problematic when children from some regions do not represent their ethnographic region, but borrow costumes, dialects and song repertoire from various corners of the country ... one of the singers, for example, this year performed in a costume from Kyjov and sang one song from Hanácko and another from Hornácko ... it is then the mistake of the juries from the lower rounds to overlook these faults and send the child to the national round.” (Petráková, 2004: 229).

¹⁷ Collection activity under *Das Volkslied in Österreich*, and further through institutions: State Institute for Folk Song (*Státní ústav pro lidovou píseň*) (1919–1937), and Institute for Ethnography and Folklore Studies of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences (*Ústav pro etnografii a folkloristiku Československé akademie věd*) (1954–1998) – the predecessor of the current Institute of Ethnology CAS.

draw on this legacy and its re-editions to this day. While the knowledge of folk songs in various Czech dialects, compiled in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia mainly through the course of the 19th century, is preserved and passed on even nowadays, the German song repertoire in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic has become abandoned in people's memories and, only with some exceptions,¹⁸ it has *de facto* been forced out from the music awareness of the general public. It is well known that most Germans were transferred or expelled from Czechoslovakia soon after the Second World War (Glassheim, 2000). Together with the inhabitants, their folklore¹⁹ also disappeared from some regions not only in the German borderlands.²⁰ With respect to “Zpěváček”, these regions are questionable areas, since they are historically free from folk songs in the Czech language. Hence the principle on which children are to represent their folklore area through the competition repertoire reveals a selective approach towards understanding the cultural and historical legacy of music and dance. This is currently tied solely to the Czech²¹ language and national identity, thus it excludes the lost German identity and the song repertoire belonging to it. Therefore, we can state that contemporary “folklorists” in the Czech Republic approach the identity of folk songs from an essentialist perspective while applying the regional nationalism view that refers to Bohemian, Moravian or Silesian identity. On top of that, they evidently ignore minority identities, primarily the Roma identity. A dilemma concerning the choice of the repertoire arises for children who represent the regions with a historically important presence of the German minority. They do not enter the competition with German songs; “loans” from neighbouring and nearby areas are tolerated – therefore also a repertoire from the Western or South-Western Bohemia can be heard at the Karlovarsko²² regional round. On the other hand, disputes about compliance with a micro-region the performers come from and the song they perform appear on the level of Slovácko, probably the most canorous Moravian region. If a child representing for instance the Horňácko micro-region performs a song whose origin is assigned to another micro-region, it becomes subject to strong criticism.

Apart from identity and regional aspect of the competition folk song repertoire, as a negotiated culture and historical heritage, aesthetic aspects are also to be considered. Children do not enter the competition with inappropriate lascivious, jocular, or drunkard

¹⁸ There are individual cases where music teachers or leaders of folk ensembles tried to introduce children to originally German songs, or their variations, not always successfully translated into Czech. As a rule, these songs are not well accepted as they are *ländler* type dance melodies with a large vocal range, which are less suitable for children mainly due to high demands on singing skills.

¹⁹ The songs were maintained in records written by collectors between 1819 and 1937; the collection was published by the State Institute for Folk Song (Jungbauer, 1930–1936).

²⁰ Regions of Brno, Znojmo, Karlovy Vary, or the North-Eastern Bohemia.

²¹ Meant including the Bohemian, Moravian, and Silesian dialects.

²² The region in North-Western Bohemia.

songs,²³ although these make a substantial part of the collected folk song repertoire. For instance, songs belonging to the Prague urban folklore are considered inappropriate for children. The reason is that they often refer to life of marginal social strata at the late 19th century, and they do not avoid vulgar expressions.

Folklore and “Zpěváček” in postsocialism

After the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia in 1989, all subjects involved in music and dance activities – mainly folk ensembles themselves – had to come to terms with processes of privatization, liberalization, and democratization in postsocialist conditions²⁴ (Müller, 2019: 536), and had to start operating as independent subject of civil society. All this related to the need to start using one’s own initiative and apply for funding from public grants or private gifts. “Lobbying” skills to establish contacts with relevant “influential” people could not be disregarded. As the people engaged in the folklore movement were more than willing to keep continuity in their activities, an umbrella organisation for both adult and children folk ensembles – FoS ČR – was founded in the Czech Republic in 1990.²⁵ It focused on programme, editorial, and education activities. Apart from that, the association became a promoter and temporarily also the main organiser of nationwide folklore shows including “Děti a píseň”, which changed its name into “Zpěváček” at the beginning of the 1990s.

