

Musical Theatre as an Object of Transnational Political Exchange

The Case of Isaac Dunayevsky's Operettas in Czechoslovakia*

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Abstract. The paper focuses on the ways Czech-language theatres in Czechoslovakia were dealing with the obligatory presence of Soviet operetta titles in their repertoire, dating from about 1950 to 1989. The reform of Czech musical theatre began right after World War II. In search of the right, nationalized form of operetta, Czech theatre organs soon understood that the example must be drawn from the hegemonic Soviet culture. In the Soviet discourse, mainly Isaac Dunayevsky's operettas were considered masterpieces, and Czech theatre politicians were soon paying their attention to them. After some initial difficulties in obtaining material for the operettas, Dunayevsky's pieces entered Czech theatre and stayed on the repertoire to the beginning of the 1960s. After the Warsaw Pact Invasion in 1968, Soviet operettas re-entered the theatres' repertoire; however, their reception and staging circumstances were much more complicated. The paper focuses on the main tendencies in staging Dunayevsky's operettas in Czechoslovakia, the political and cultural background of productions, and the various ways of presenting it in Czech society and culture. The cultural and historical microprocesses analysed may then throw light on a wider range of historical and cultural phenomena, including cultural transfers and relations between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, the discrepancies between the official and unofficial discourse, as well as the role of popular musical theatre in a socialist society.

Keywords: operetta, socialist culture, cultural transfer, Soviet music, Czechoslovak history, Czechoslovak culture, Isaac Dunayevsky

When Soviet operetta came to Czechoslovakia in the early 1950s, it was Isaac Dunayevsky's name that was heard the most frequently in connection with it. The import of Soviet operettas was due to political changes starting in 1945. The ongoing

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nationalization of theatres strongly affected operetta houses that had been heavily dependent on private income from commercially successful productions. As early as October 1945, the Musical Theatre in Karlín, Prague, saw a new version of Rudolf Friml's *Král tuláků* [The Vagabond King] under the direction of the communist theatricalian and composer Emil František Burian. His idea to make operetta less commercial and more dramatic and political failed to succeed with the audience, however, critical response from the progressive side of the press was enthusiastic.¹ Another experiment followed in October 1945, with director Alfred Radok's *Veselá vdova?* [Merry Widow?] in the Theatre of the Fifth of May in Prague meeting similar critical and popular responses. The first Soviet operetta in a Czech theatre was Boris Alexandrov's *Svatba v Malinovce* [Wedding in Malinovka], staged in Tyl's Theatre in Prague in 1946. The piece and its performance were allegedly too dependent on Viennese models to mark a turning point in the history of operetta in Czechoslovakia.² Nevertheless, starting in the 1950s, it became one of the most frequently produced and reprised Soviet operettas in Czechoslovakia.

The ongoing nationalization of culture took a rapid leap forward after the Communist *coup d'état* in February 1948. Operetta was one of the main topics of discussion in the newly formed Theatre and Dramaturgical Council, a centralized organ of organizational and ideological control over theatres. In 1949 discussions, some members of the Council recommended the dissolution of old operetta troupes as a way to raise the quality of operetta productions; even though this plan had never been put into practise, the question of operetta did not vanish. The main task was to find a new repertoire. If the first years of the Communist transformation of theatre culture in Czechoslovakia marked a dogmatic rhetoric and simple solutions, the new shift in the cultural policy in 1952 rejected the former development and, in an attempt to make culture pay for itself, allowed a repertoire diversification of theatres.³ In the new programme for operetta theatres, Soviet as well as contemporary Czech plays, classic operettas and opera buffas had to be present. This strategy in fact reflected the state in the Soviet Union where operetta houses produced a variety of titles, including commercially successful neo-Viennese operettas. Soviet cultural politics after World War II largely promoted the birth of new Soviet operettas that would overcome Western cosmopolitan influences. And, indeed, many new pieces did arise, including some of the most successful operettas by Isaac Dunayevsky and the new rising star Yuri Milyutin. State politics agitated for an original repertoire; indeed, the new pieces did enjoy popular success (especially Dunayevsky's *Volny veter* [Free Wind]).⁴

1 Bár, *Od operety k muzikálu*, 30–31.

2 Šulc, *Česká operetní kronika*, 387.

