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Michal David in Context: A Musicological Reassessment of His 1980s Popular Songs

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Abstract

This study examines Michal David, one of the most prominent figures in Czech pop music of the past forty years, with particular focus on his work as a composer and songwriter in the 1980s. Drawing on press accounts, interviews, memoirs, archival sources, and musical analysis, the article situates David's output within both Czech and international popular music trends. Given his polarized reception – enduring audience popularity versus critical dismissal as “normalization pop” – the study reassesses David's compositional techniques and challenges the prevailing narrative of his music as merely banal or derivative.

Key words

Michal David, 1980s, popular music, Czechoslovakia, musical analysis, musical style

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Introduction

This study examines one of the most prominent, commercially successful, and widely recognized figures in Czech popular music of the last four decades: Michal David – singer, pianist, arranger, composer, producer, and music entrepreneur. The focus is specifically on David's role as a composer and songwriter, offering an original perspective within Czech musicological discourse. Historically, Czech musicologists have devoted limited attention to composers of popular music, with most scholarly interest concentrated during the emergence of “popular musicology” in the 1960s.¹ After 1989, works of this kind became rare.²

This article centers on David's career and creative output during the 1980s, a formative period in his development as both performer and composer. The research draws on a wide range of sources, including period press, published interviews and memoirs, and archival materials from the collection of the Union of Czechoslovak Composers (1949–1969) and the Union of Czech Composers and Concert Artists, housed in the Czech Museum of Music. Additionally, this study incorporates musical analysis of David's songs from the 1980s, based on a corpus of 98 titles recorded between 1980 and 1989. These were identified using a comprehensive list of David's works provided by the Supraphon publishing house.³

An analysis of David's work is particularly significant given the artist's controversial reception. While David has enjoyed enduring popularity among fans of Czech pop music: “*For some reason, crowds of Czechs still love him. When they start playing, oh, ‘Decibels of Love’ [...] at the disco, there's a mad scramble on the dance floor as if their lives depended on it [...]. People jump around out of fun, out of drunkenness, or, let's admit it, because they like the music*”⁴ – critics have long dismissed his output. His songs were often characterized as textually banal and musically clichéd, emblematic of so-called “normalization pop.”⁵ Many attributed his success to a lack of competition in the cultural landscape of communist Czechoslovakia and to his perceived conformity with the political regime.⁶ Despite this critical skepticism, David has consistently earned respect from music professionals, including those outside of popular music. For example, his melodic inventiveness was

1 See BLÜML, Jan – OPEKAR, Aleš. *Popular Music Research behind the Iron Curtain: Czech Musicology in the Context of Central European Culture and Politics*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2025.

2 See BLÜML, Jan. *Bohuslav Ondráček a česká pop music. Portrét skladatele v kontextu dějin české populární hudby druhé poloviny 20. století*. Praha: Togga, 2025.

3 The authors would like to thank Tomáš Rulf and the Supraphon publishing house for their long-term willingness to make archival material available for academic research purposes.

4 NEČAS, Luboš. *Michal David. Exkluzivní autorizovaná kronika. 50 let král českých diskoték*. Praha: Sanoma Magazines, 2010, p. 19.

5 See BLÜML, Jan. Rozbor tematiky písni československého popu let 1962–1990 s přihlédnutím k problémové kategorii “normalizační pop”. *Acta Musei Nationalis Pragae – Historia*, 2020, vol. 74, no. 3–4, p. 5–23.

6 See SPÁČIL, Dušan – PŠENICOVÁ, Zuzana. *Michal David: život nonstop*. Řitka: Daranus, 2008. Furthermore, Czech Television documentary *Michal David: žít tak, jak se má* (2021), <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/12983507860-michal-david-zit-tak-jak-se-ma/> [cit. 2025-09-05].

praised by classical composer Ivana Loudová,⁷ and jazz musician Rudy Linka, among others, spoke highly of his musical talent.⁸ This article examines David's work through a musicological lens uncovering the compositional techniques and stylistic diversity present in his oeuvre, and reveals a sympathetic relationship with international popular music trends of the 1980s. More broadly, the article challenges the dominant media narrative that frames David as a purveyor of artistically inferior music merely inspired by Italian pop kitsch – music deemed worthy of sociological inquiry, but unworthy of serious musicological attention.⁹