In conditions of the newly-established capitalism, the management of FoS ČR tried to obtain support for activities of folk ensembles but also to build its individual PR and medialize folklore in general. The nationwide competition “Zpěváček” was its flagship event. From the Association’s point of view, it was also the most prestigious event mainly during Zdeněk Pšenica’s²⁶ chairmanship. Pšenica was attempting to gain the favour of regional and top Czech politicians representing different political parties, and on behalf of the Association he submitted applications for grants to three Czech ministries.²⁷ At the same time and in the new conditions, folklore was rendered in a new way and gained different connotations: while in the previous regime it was in fact misused by the communist ideology, in the second half of the 1990s FoS ČR started

²³ Despite this, it is a matter of individual taste if mostly love folk songs will be acceptable or not.

²⁴ The concept of postsocialism has become a target of criticism (Müller, 2019). The year 2004 can be considered as the end of postsocialism in those Central European countries which joined the EU (Pickles, 2010: 135). In this paper I am using the term mainly in connection with the 1990s transition period following the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia after 1989; with respect to the issues of not only music activities including folklore cf. (Milanović, Milin, Mihajlović, 2020).

²⁵ At the end of the 1990s the FoS ČR associated about 400 folk ensembles (Synek, Jánoška, 2011: 8).

²⁶ Zdeněk Pšenica (1963–2019), came from a small town of Zubří in Walachia and worked as a labourer in the Zlín rubber factory. He proved successful in the FoS ČR from the beginning of the 1990s. In 1997 he took its lead and remained at the post until its dissolution in 2014.

²⁷ Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Education, Ministry for Regional Development.

to be supported mainly by regional politicians from the CDU-CPP party,²⁸ which endorsed Christian and conservative values combined with regional patriotism. The national round of “Zpěváček” was purposively held in Velké Losiny in the Olomouc Region between 1995 and 2013.²⁹ Competitors faced difficult transport and accessibility to the venue, local accommodation far from being comfortable and other glitches in organisation. The complicated logistics was rather demanding on folk ensembles, which accompanied the competing children without a fee. On the other hand, the attractive and representative venue in a private thermal spa in the foothills of the Jeseníky Mountains suited hosting receptions aimed at self-promotion and effort to attract the attention of regional politicians and other “influential” public figures.

The other strategic intention supposed to raise awareness of the competition was the engagement of famous personalities. Between 1999 and 2006, the Slovak tenor Peter Dvorský³⁰ personally took part in and patronage over the competition. Dvorský was among others also the instigator of “Slávik” (Nightingale in English), a similar competition that was established in Slovakia at the beginning of the 1990s.³¹ “Slávik” winners were guests at the Czech competition and vice versa, and they also appeared at a newly initiated event – joint galas held in representative venues in Prague which also attracted the attention of media and private sponsors. Those who performed at these galas and next to the best children singers from the Czech and Slovak Republics³² were personalities from local opera theatres, pop singers and members of both classical and folk music ensembles. Also, Czech and Slovak VIP guests could be found amongst the attendees.

Pšenica’s activity might be summarized as rather ambivalent. On the one hand the numbers and promotion of folklore events increased significantly together with received funding from state subsidies during his tenure. On the other, since November 2014, regional and nationwide print and online media started publishing news about serious financial difficulties experienced by FoS ČR.³³ The Association owed money to several subjects, while mismanagement of funds and suspected fraudulent behaviour in connection with received funding transpired. Representatives of regional folklore associations were displeased with the high cost of promotions and representation, while the folk ensembles received much smaller sums of money to cover their activity and equipment. The fact that FoS ČR filed for bankruptcy in November 2014 (Městský

²⁸ Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People’s Party.