3 Bár, *Od operety k muzikálu*, 54–55.

4 Tomoff, "Of Gypsy Barons and Power of Love," 37–38.

In search of Dunayevsky's Czechoslovak image

In the Czech context, the import of Soviet operettas was a significant matter of political changes of culture. Soviet pieces had to serve as an example for the new Czechoslovak operetta theatre. This high attention given to Soviet theatre import, in fact, resulted in difficulties in obtaining the desired repertoire material. The exclusive agency for dealing with international theatre contacts and acquisition was the Czechoslovak Theatre and Literary Agency (ČDLJ), a part of the Theatre and Dramaturgical Council, which functioned under the Ministry of Education and Enlightenment. However, there was also another organization that was managing specifically Czechoslovak–Soviet relations, including the theatre ones: the Union of Czechoslovak–Soviet Friendship (SČSP). Formally a voluntary organization established in 1948, it held a strong political influence since it was founded by the almighty ideological figure and Minister of Education and Enlightenment Zdeněk Nejedlý (1948–1953), and by 1949 it had already incorporated about one million members.⁵ According to sources, the duplicity of the theatre exchange agency was causing some troubles in obtaining the required Soviet materials. Since it was considered a subject of great importance, two organizations oversaw it. Ironically, this fact meant that the actual inflow of Soviet material was not as active and fast as desired. The ČDLJ decided to use its authority to put an end to the chaotic situation and, at the beginning of 1950, they asked the Union to step back from their agency activities in favour of the ČDLJ. The SČSP now had to only oversee 'ideological matters'.⁶ As an effect of these negotiations, it was only around 1951 that Soviet operettas began to be performed regularly on all the main Czech operetta stages, both in the centre and on the peripheries. At the time, the name of Isaac Dunayevsky was not unknown to the Czech audience. His songs (especially from the movies *Vesyolye rebyata* [Jolly Fellows], 1934, and *Deti kapitana Granta* [The Children of Captain Grant], 1936) were played during the 1930s by famous Czechoslovak jazz orchestras such as Melody Boys with the famous conductor and singer Rudolf Antonín Dvorský, whose music publishing house was also the first to release Czech editions of Dunayevsky's songs.⁷ Dvorský's manner of performing the songs was in the vein of contemporary Czechoslovak popular music, mixing light swing rhythms and arrangements with clear harmonic and melodic structures of urban folklore. Thus, Dunayevsky's music became associated with contemporary Czechoslovak jazz and popular music. After World War II, Dvorský became an unwanted figure for the new

5 Knapík, *Únor a kultura*, 166.

6 Divadelní ústav, MB 682. Zpráva o činnosti Čs. divadelního a literárního jednatelství v r. 1950: Plán divadelní sekce SČSP na rok 1950. [Report of activity of ČDLJ in 1950: Plan of the theatre section for 1950], 1951.

7 Müller, R. A. *Dvorský*, 30, 32.

political establishment.⁸ The paradigm of popular music quickly changed, and jazz was seen as a sign of the bourgeois West. Similarly, in the Soviet Union, the post-war discourse heavily depended on nationalist, anti-cosmopolitan, and antisemitic narratives. However, this period also saw the premiere of Dunayevsky's most famous, in musical terms highly cosmopolitan operetta *Volny veter* [Free Wind], 1947, and the import of his operettas to Czechoslovakia began four years later.

Volny veter, an operetta written by Dunayevsky in 1947, marked a significant event in Soviet operetta history. It became a certain point of reference for Soviet and foreign writers when referencing Soviet operetta as a genre. Upon its premiere, *Volny veter* was a big success with spectators, but the critical response was rather mixed. The operetta was nominated for the Stalin Prize for Opera but did not actually receive it: the reason was an extensive discussion in the prize committee whether it was appropriate to give such a high reward for an operetta that was influenced by 'Western' musical styles and "had nothing Russian about it".⁹ The operetta was "a huge success" (in the composer's words)¹⁰ with the audience, however, it took some ten years before it was appreciated by critics and experts.¹¹ Yet, Dunayevsky was overall an authoritative figure in Soviet popular music, composer of many appreciated patriotic songs, a People's Artist (1950), and winner of two Stalin prizes (1941, 1951). The choice of Czech theatre organizers to import Dunayevsky's operettas was perfectly reasonable in the given context.

Following official discussions about the fate of Czech operetta in the early 1950s, the Musical Theatre in Karlín, Prague, was chosen to set the exemplary position and function for other operetta houses in the country.¹² However, it was the Nusle Theatre Na Fidlovačce, Prague, where the first production of a Dunayevsky operetta took place. Premiered on the 1 March 1951, Prague's *Dobrý vítr do plachet* (a variant title of *Volný vítr*) was highly praised by critics as a "principal turnaround"¹³ in theatre policy.

