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THE CZECH SACRED SONG FROM THE PERIOD OF THE REFORMATION

The Czech monophonic sacred song is of great significance for the development of the Czech music culture in the past. The Czech sacred songs, psalms and hymns, have already been collected in various manuscripts or in printed collections (mainly in the form of hymnals) since the period of Middle Ages. This collecting then continued during the whole Renaissance and the Baroque and, in the Czech lands, it was closely connected with the activity of various religious movements, namely in the 16th and 17th centuries.

But unfortunately, we still have several hundred of psalms and hymns from that period, which have not been published in collected form nor even evaluated until now. For this reason, nowadays there is a marked imbalance between the number and importance of records which have been preserved (especially manuscripts and printed collections of Czech monophonic songs, mainly hymnals), as well as lack of accessibility or even knowledge of their content and importance for the further development. It is necessary to say, that namely the period of the 16th century with its fruitful production of sacred songs has not been researched thoroughly until now. Therefore I would like to direct your attention to the period in which the development of the Czech sacred song after the Hussite revolution and throughout the 16th century was considerably influenced by the authors, composers from the evangelical circles. Namely the utraquists and members of the Unity of Brethren (Unites Fratrum) introduced in the period of the Reformation the sacred song in the vernacular language as a basic element of the church service¹. The Unity of Brethren was, at that time, quite a small religious group, a sect, but its contribution for the development of the Czech monophonic song from the Reformation is indisputable. The first hymnal of the Unity of Brethren was printed in Prague in 1501, soon after the invention of the

¹ The tendency to introduce the mother tongue in worship was regarded as a significant feature during the whole period of Reformation. In the neighbouring Germany it was represented by Martin Luther's efforts to use the vernacular language in worship service.

printing process. This was not only the first Czech printed hymnal of any kind but, also it is worth saying that this was first hymnal to be printed in Europe.²

This historical fact places the activity of the Unity at the forefront of cultural endeavours of that period. The number of hymns composed gradually increased and, during the course of the 16th century, the Unity became the foremost producer of hymns in Czech lands.³ Prayers and hymns have been a constant element of the spiritual life of the Czechs from the earliest times, and the development of poetic activity among the Unity was a natural evolutionary process. The sacred song became one of the characteristic features of Czech culture from both the literary and the musical standpoint. The sacred song of the Unity became in the 16th century an integral part of the liturgy and was the response of the congregation of believers to the Word which had been preached. It was, therefore, necessary to compose new hymns and equally necessary to publish new hymnals, in which hymns in the vernacular language could be included.

The subsequent struggle to raise the artistic standard of the hymns lasted among the authors in the Unity for decades. Hymns were considered to be confessions of faith and as expressions of the religious belief of the Unity as a whole, not simply an external affirmation of the religious faith of its author or as the result immediate poetic inspiration. It can be said that the tradition of the Czech reformation movement played a key role in the development of the tendency towards more individual hymns. And namely The Unity of Brethren has its specific position between the various denominations in the process of the development of the Czech sacred song, as it was mentioned above. Because of the contemporary situation, the Unity lived in an environment of constant persecution. So we can notice that during a certain historical period, an upsurge in the production of hymns by the Unity was achieved more slowly in the Czech lands than, for example, in neighboring Poland. The hymns of the Unity had, in their own way, to come to terms with various Reformation influences, to react to constant polemic, and, especially in the initial phase, to take up a defensive stance. So it seems that there was not the necessary calm for a proper development of hymnody.⁴ If, in spite of this, the hymns of the Unity did reach a peak in the Szamotuly Hymnal published in 1561 in Szamotuly and the Ivančice Hym-

² In this hymnbook only texts of the sacred songs were preserved. The hymnbook was analysed and evaluated for the first time by the Czech musicologist Jan Kouba, namely in the study: *Der älteste Gesangdruck von 1501 aus Böhmen*. In: *Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnologie* 13, 1968, p. 78–112.

³ The Unity of Brethren edited a lot of hymnbooks in this period, mostly in the printing-houses in Moravia (Ivančice, Kralice). The Ivančice (1561) and the Szamotuly (1564) hymnbooks were best known.

