

First English Monograph on Czech Broadside Ballads



Patricia Fumerton – Pavel Kosek – Marie Hanzelková (eds.), *Czech Broadside Ballads as Text, Art, Song in Popular Culture, c.1600–1900*. Amsterdam University Press B.V., Amsterdam 2022. 498 pp.

Broadside ballads (*kramářské písně* in Czech) have been attracting the attention of scholars since the mid-20th century; nevertheless, it was the project *NAKI II Broadside Ballads in the Historical Collections in Brno* that brought systematic research to this phenomenon by joining specialists in multiple disciplines from several institutions. Besides the admirable number of catalogued items, the project team has prepared many exhibitions, workshops, discussions, and publications about broadside ballads. The presented book constitutes the most extensive completion of long-term, multidisciplinary research and the first presentation on this subject to international readers.

The author team gathers prominent Czech linguists, historians, musicologists, and librarians, supported by foreign colleagues, among them Patricia Fumerton, the director of the English Broadside Ballads Archive in California. After years of hard work, this collective was ready to discuss the topic across

a range of fields, examining broadside ballads as products of material culture, literature, and music. In the Introduction and General Overview, the authors analyse the position of Czech broadside ballads in relation to similar early modern prints. The third section, Topics, discusses the various themes found in ballads; the fourth, Musicology and Transmission, sounds out musical aspects; the fifth, Language, narrows the focus onto the text; whereas the last section, The Wider Context, opens up the subject to international comparison. Despite the multiplicity of authors and topics, individual chapters communicate with each other, and jointly constitute a complex and resonant whole.

The publication aims at worldwide readership, and the authors try to balance the needs of foreigners encountering Czech broadside ballads for the very first time with the demands of internal researchers. Although much of the information mentioned in the book must be familiar to Czechs, most research questions are newly contextualised.

The first chapters carefully explain the concepts and terminology that are generally considered in Czech expositions of broadside ballads. The authors avail themselves of the necessity to translate standard terms into English as an opportunity to discuss their meanings. Czech broadside ballads are introduced as a unique element of European literary culture: they are specific in topics and form, and the huge number of preserved prints, often sewed together by their owners into blocks (*špalíček*), is also exceptional. Blocks of prints cannot be regarded as mere collections, rather they constitute a very specific form of reception for individual readers and demonstrate one manner of utilising these tiny and cheaply printed items. The authors precisely analyse topics that were formerly brushed over with a mere description or cursory pronouncement, for example, discussing the size of prints and their space-saving typography that facilitated making a block for carrying in one's pocket. They underline the specific features and evolution of Czech broadside ballads, and summarise their image in historiography and literary history. The three most important and numerous collections kept in the Czech Republic, as well as the progress of their categorisation and digitalisation, are described; maybe a chapter about smaller collections deposited in regional institutions should also have been included.

The third part of the book focuses on several characteristic topics such as "crime and punishment", gender stereotypes, and demonic appearances. Relatively little space in this section is dedicated to religious themes and pilgrimage songs, although spiritual content represents a characteristic feature of Czech broadside ballads compared with production in other countries. More

attention is paid to religious ballads in the next chapters devoted to musicology and the transmission of textual and musical motifs in folklore, oral tradition, manuscripts, and printed media. Broadside ballads usually lack notation, singers were instructed only by a tune title or were expected to use a familiar melody. New songs were created via *contrapositum*, *contrafactum*, or paraphrase. Even though many works by first-rate professional authors can be traced in broadside ballads, the transmission of melodies and texts was crucially reliant on folk tradition, memory, and creativity. Another important aspect of broadside ballads is their language, which for a long time was considered lowly and plebeian. Nevertheless, linguistic analyses prove that the linguistic standard of broadside ballads does not differ much from other literary production of the Baroque era.

The last section opens the way for a comparison of Czech prints with their foreign counterparts. Czech broadside ballads share some common features with their English equivalents from the 17th century. Similarities to Polish production and reciprocal influences may not come as a surprise, but a glimpse at Brazilian cordels offers a fascinating insight into a living tradition of cheap ballad printing.

Limited space is given to issues concerning the production and distribution of broadside ballads, i.e. to printing houses, authors, and sellers. However, these topics have been carefully examined in the publication of another project, also published in 2022. Some readers may bemoan the absence of any presentation of broadside ballads as a component of visual art. The illustrations decorating broadside ballads, especially the front covers, are mentioned only rarely in this publication. This aspect remains under-explored and open for further systematic research into problems such as iconography, transition of motifs, and authorship.

Of course, no publication can embrace every aspect of a subject, and it must be emphasised that the authors have signally contributed to the understanding of broadside ballads in the European context and to presenting Czech research in the field. The whole team engaged in the NAKI II project has submitted work of major importance and prodigious extent that will undoubtedly be appreciated and drawn upon by both Czech and foreign scholars. The publication is available online for free: *Czech Broadside Ballads as Text, Art, Song in Popular Culture, c.1600–1900* (oapen.org)

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