Other theatres soon followed the Prague example, and during the next two years, *Volný vítr* opened in České Budějovice, Ostrava, Brno, Olomouc, Jihlava, and Opava.¹⁴ The popularity of the piece in Czechoslovakia continued towards the end

8 Müller, R. A. *Dvorský*, 50. For a more detailed and critical view on this phenomenon, see: Želinský, "The Music of the Dying Class."

9 Frolova-Walker, *Stalin's Music Prize*, 192.

10 Dunayevsky and Raynl, *Pochtovy roman*, 62–63.

11 See Alexeyev, *Istoriya russkoy sovetskoy muzyki*. vol. 4, 66.

12 Bár, *Od operety k muzikálu*, 55.

13 Feldstein, "Cílevědomým prováděním divadelní politiky k úspěchům našeho divadla."

14 The year 1952 also saw a peculiar production in Kladno of what was probably an operetta adaptation of Ivan Pyryev's 1949 film *Kubanskí kazáci* [Kuban Cossacks] with Dunayevsky's score, under the new title *Tomorrow*.

of the 1950s: theatres in Kladno and Pilsen presented it, and in 1960, Czechoslovak Radio recorded a radio production with a star cast from the Musical Theatre in Karlín under the baton of the famous Czech conductor and operetta composer Vlastislav Antonín Vipler. Since as the only official radio station in the country,¹⁵ Czechoslovak Radio had the widest coverage of households, it is highly likely that the radio version reached hundreds of thousands of listeners.

The initial perception, as complicated as it was in the Soviet Union, became even more complex in the Czechoslovak context. When the new production was about to open in České Budějovice in April 1951, some authoritative figures raised their voice against it, claiming that the play was “ideologically harmful, even [...] tabloid”.¹⁶ Reportedly, negotiations about the piece took almost a year, and *Volný vítr* would finally be staged in České Budějovice only the next February.¹⁷ The central organ (in this case the Theatre and Dramaturgical Council) repeatedly claimed that its role was not to directly dictate the dramaturgy of theatres, but rather to ideologically oversee the theatres’ own repertory initiatives. In the case of the České Budějovice *Volný vítr*, the Council had to intervene and prevent the cancellation efforts of the theatre organizers. It was, after all, the famous Soviet operetta that was at stake.

This case also shows how unclear the authoritative discourse could be in that period. Theatres were trying to meet several ideological demands from the centre, but it was not always clear what exactly they were. If an authoritative figure invited theatres to fight bourgeois and cosmopolitan tendencies in operettas, the theatres could easily find those tendencies even in Soviet pieces. After all, as shown above, there was a similar discussion surrounding *Volny veter* in the Soviet Union. The anti-cosmopolitan discourse also affected the material of Czech-language productions of *Volny veter*. Taking a closer look at the material of Czech productions, we can see several interventions that indicate cautious treatment, or even censorship.¹⁸

The syncopated song of Foma and Filipp had already been criticised in the Soviet journal *Sovetskoye iskusstvo* by the musicologist David Rabinovich saying:

“In [...] *Volny veter* there is also a song [...] with a refrain which has absolutely unintelligible lyrics [...] or similarly absurd (mildly speaking)

15 Knapík et al., *Průvodce kulturním děním*, 215–17

16 “[...] hra je ideologicky závadná, dokonce prý »bulvární«.” Feldstein, “Cílevědomým prováděním divadelní politiky k úspěchům našeho divadla,” 266.

17 Archiv Jihočeského divadla, *Volný vítr*. Online archive entry.

18 The material I analysed is the radio production, which is the only surviving audial material of the Czech version of the operetta. Along with the official copy of Czech libretto from the 1950s, that I had access to, it creates a vivid image of the adaptation.

couplets about uncle Pryg. The operetta contains [...] a lot of dirtiness [*poshlost*] [sic!] so typical of the old operetta!”¹⁹

In the Czechoslovak radio production, this problematic number was re-instrumented for voices and the accordion, and the syncopation was significantly reduced. This is not the only case of such treatment in Czech productions, with the *Chastushki Yashki* [Chastushkas of Yashka] in *Belaya akatsiya* [Bílý akát, White Acacia] re-instrumented in the exact same manner. The conductor of both Czech radio productions, Vlastislav Antonín Vipler, is unlikely to have been the one to come up with these changes since as a composer of operettas he was known for thorough-composed orchestral scores.

There was another problematic number. The quartet in the Seventh Heaven pub has two parts: a waltz and a foxtrot, and is sung by positive characters in the operetta. In the Czechoslovak recording, the first waltz part is left untouched; the number, however, ends right after this part. This must have been due to an intervention by the censors, since the foxtrot lyrics are absent in all available copies of the Czech-language libretto.