⁴ Some scholars have expressed the opinion that the hymns of the Unity could have developed in a much more intensive manner if they had not been censored by the Brethren elders, sometimes to the point of overscrupulousness. This rigidity also caused some excellent and gifted authors, such as Adam Šturm or Matěj Červenka, to prefer not to submit new hymns for examination and approval by the Brethren commissions.

nal published in 1564 in Ivančice, then it was due to the work of Jan Blahoslav as author and editor of the new hymns contained in these hymnals. Jan Blahoslav (1523–1571) was a great personality, a bishop of the Unity and the author of the first Czech treatise about music called *Muzika*. Blahoslav's hymnographic and editing activity represented a real turning-point and his editing of the Ivančice Hymnal established a standard for Brethren hymns which was to be adhered to for over half a century.⁵

Historical sources document that protestant schools placed great emphasis on musical education. As for special musical training, Jan Blahoslav and his follower Johann Amos Comenius (1592–1670) had much in common with regard to the theory of music and musical education. Blahoslav contributed to the development of the musical education by writing his *Muzika* and two Additions to *Muzika*, a large part of which was devoted to practical questions of solo and group singing, by composing a new church songs for the Unity of Brethren and by editing a new hymnals. In these activities, Jan Blahoslav was a predecessor of Johann Amos Comenius and his hymnal published in Amsterdam in 1659. The introduction to the second Addition to *Muzika* entitled "Knowledge Necessary for Those Who Want to Compose Songs" explains Blahoslav's approach to the process of composition and is intended for "composers" of sacred songs.

His considerations on the contents of Protestant sacred songs included in the Addition show his basic approach to the poetics of church music based on stressing the aesthetic impact of the song. They also include the educational and psychological aspects of composing new songs. Later we can find the same requirement on newly composed sacred songs being stated in Comenius's writings, which shows that certain musical traditions of Blahoslav's time survived in the subsequent periods. One of Blahoslav's basic requirements, that of musical syllabic quantity (long notes for long syllables and short notes for short syllables) found expression in his adding new lyrics to existing melodies – the method also used later by Johann Amos Comenius.

Johann Amos Comenius was the greatest personality of the Unity whose important anniversary (400 years from his birth) has recently been celebrated by the whole cultural world. Comenius's contribution to the shaping of the new linguistics, paedagogics, philosophy etc. is very well known, but his activities as a composer of sacred songs and his editing a hymnal at the very end of his life

⁵ Blahoslav's *Musica* was published in Olomouc in Moravia in 1558, the second edition of *Musica* including two "Additions to *Musica*" was published in Ivančice in 1569. A detailed analysis of *Musica* is in Otakar Hostinský's study: *Jan Blahoslav and Jan Josquin. A Contribution to the History of Czech Music and Theory of 16th Century Art. With New Reprints of Both Musicas: Blahoslav's (1569) and Josquin's (1561)*. In: *Rozpravy České akademie císaře Františka Josefa pro vědy, slovesnost a umění v Praze*, V, class I, No 1, Praha 1896. The scholar Thomas Sovík of the University of North Texas published both *Musicas* (Blahoslav's and Josquin's) in the USA recently. He translated it into English in edition: *Czech Documents in Translation*, published by the Czech Historical Society 1991, Denton, Texas.

in 1659 in Amsterdam is not that known. The *Amsterdamer Hymnal* represents a valuable collection of sacred songs from the period of Reformation.

It was very popular at that time and in the following centuries too. The hymnal contained, besides Czech songs, also the songs of German and Polish origin. These songs were often used (simply undertaken or adapted, translated etc.) in the latter hymnals in various countries and also in different denominations in Protestant or Catholic circles. But in Comenius's native country, in Moravia, we had to wait for many years for the new edition of this hymnal which was published only in 1992.⁶