²⁹ Due to the financial problems of FoS ČR the nationwide round of “Zpěváček” was called off in 2014.

³⁰ Zdeněk Pšenica managed to engage Dvorský in co-operation thanks to coincidence – Pšenica’s wife came from the same Slovak village as the famous opera singer. Due to his work commitments, from 2007 Peter Dvorský was no longer present at the nationwide rounds and galas.

³¹ Official competition website <http://www.slavikslovenska.org/start.htm>.

³² Winners of similar children singing competitions from Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Russia, and Austria took part at the gala in 2006.

³³ See for example Kabátová, 2014.

soud v Praze, 2014) and was eventually dissolved discredited folklore activities overall. Despite that, the continuity of the competition was not disrupted. FoS ČR regional branches perpetuated their activities and at their own expense organised district and regional rounds of the competition. Nevertheless, marginalisation of the competition has taken its toll, and is apparent even nowadays in considerably lower funds provided by state institutions.³⁴

The competition’s significance for regional folk singing style reproduction

Ongoing generation continuity can be seen in various aspects through which “Zpěváček” is involved not only in the folklore community despite the change of the political system in early postcommunist and contemporary contexts. Generation continuity is obvious firstly in the personalities of those individuals who are engaged in the competition, and at the same time perceived as key representatives of the folklore movement. From the second half of the 20th century, the most prominent folk ensembles intertwined with “Zpěváček” – and the foremost folk singers as well – developed to be textbook representatives of individual music styles. They contributed to the gradual implementation of unwritten rules³⁵ for music and interpretation characteristics of (micro)regional styles.³⁶ One of the judges and organizers of the Bohemian regional round adds:

The development of the folklore movement in Moravia has not led to a levelling, but on the contrary to a sharpening of the style differences in the individual so-called ethnographic regions or sub-regions, whereas in Bohemia it is not possible to observe this, I am not able to say that some music is more South Bohemian and some is more Chodish. (Skořepová, 2022b)

³⁴ During Pšenička’s chairmanship at the end of the 1990s the FoS ČR used to receive sums even as high as CZK500,000; its current organizer of the nationwide round, the BROLN, receives only about CZK70,000 (Skořepová, 2022c).

³⁵ On the influence of institutionalized standards on the transformation of folk singing cf. (Šivic, 2007).

³⁶ An analysis of the detailed aspects of micro-regional styles is beyond the scope of this article. In general, Czech folklorists and ethnomusicologists (Tyllner, 2014: 570–573) distinguish the so-called western (instrumental) type characteristic of Bohemian folk songs. Moravian songs correspond to the so-called eastern (vocal) type. Bohemian songs are characterised by formal periodicity, regular metre, diatonic melodicism of scale runs and staggered triplets. Moravian songs, on the other hand, are characterised by variable metre, with the melodies and rhythm based on the spoken word. Modality and more complex forms of harmonisation appear. Polish influences are reflected in North-Eastern Moravia, while South-Eastern Moravia is characterised by the so-called New Hungarian style influenced by Romani musicians from Hungary and Slovakia. The Moravian instrumental ensembles feature the cimbalom, which is absent in Czech ensembles. Compared to the Bohemian singing style, the Moravian has a different way of phrasing, vocal ornamentation and phonation, which is characterised by glottal, or “hard” attack.

Generation continuity in connection to the folklore movement is sustained also thanks to former “Zpěváček” competitors. They are active as prominent singer personalities in various music ensembles often extending beyond folklore. Some asserted themselves in the singing of other genres or in acting. After all, former participants in “Zpěváček” can still be found amongst jurors, organizers and accompanying musicians in regional and nationwide rounds of the competition.