The shifts in Czechoslovak production are symptomatic. The production team was attempting to make the operetta more suitable to what Czechoslovak culture perceived as Soviet at this time. If the Soviet piece of art had to serve as a role-model, it had to do so by fulfilling as many criteria of socialist realism as possible. The hegemonic role of the Soviet Union, especially its dominant Russian culture, also played a role in the interventions. The accordion serves as a very clearly readable musical sign of Russianness, but the foxtrot does not, therefore it was cut out. The “publisher’s note to the director” placed on the title page of the agency copy of the libretto of *Volný vítr* says that the love story of Marko (Janko) and Stella must under no circumstances become more important in the production than the main revolutionary narrative.²⁰ Such cautious behaviour in the case of a Soviet operetta is even more paradoxical if we consider that operettas influenced by neo-Viennese jazz were still enjoying considerable popularity in the Soviet Union, while in the early period of Czechoslovak communism they were erased from the repertoire with great verve.

The story of Dunayevsky’s operettas in Czechoslovakia in the 1950s continued with another successful row of premieres. While his 1950 operetta *Syn klouna* [Son of the Clown] had to wait for its Czechoslovak premiere until the late 1970s, his 1955

19 “Но в том же Вольном ветре есть [...] песенка с совершенно нечленораздельным припевом [...] или столь же бессмысленные, чтобы не сказать хуже, куплеты про дядю Прыга. [...] в оперетте немало пошлости – родимые пятна старой оперетты!” Rabinovich, “Operetta-pamphlet.”

20 Divadelní ústav, B 1061. Dobrý vítr. Libretto copy, 1951.

swan song *Belaya akatsiya*²¹ arrived much earlier. In 1957, three theatres put on the Czech version, and during the first years of the next decade, three other operetta houses followed. A radio version was recorded already in 1957, and the Prague production of the same year was broadcast by Czechoslovak Television.

The operetta was praised by the composer Jiří Válek, who saw it as an example of a realistic operetta combining current topics and tasteful comedy.²² *Belaya akatsiya* was written in a different context than *Volny veter*. It is the story of a young girl from Odessa who chooses a career as a telegraphist over singing in theatre. The storyline contains two negative characters: the spoiled bourgeois girl Larissa, and the effeminate junk dealer Yasha, not very typical characters of a socialist-realist piece, whose musical characteristics lean toward salon music and jazz. In his review of the first Moscow production, jazz musician Leonid Utyosov expresses his warm feelings toward the imagination of the operetta of his own hometown of Odessa. The city was once a famous cosmopolitan centre on the shore of the Black Sea with a specific culture and a large Jewish minority, but in the later discourse of the 1930s and 1940s, Odessa was associated mainly with its naval forces and with important revolutionary and war battles. *Belaya akatsiya* shows a certain shift in discourse about the city. While the naval theme remains important, the story also shows Odessa as a cultural centre and, in a certain meta-narrative, as the home of an important operetta house. What Utyosov rightly depicted was the presence of mocked 'pre-revolution' Odessa characters (Larissa and Yasha), who were re-entering the discourse of imagining Odessa.²³ The 1957 Soviet film adaptation of the operetta uses explicit signs of Jewishness in connection with Yasha in a carnivalesque scene on a boat. The caricature-like portrait insinuates the presence of the cultural Other, reflecting the antisemitic moods in the post-war Soviet Union.²⁴

For the Czech audience, the image of Odessa was not as clearly culturally defined as for the Soviet audience. There are other signs that appear significant in Czech productions. The score used for the 1957 Czech recording contains several arrangements and changes. The most important intervention is that the jazzy Larissa song in the third act is cut out, while Yasha's *chastushkas* on the orchestra's boat is rearranged: the orchestral accompaniment is replaced by a solo accordion. There is also an added instrumental number for the accordion, strongly reminiscent of traditional Russian *protyazhnaya* (long) songs. The dramaturgical role of these arrangements is not clear; the changes appear to be culturally and politically significant. The

21 Dunayevsky died on the 25th of July, 1955, and left the operetta partly unfinished. The material was completed by the composer Kirill Molchanov.

22 Válek, "Opereta našich dnů."

23 Utyosov, "Belaya akaciya: vmesto recenzii."

24 Further reading: Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union*, 209–47.

Czech crew decided to eliminate the only jazz number in the operetta and to underline the Russianness of other numbers by using a typically Russian instrument, the accordion. Those interventions recall the similar treatment of *Volný vítr*, adjusting the original nature of Dunayevsky's operettas to the Czechoslovak image of Soviet culture, which is specifically national and free from Western influences.