Comenius's hymnal (called according to the place of editing the *Amsterdamer hymnal*) forms the main part of his hymnographic work. Comenius planned to publish the hymnal for some time – even while he was living in his native country – and the final published version was preceded by a number of preparatory works.⁷ Nevertheless, Comenius's most prolific period as a composer of hymns dates from his leaving for permanent exile in 1628. The most significant examples of Comenius's hymnographic work prior to the publishing of the *Amsterdamer hymnal* are his translations of psalms based on syllabic quantity (from 1627), printed collection of hymns entitled "Several New Hymns" (from 1631) and the manuscript collection "Several Religious Hymns" (from 1645–1649). To these works can be added two books of an earlier date referring to the theory of hymnwriting and verse: the publication "On Czech Poetry" written before 1620 and the manuscript notes "Annotata" (from 1633). All of these works are instrumental to our understanding of Comenius's efforts to raise the standard of hymns and poetry in the Czech language. As for the *Amsterdamer hymnal*, the entire arrangement and range of compositions included differs considerably from previous Brethren hymnals. Comenius divided the entire corpus of hymns into new sections, critically reviewed them, and wrote a detailed foreword to the new hymnal in which he dealt with history, theory and poetical nature of a hymn.⁸ At the beginning of the hymnal there are 150 paraphrases of the psalms by Jiří Strejc, the author of the *Unity of Brethren*, then there are 430 hymns. Comenius classified all of these hymns as, either basic hymns, service hymns or hymns for particular occasions. He follows the same principles in dividing them into three main groups as Brethren theologians did in arranging previous hymnals. The first division of this kind is to be found in Jan Blahoslav's edition of the *Ivančice hymnal* from 1564 – a division that was preserved by Comenius. Comenius displayed a non-traditional approach also in compiling

⁶ This edition was published under the title: Jan Amos Komenský – Kancionál. (Hymnal). Edited by Olga Settari. Prague 1992, published by publishing house Kalich, 230 pp.

⁷ For details see foreword to the edition of Comenius's Hymnal, Prague, Kalich 1992, p. 27.

⁸ This four-part foreword to the Hymnal occupies an exceptional place among forewords to previous Brethren hymnals. It is the primary source for our evaluation of Comenius's share in the development of the hymn, not only from the practical point of view (as the author of the majority of the new hymns), but also from the theoretical point of view (as a theorist of the hymn).

the indexes. In addition to the normal index of all psalms and hymns that was to be found in previous hymnals, he added other three special indexes, which were of great importance for indicating the origin and the authorship of the hymns in the hymnal.⁹

In selecting and arranging the hymns for the Hymnal, Comenius was guided both by theological and aesthetic considerations. He did not automatically adopt older models of hymns, but, he rather reflected on their content and the function they would have in a new hymnal. The basis of the Hymnal remained a heritage of older Unity of Brethren hymns (310 hymns revised to a greater or lesser extent), and to these hymns Comenius added 146 new ones. A Czech literary historian Antonín Škarka has established that this work included a total of 135 of Comenius's own compositions, which means that more than one fifth of all the hymns in the Hymnal were composed by Comenius himself.¹⁰ Apart from new hymns, the Hymnal also includes translations of German and Polish hymns, sometimes with their original melodies. This was due to the fact that he was in exile, and also represented an attempt to draw nearer to the neighbouring German and Polish churches. However, he vetted both the original Czech hymns and those adopted from abroad when compiling the Hymnal. Comenius left out older hymns which were inexpressive, long, difficult from the viewpoint of music or uninteresting. From his modification it can be inferred that his intention was that the melodies of the new and revised hymns should not be too difficult so that these could be sung by people without prior musical training. The newer hymns included in the Hymnal also differ from the older hymns in their attention to correct Czech declamation and to the proper relationship harmony between the text and the melody in accordance with Comenius's thoughts on quantitative verse in music.¹¹

Comenius own poetic compositions represented an attempt to move in new directions in Czech poetry. The most valuable examples of this attempt in the Hymnal are his paraphrases of the Old and the New Testaments. His well-known verse rendering of the "Song of Songs by Solomon" ranks among those poetic works of Comenius which have been acclaimed as the most impressive examples of the Czech lyric poem, and which stylistically have been classified

⁹ We can find there the indexes beginning on page 730: Index of German hymns newly rendered into Czech (pages 730–731) Index of Polish hymns translated into Czech (page 731) Index of completely new hymns (pages 731–733) Hymns which are old, but which have not previously been included in hymnals (page 733) Index of all psalms and hymns included in this hymnal (pages 733 to 750).

¹⁰ See Antonín Škarka's study: Comenius – the poet of sacred songs. In: *Archiv pro bádání o životě a spisech J. A. Komenského* 14, 1937, p. 11. The greatest amount of information is included in Antonín Škarka's edition: *Johann Amos Comenius, Sacred songs*. Edited by Antonín Škarka. Prague, publishing house Vyšehrad 1952, 523 pp.