On the other hand, a closer look at the competition reveals that, as a priority, only some children competitors will enjoy the implicit privilege of success in “Zpěváček” connected to singing folk songs. Firstly, they are the children for whom the aforementioned generation continuity is present thanks to natural everyday singing patterns within a family – and this is evident in micro-regions rich in folklore. The second group of successful little singers is represented by children who are or have been, often since pre-school age, members of folk ensembles where they encounter the repertoire and its model interpretation at internal and public performances. Therefore, these competitors come with a particular experience of integration into a community of folklore revivalists. They will fulfill the juries’ expectations due to the “right” choice of the competition repertoire, the way it is presented, performed, and sung. In this respect their competences represent a certain form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973). In many cases, competing children grounded in a totally different starting point style-wise and regarding interpretation, with no broader knowledge of folklore, are marginalised. Typically these are children attending music schools or schools with a general study programme, who have no experience with participation in a folk ensemble.³⁷ An inconsistent regional origin of the chosen repertoire and the folk costume that the participant is wearing is almost an unforgivable mistake. In spite of all this, even the competitors who select a suitable repertoire but sing it according to a classical singing style and technique may not receive the jury’s recognition and be successful, as their interpretation does not correspond to the given (micro)regional style of folk singing. In other words, the competitors do not meet the conditions of the authorised discourse in the cultural heritage of regional songs. In such cases, the jury often decides not to send the competitor to a higher round. The jurors presume that the child’s performance will not be convincing enough amongst little singers from “folklore-rich” regions.

Conclusion

Due to the “proper” choice of the competition repertoire, “Zpěváček” *de facto* ties up a direct connection between a child and the region which the child represents in the competition, and whose identity the child is supposed to refer to. The song repertoire

³⁷ In some areas, children who do not come from folk ensembles or are not even descendants of direct bearers of the traditional folk singing and music prevail in local and regional rounds of the competition.

is, primarily from the organizers’ standpoint, perceived as a negotiated (micro)regional and cultural heritage and, at the same time, a symbolic identity marker. In connection with that it needs to be stressed that the Bohemian or Moravian and Silesian identity respectively (and alternatively their partial micro-regional, sometimes competing “sub-identities”), eliminate former historical and contemporary minority identities. As for the minority identity, we can list mainly the German one, to which no competitors can relate any longer. However, with respect to the frequency of song collecting prior to the Second World War, it was the German repertoire that best characterised certain regions. Furthermore, contemporary minority identities are only a marginal matter. In 2002 the winning singer was a Polish boy Filip Koziel from Těšínsko, a region near the Czech-Polish border. Roma children, sometimes even performing Roma songs, appeared amongst competitors on regional levels, but they have never won the nationwide round. Even though it is possible to find children who performed a Slovak song in the history of the competition, its propositions do not allow for Slovak folklore after the split of Czechoslovakia. Also, the above-described activities of the Czecho-Slovak cooperation under the patronage of Peter Dvorský, the founder of the “Slávik” Slovak competition between 1999 and 2006, were in fact an episodic marketing strategy.

Deeper insights into the competition reveal the aforementioned limits of inclusion. Therefore, only those who overwhelmingly already have some previous connection to folklore join and succeed in “Zpěváček”, which continues to be one of the main platforms maintaining the homogeneity – but simultaneously also a certain exclusivity – of the Czech folklore movement. Further, it significantly contributes to the integration of young performers into already established folk music and dance ensembles. Regardless of the crisis and fall experienced by the FoS ČR after 2014, and despite stereotypical belief that interest in singing folk songs is generally receding, the competition gained a permanent place and importance, albeit only within the Czech folklore scene. The number of children participating in the competition has a steady but gradually increasing tendency, not only from the more “canorous” micro-regions of Moravia and Silesia, but also from Bohemia.³⁸ The over forty-five-year long history of the competition eventually exposed the transformed stance towards politics. In the early postsocialism there might have been an effort to integrate the firm ties of folklore and politics, which existed prior to 1989, through individual “lobbying” efforts and principles of marketing propaganda. The fiasco in connection with the fall of FoS ČR resulted in the opinion that an apolitical standpoint, or non-partisan position of folklore activities are necessary. In the conditions of the current Czech pluralist political spectrum there is a widespread belief that folklore does not have to bear the same significance and be perceived in the same positive way for all garnitures.

³⁸ In the early 1990s about 2,000 children went through all the rounds of the competition, starting from the lowest levels of the regional rounds up to the nationwide round, but in recent years their number has reached 5,000 (Skořepová, 2022c).