Thus, some strategies of Czech theatrical agents during the first period of staging Soviet operettas in Czechoslovakia can be interpreted as censorship interventions, which were mainly affecting the musical material of the pieces. As Gaby Thomson-Wohlgemuth describes in her book on translated literature in the GDR, censors were looking for a certain scheme of motifs that were allowed in socialist realist works of art. Among the positive motifs, we find work ethos and active involvement, while negative elements, such as escapism, and sentimental or kitschy expressions, were not desirable in socialist pieces, but they were allowed in the passages describing non-socialist societies.²⁵ What Dunayevsky (and also Milyutin) often did was to use jazz music, which is associated with non-socialist culture, for describing positive characters. Therefore, in the early Czechoslovak communist dogmatic culture, those defective features had to be eliminated. The strategies changed over the following decades and, in many cases, adaptation rather than cancellation would be the tool that Czech theatres applied when dealing with Soviet pieces.

Infamous comebacks of Dunayevsky's operettas

The Stalinist period of Czech communism definitively ended at the beginning of the 1960s. During the following decade of relative liberalization, Czech musical theatres began to focus on the musical repertoire imported from Western countries. Soviet operetta went virtually absent on Czech stages, although in 1963, the largest Czech recording company Supraphon released Dunayevsky's profile album with predominantly film songs. In the second half of the decade, the boom of (Broadway) musicals in Czechoslovakia led to the establishment of the specific Czech type of musical closely connected to the period's popular music, and to the newly established cabaret and popular music oriented 'theatres of small forms'. The period of liberalization ended in August 1968, when the armies of the Warsaw Pact invaded Czechoslovakia. This resulted in twenty years of so-called 'normalization', a period of stagnation and the restoration of strict Soviet hegemony.

Political consolidation strongly affected culture, and theatre repertoires were once again designed by centralized ideological schemata. According to the new state-recommended repertoire model, at least one Soviet play had to be premiered

25 Thomson-Wohlgemuth, *Translation Under State Control*, 125–26.

each season.²⁶ Theatres were in charge of their choices, but those had to be approved by numerous supervisory and censorship authorities. The role of the press also became rather formative, establishing a normative discourse that was reproduced as ideologically authoritative.

The presence of Soviet pieces was ensured also by establishing theatre festivals, such as the Festival of Soviet Drama, with the obligatory participation of professional theatres. The brochure of the 1974 Festival of Soviet Drama accentuates the spontaneity of theatres' participation, creating thereby an ideological discourse of voluntary consent with authoritative cultural measures.²⁷ This strategy of authoritative discourse stressing the spontaneity of subordinate cultural agents is one of the main features of the contemporary press.

The first Soviet operettas, and now also musicals, began to appear on stage three years after the Warsaw Pact invasion. The 1970s and 1980s were the period when Soviet operetta was even more of a political matter. The productions were often linked to official celebrations, and the critical discourse was, in comparison to the 1950s, far less analytical and more straightforwardly appreciative of the simple fact that the production was of Soviet origin.

The nature of transformations of theatres after 1968 can be shown through the example of the Musical Theatre in Karlín. In 1970, Jindřich Janda, a former singer and a member of the troupe, was appointed by 'superior organs' as its new director replacing Ludvík Žáček, who stood against the Soviet invasion.²⁸ A loyal cadre, Janda started to apply normalization politics in the theatre. In 1971, he was the first theatre director to sign a bilateral contract with a theatre in a befriended country: and he chose no less than the famous Moscow Theatre of Operetta.²⁹ The contract included an agreement on hosting troupes and exchanging pieces. During the first year of the contract, he invited the chief director of the Moscow Operetta, Georgy Ansimov, to produce a new Soviet musical in Prague, Andrei Eshpai's *Sedmé nebe* [Seventh Heaven]. This was a direct manifestation of the newly reestablished Soviet cultural hegemony in Czechoslovakia, even more so because its main narrative revolved around the heroism of Soviet soldiers.

The audience response was negative. During the productions of *Sedmé nebe* in 1971, the auditorium was often reported to be empty, and the theatre had to organize bus tours from the peripheries of the country to fill the theatre. The production was the first practical manifestation of the newly established transnational

26 Crhová, *Sklenka vína u Jarina*, 47–48.

27 Martínek, *Festival sovětské dramatické tvorby v ČSSR 1974*.

28 Janda, *Hudba-divadlo-život*, 121.

29 Bár, *Hudební divadlo Karlín*, 149.

agreement of cooperation and exchange between the Musical Theatre in Karlín and the Moscow Theatre of Operetta. When the Czech troupe toured Moscow with the same production, audience responses were enthusiastic.³⁰ This contrast in reception originated in the cultural and political differences of the two countries: simply put, while Soviets did not have any (or a very little) knowledge of their armies occupying Czechoslovakia, in Czechoslovakia, Soviet culture was primarily associated with the occupation.