¹¹ Comenius explains his views on the quantitative verse in greatest detail in his work "O poesi české" (On Czech Poetry) written before 1620. Its topic is quantitative verse, which Comenius considered to have a higher artistic value than syllabic rhymed verse.

as early examples of the Baroque.¹² Likewise, some of Comenius's translation of German Reformation hymns are so accomplished that the reader might think they were original poetic compositions.

We can also ask whether some of the hymns in the Hymnal can be ascribed to Comenius as a composer of the melody. We might suspect that Comenius composed the melody only for eight hymns which were printed together with music for the first time in the Hymnal, unless, of course, we are able to indicate some other author of these eight melodies.¹³

If we analyse the melodies in Comenius's Hymnal from the viewpoint of stylistics, we discover that they are very heterogeneous. We can find a medieval liturgical chant and a sacred song from the end of the Renaissance. Some of the oldest melodies are dating back to the Hussite period or to the period of vernacular Czech songs. The melodies of old German and Polish songs were also used for some hymns in Comenius's Hymnal. Analysing the relationship between the texts and melodies in Comenius's Hymnal from the viewpoint of the system of cross-referencing melodies, which was consistent with contemporary practice, we must take into account that the link between the text and the melody was not that strong that it could exclude the possibility of combining individual melodies with other newly composed texts. Melodies to hymns were taken from one hymnal and used in another with newly composed texts, or with revised versions of the old ones. This process was very common. Comenius's Hymnal contains a total of 406 notated melodies, and the remaining 199 hymns have a cross-reference to another melody.

As we can deduce from the analysis of the Amsterdamer Hymnal from the viewpoint of music, Comenius adapted melodies (i. e. undertaken melodies to new texts), and he also made changes in a number of cases in accordance with his theory on quantitative verse in music. In his sacred songs, Comenius seems to have fully respected the demands of his church, for the sake of which he even may have oppressed his poetic talent, though, through his work, we can feel his personal ideas, mystics and baroque features. The texts of some of the Comenius's songs show that their author did not create them merely as a religiously thinking man but he had also a poetic talent. Some of his songs seem to be written already in the baroque style, with specific verbal expressions, and poetic structure which were not very frequent in Protestant poetry of the time. In some of his sacred songs, Comenius was not afraid to express even his innermost subjective feelings. One of the examples is the song "The lives of all of us are a pilgrimage" in which Comenius expressed the basic idea of constant wandering

¹² This song can be found in Comenius's Hymnal on the pages 217–229 under the title: Addition to the psalms XV.

¹³ Comenius's authorship of these songs was analysed by Olga Settari, most recently in the mentioned edition of the Amsterdamer Hymnal, Prague 1992, p. 40–44.

and searching for security in life and spiritual security.¹⁴ This song was composed by Comenius in the pattern of the so-called “common note (tune)” and in the foreword to the Amsterdamer Hymnal he describes it as a model hymn. It is one of the most perfect examples of Comenius’s poetry in which the text is written in accordance with the musical quantity.

As a whole the sacred songs included in the Amsterdamer Hymnal were inspired by Comenius’s deep religious feelings. In his songs, Comenius expressed his faith perhaps in the most intensive way and, at the same time, he wanted the sacred song to contribute to the harmony and understanding among the people, to bring pleasure at singing in its verses and melodies. The sacred songs from the Amsterdamer Hymnal testify to Comenius’s development from preparatory attempts in composing hymns to the work which represents the synthesis of his work as a composer of hymns. Comenius’s Hymnal marks the end of his hymnographic work and it also marks the end of a sequence of Brethren hymnals published at home and in exile, for the use of the faithful. It represents a significant source of sacred songs from the Reformation period and, nowadays, it can also serve as a basis for further research.

¹⁴ This song had been composed for the funeral of Comenius’s second wife Dorota Cyrillová and had been published on 29 August 1648. Its text is usually considered to be a miniature verse form of Comenius’s book “The Labyrinth of the World”, having the same basic idea of constant wandering. The song can be found in Comenius’s Hymnal on the page 694.