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Tekmovanje v ljudskem petju »Zpěváček«: regionalna identiteta in uprizorjanje dediščine na Češkem

Članek se osredinja na tekmovanje otrok v ljudskem petju »Zpěváček - Děti a píseň« (Mali pevec – Otroci in pesem), katerega začetki segajo v konec 70. let 20. stoletja. Takrat je bilo to edino otroško tekmovanje v petju ljudskih pesmi na Češkoslovaškem, vendar je imelo omejen regionalni obseg: repertoar in izvajalci so bili z različnih območij Moravske, redkeje iz Šlezije, kot najbolj »pevskih« čeških pokrajin. Na območjih Moravske in Šlezije je bilo namreč petje ljudskih pesmi in ukvarjanje s folklornimi dejavnostmi precej pogostejše kakor na Češkem. Šele v obdobju postsocialistične preobrazbe je tekmovanje preseglo moravski okvir in postalo vsedržavna prireditev z več krogi, od lokalnega do regionalnega in državnega. To se je zgodilo po zaslugi ustanovitve vsenacionalnega Folklornega združenja Češke republike, katerega cilj je bil podpirati in organizirati folklorne dejavnosti v vseh pokrajinah, tj. na Češkem, Moravskem in v Šleziji. Državno tekmovanje »Zpěváček« je postalo vodilni dogodek Folklornega združenja Češke republike. V skladu z zahtevami tekmovanja morajo tekmovalci dve ljudski pesmi izvajati v različnem tempu: ena pesem mora biti zapeta »a capella«, drugo pa spremlja regionalna folklorna skupina. Glavna zahteva in merilo za ocenjevanje je skladnost izvora pesmi z ustreznim narečjem, regionalnim slogom petja in ljudsko nošo, v katero so otroci oblečeni na tekmovanju.

Študija izhaja iz perspektive glasbe in antropologije, upošteva zgodovinski in sodobni kontekst ter temelji na terenskem delu, vključno z opazovanjem z udeležbo in avtoetnografijo, intervjuji in analizo dokumentov. Obravnava naslednji vprašanji: Kakšno vlogo ima tekmovanje s štiridesetletno zgodovino v okviru folklornega preporoda? Kaj nam pove predvsem o (mikro)regionalni identiteti in o načinu obravnave, ohranjanja in reprodukcije lokalne pesemske folklore na Češkem? Članek osvetljuje zgodovino tekmovanja, spremembe v zahtevah in organizaciji od začetka do danes. Opozarja na nasprotje med t. i. folklorno šibkimi in folklorno bogatimi (mikro)regijami. Raziskava je pokazala, kako se organizatorji tekmovanja, učitelji otrok in člani češke folklorne skupnosti opirajo na sporen koncept folklornih regij, ki so ga češki etnologi opredelili na podlagi razmer v 19. stoletju. Repertoar pesmi skupaj s posebnim slogom interpretacije petja in nastopanja v ustrezno izbrani regionalni ljudski noši velja za abstraktno obliko (mikro)regionalnih kulturnih simbolov in lokalne dediščine, ki izraža etnonacionalne vidike in predstavlja (mikro)regionalno identiteto. Čeprav gre v tem primeru za dediščino, ki je uradna dediščinska zakonodaja ne prepozna, se tu kaže proces diskurza avtorizirane dediščine. Organizatorji natečaja ga uporabljajo po zgledu vodilnih akterjev češkega folklornega preporoda.

Na tekmovanju ima osebna identiteta otrok drugotno vlogo, saj naj bi – predvsem v goffmanovskem smislu – tekmovalci uprizarjali dediščino in regionalno identiteto, ki jo predstavljajo. Na ta način »Zpěvák« vzpostavlja in *de facto* stabilizira neposredno vez med otrokom in regijo, ki jo predstavlja, ter identiteto, ki naj bi jo označevala. Češka oziroma moravska in šlezjska identiteta (ali tudi njene delne mikroregionalne in včasih celo konkurenčne »podidentite«) odpravlja ali izpušča nekdanjo zgodovinsko nemško identiteto, pa tudi sodobne identitete manjšin, predvsem Romov.