In this atmosphere, Dunayevsky's operettas started to re-appear on stage. Krušnohorské Theatre in Teplice, in particular, was very active putting on *Volný vítr* in 1972 and the year after an unlikely choice of the 1937 sovkhos operetta *Zolotaya dolina* under the title of *Poklad Zlatého údolí* [Treasure of the Golden Valley]. In a 1974 review, a critic observed that a year after its first night, the auditorium was still full of people who were predominantly from the younger generations.³¹ It is hard to believe, but since the production was politically important (produced on the occasion of the 56th anniversary of the October Revolution, it was a Czech premiere of the operetta, and large staging forces were engaged in its production), the press was probably ordered to create as flattering an image as possible. The Teplice theatre returned to Dunayevsky in 1976, staging another rarity: his penultimate operetta *Syn klauna* (1950), while the same year, the Moravian Theatre Olomouc decided to put on the NEP operetta *Zhenikhi* under the title of *Ženichové* [Grooms]. However, if we move away from the interesting repertoire choices, these productions failed to resonate with a wider audience or in general discourse, which was perhaps partly due to the peripheric location of the theatres. In contrast, two productions in the centres, namely in Prague and Brno, in the 1970s and 1980s respectively, attracted much more attention.

In 1974, the Musical Theatre in Nusle, Prague saw a premiere of *Bílý akát*. The operetta returned to the theatre after 17 years in a whole new staging and with a new orchestral arrangement. It was produced on the occasion of the Festival of Soviet Drama and the Month of Czechoslovak–Soviet Friendship.³² At the time, the Nusle Theatre was a part of the largest Czech musical theatre in Karlín. Thus, the production was an important political act, focusing on many political narratives around it. An important narrative surrounding the new production was the one of ‘friendship’ —Musical Theatre in Karlín and Nusle had hosted in Odessa three years earlier, and now they decided to put on a renowned Odessa operetta as an homage to the city. There was also a television version made and broadcast by Czechoslovak Television the following year.

30 Vašák and Macků, *Z operety do operety*, 146–47; Bár, *Od operety k muzikálu*, 228–29.

31 mV, “Svědectví solidnosti.”

32 *Bílý akát* [theatre programme].

The 1974 *Bílý akát* is specific in several aspects. From a staging point of view, it deviates from the monumental realist tradition of the 1950s. The stage design resembled the naïve style of the Czech children's book illustrator Adolf Born, thus moving away from realistic approaches. A major change was made regarding the orchestration of Dunayevsky's score. The conductor and arranger Vladimír Raška created a new sound using big band sounds and a period drum kit stylization. He also composed a new overture—a medley of melodies from the operetta. As a result, the score resembled mainstream pop singers and bands that filled Czechoslovak television prime time during normalization. The overall staging was in the vein of contemporary Czech TV productions. It was also free from many signs and allusions of Russianness, which characterized the first Czech production in the 1950s. Now, after 1968, the crew clearly attempted to make the operetta more accessible to Czech audiences.

These changes form part of the process of actualization, irony, alienation, and in general, abandonment of the realistic and documentary principles of the 1950s 'realistic' productions. It does not say as much about the production itself as about the context. The attitude towards Russian culture was cold after 1968, and it was not desirable to make direct associations or visual presentations of Russianness; it was more desirable to make the piece speak in the vernacular language. The Communist Party was consolidating its position through consensual acts of everyday life, consumption, etc.³³ The 'normal' in 'normalization' to some extent eliminated the ceremonial and revolutionary pathos of early Czechoslovak communism. As a part of this tendency, the operetta production comes out as timeless, as was the era itself: 'timelessness' was one of the main signs of normalization, an era of stagnation in which people tended to turn their attention from political participation to private matters.³⁴ However, there was still a political ritual behind operetta production: *Bílý akát* was staged on the occasion of the Festival of Soviet Theatre, thus fulfilling political demands, showing the loyalty of Czechoslovak culture to the Soviet hegemon.

Ten years later, something different happened in Brno. At the time, the theatre scene in Brno was famous for its relative independence from centralized cultural politics. Even when it came to Soviet operetta, the State Theatre in Brno would rarely stage such pieces after 1968. During the 1970s, they only produced three Soviet musicals, and only in 1985 did a Soviet operetta come to Brno under extraordinary circumstances.

Volný vítr was chosen to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Brno's liberation by the Red Army. The production with a new translation by the director Petr Pospíšil

33 Kolář and Pullmann, *Co byla normalizace*, 42–44.

34 Pehe, *Velvet Retro*, 88.

also marked the 85th anniversary of Dunayevsky's birth and the 30th anniversary of the composer's death. This very last production of an operetta by Dunayevsky in Czechia saw only 17 nights, but its importance lies elsewhere.

The operetta was chosen to represent the theatre on the occasion of large-scale anniversary celebrations with a visiting international political delegation.³⁵ The delegation included the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia Milouš Jakeš, several other secretaries and high officials of the party, as well as numerous guests from friendly countries, including the widow of Marshal Malinovsky, Raisa Malinovskaya. During the intermission, the guests met the cast and crew.

According to a recent source, the new staging of *Volný vítr* represented an "adverse reminiscence of recent years,³⁶ especially with the production being openly declared as part of party propaganda and ideology."³⁷ According to reports, the production emphasized the dramatic nature of the text, putting its operetta characteristics aside.³⁸ This approach was supported by the monumental and static, yet multi-layered stage design by Jan Dušek. Although the operetta only had 17 repeats in Brno,³⁹ it was praised by the press: one reviewer stated that this production should provide an impulse for Brno theatre to put on Soviet pieces more regularly.⁴⁰ This appeal turned out to be unsuccessful, and the theatre would not produce any other Soviet musical or operetta after *Volný vítr*. The discrepancy between the symbolic political role of the production, which clearly led to its lack of popularity, and its stage qualities is apparent and leads to questions about the production team's motivations.

The analysis of the two productions in Prague and Brno show two alternative ways of staging Soviet operetta in Czechoslovakia after 1968: one is using slight irony and taking a distance from realism, which characterized the Czech popular production in the period, while the other takes a serious artistic stand that seeks for possible deeper meanings and actualizes the genre not dissimilarly to the 1950s productions. However, whichever route the theatres took, Soviet operettas did not stand a chance to receive the same audience response as during the first period of the import. Perhaps one of the main instruments engaged in correcting this situation was the press.

35 ČTK, "Brno oslavuje výročí osvobození."

36 Meaning the 1968 invasion and following political consolidation.

37 "Volný vítr [...]se stal pro mnohé neblahým připomenutím nedávných let, zvláště když se inscenace otevřeně proklamovala jako součást stranické propagandy a ideologie." Zacharník and Drlík, *Ve službách operety*, 101–2.

38 Pečman, "Dunajevského Volný vítr."

39 In comparison, the 1986 *Kiss Me Kate* production, although reportedly not very successful in Brno, had 47 repeats.

40 jf, "Návrat k Dunajevskému."

During the era of normalization, the role of the press was vital in shaping public thinking. After 1968, the press functioned in a very specific way regarding censorship and ideological control. There was no preliminary censorship, but personal shifts in leading positions after 1968 would ensure politically loyal press crews. The new reporters were obliged to undergo ideological training that prepared them for the desirable type of journalism.⁴¹ Across various areas, journalists were using a unified authoritative language that was heavily repeated on various structural levels. As Alexei Yurchak points out, this citational language was strengthening the authority of the official discourse.⁴²

However, with the end of the 1980s approaching, the stagnating ‘hypernormalized’ language of the official discourse with its empty automatism opened the road for new readings. Theatre agents were allowed more space to manoeuvre within the established cultural-political discourse and to bring new interpretations into established rituals. In November 1986, the Musical Theatre in Karlín premiered *Cikáni jdou do nebe* [Gypsies Are Found near Heaven], a musical sensation based on the eponymous 1975 Soviet movie based on Maxim Gorky’s short story *Makar Chudra*. The musical has been staged regularly throughout the country ever since. In the programme of the original production, there is a brief note: “On the occasion of the Month of Czechoslovak–Soviet friendship”.⁴³ The production did meet the political demand for one Soviet piece per season, but the producers’ strategy was to present a Soviet production that did not explicitly represent its Soviet origin or relation to the so-called ‘Soviet reality’. This strategy proved successful but also symptomatic of the last years of the authoritative regime in Czechoslovakia. The social and cultural loosening was changing the face of Czechoslovak culture, but the regime was still affirming itself by rituals that were increasingly apart from their original content.⁴⁴

Echoes of Dunayevsky after the Velvet Revolution

The story of Dunayevsky’s operettas in Czechia did not end after the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Although in the 1990s Czech society tried to dissociate itself from its previous communist past, in 1999, Czech Television decided to broadcast the normalization TV series *Třicet případů majora Zemana* [Thirty Cases of Major Zeman], a symbol of police propaganda in the previous regime. This resulted in an

41 Klimeš, *Doporučeno nezveřejňovat*, 80–83, 105–7.

42 Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 49–50.

43 “K měsíci československo-sovětského přátelství.” *Cikáni jdou do nebe*.

44 See for example: Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 93–98.

explosive discussion and backlash mainly from the liberal press.⁴⁵ However, other TV shows and films from the normalization era, while not so directly ideological, had been re-screened even prior to this debate. One such case was a 1997 rescreening of the TV version of *Bílý akát*. The broadcast was a part of the *Ze zlatého fondu* [From the Golden Fund] series. The narrative of the “golden fund” is significant in the context of nostalgia that was emerging in post-socialist countries around this time. The notion of tradition was important in this approach, a tradition of well-crafted state funded TV series and films from the socialist era. These pieces of art, which necessarily offer an idealized image of the period, tended to overshadow the viewers’ own not so positive experiences of the past.⁴⁶ Perhaps in the case of *Bílý akát*, the viewers’ positive nostalgic approach was not so strong given that, even at the time when the film was released, Soviet operettas did not enjoy popular success, while many Czechoslovak TV shows and films did. Interestingly enough, despite all this, Czech Television decided to re-screen the operetta again in 2011, which provoked the music critic Boris Klepal to write an outraged entry on his blog about the dull nature of the piece and people’s incomprehensible yearning for normalization culture.⁴⁷ In his entry, he uses elitist narratives against people’s nostalgia, which he perceives in a strict political sense—an approach that is often used by contemporary Czech media discourse.

Probably the last time Dunayevsky’s operetta music was present in Czechia was in 2019, when the J. K. Tyl Theatre in Pilsen organized an operetta concert in collaboration with the M. Vodyanoy Academic Theatre of Musical Comedy in Odessa. The concert entitled *Bílý akát* contained three numbers from Dunayevsky’s last operetta of the same name, i.e., the *Song about Odessa*, the *Song of White Acacia*, and the *Song about the Sea* (originally *Tonya’s Song on the Boat*). It was organized in the cooperation of the two theatres and was held twice: in September 2019 in Odessa, and in October in Pilsen. Overall, it resembled cultural events of ‘friendship’ in the previous regime, representing the official image of fruitful transcultural exchange between befriended nations. Some of the Czech organizers ironically distanced themselves, referring to its anachronistic nature and cultural distance towards the Ukrainian guests’ allegedly more conservative and uncritical approach to their own Soviet past.

This case illustrates how differently post-socialist countries deal with their culture in the former communist era. While the official Czech narrative tends to keep a critical distance from the past, in Russia and in some other post-Soviet countries Dunayevsky’s operettas are still regularly performed. Whether the cultural transfer of the operettas to Czechoslovakia was bound to be a failure from

45 Pehe, *Velvet Retro*, 70–72.

46 Pehe, *Velvet Retro*, 73–75.

47 Klepal, “Isaak O. Dunajevskij: Bílý akát.”

the very beginning or distancing was due to the country's political and cultural development is not an easy question to answer. In any case, the presence of Soviet operettas was due to the political situation and showed the influence of Soviet culture's desired image in Czechoslovakia. Dunayevsky's operettas gained a certain symbolic status that was changing with time. First they served as an example of a fresh socialist musical comedy to be followed by Czech composers and playwrights, then in the 1970s and 1980s, it turned into a symbol of the old and the old-fashioned, while also attracting negative or mocking emotions from people affected by the Warsaw Pact invasion; finally, after the Velvet Revolution, it was just something obscure that invoked days long gone by, that could be approached with nostalgia, mockery, or disgust.

The story of Dunayevsky's operettas in Czechoslovakia also shows how important the official discourse was to shape the desired image of a certain cultural phenomenon in serving the official ideology. In addition, as we have seen, there were several mechanisms of treating the material of the operettas to shape the ideological message of the pieces. While in the 1950s, Dunayevsky's operettas were often arranged to fit the general definition of 'Russianness' (e.g., by eliminating jazz music from the scores) and to match certain dogmatic ideas of socialist realism, during the later period, theatre producers approached the operettas with irony, alienation, or using clever staging perhaps in order to make the productions more accessible for audiences (knowing about the more or less enforced political motivations behind it). The strategies described may show the transforming nature of cultural relations between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, reaching from worship and gratitude to fulfilling political tasks with an undercurrent of distance. It needs to be added that cultural relations manifested themselves in various ways in the different cultural, social, and political subcultures of Czechoslovak society.

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