Musical Beginnings and the Birth of a Star

Michal David (born Vladimír Štancil on July 14, 1960) was connected through his mother's lineage to the renowned Kludský circus family. This circus environment shaped his earliest musical experiences and inspiration. As he recalled: "*When I was a child, I wanted to be a trumpet player in the choir loft under the big top. The kind of musician who plays a solo during the applause after the grand finale and sometimes plays down in the ring.*"¹⁰ From a young age, David demonstrated musical talent. At ten, while living in Italy for a year at a boarding school, he began learning the organ and gave his first public performances at masses.¹¹ By thirteen, he was playing in a rock band that covered songs by Deep Purple, Slade, Sweet, and Led Zeppelin. This interest in rock music led him to jazz rock, and he eventually founded a jazz ensemble that included singer Jana Koubková. Her involvement brought a fresh repertoire and connected the group to the influential Jazz Section organization. Thanks to this connection, his ensemble named Čtyři, appeared at the Prague Jazz Days festival in the mid-1970s. During the normalization period, this festival was the only regularly recurring event that offered space to a broad spectrum of musical genres and welcomed both professional and amateur performers. Among the latter, David was recognized as one of the festival's highest-rated instrumentalists.¹²

In 1975, Michal David enrolled at the People's Conservatory (LŠU-LK), where he studied piano and composition.¹³ However, he did not complete the program. A year later, following his success at the Prague Jazz Days, he was hired as a professional musician in František Janeček's band Kroky, which accompanied singers Jana Kratochvílová and Nadě Urbánková in the late 1970s.¹⁴ David rose to prominence as a member of Kroky,

7 POPELKA, Vladimír. *Můj život s hudbou*. Pelhřimov: Nová tiskárna, 2019, p. 308.

8 *Michal David: žít tak, jak se má* (2021).

9 ál. Nonstop, Michal David, Kroky Františka Janečka, Supraphon 1113 3554. *Hudební rozhledy*, 1984, vol. 37, no. 11, p. 528.

10 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 15.

11 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 18.

12 KOUŘIL, Vladimír. *Jazzová sekce v čase a nečase 1971–1987*. Praha: Torst, 1999, p. 134.

13 DLOUHÁ, Nina. David, Michal. In *Encyklopedie jazzu a moderní populární hudby, část jmenná, československá scéna*. Ivan Poledňák – Antonín Matzner – Igor Wasserberger (eds.). Praha: Supraphon, 1990, p. 100.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 228.

initially as an instrumentalist and later as a vocalist. In 1979, Jaromír Tůma mentioned him in *Melodie*, the leading popular music magazine, as a talented Moog and clavinet player.¹⁵ His transition to singing was prompted by the departure of several singers and Janeček's desire to fill the gap.¹⁶

International song festivals also contributed to David's rise as one of the leading Czech pop stars of the 1980s. In 1980, David performed at Bratislavská lyra; this was followed by a strong showing at Intertalent 1981, an international competition organized by the Czech national arts agency Pragokoncert, aimed at discovering young vocal talent from socialist and non-socialist countries. David earned second place and won the Audience Award, thanks in part to the song "Nenapovídej" by Zdeněk Barták and Jaroslav Machek, which became a hit during the competition. These achievements brought further international appearances, including the East German Schlagerfestival in Dresden in 1982 and the Bulgarian Golden Orpheus festival in 1983.

David reportedly rose to fame within three months from the moment the radio began broadcasting his first original song, "Chtěl bych žít tak, jak se má," recorded in the spring of 1980: He remembered that "*suddenly, cultural venues were full of screaming girls who wanted my autograph. Then came bigger and bigger halls and a packed Lucerna.*"¹⁷ The song was released as a single by Panton in 1981 and sold 50,000 copies.¹⁸ Soon after, his debut albums followed: *Nenapovídej* (Supraphon 1982), *Michal David – Kroky Františka Janečka* (Panton 1982), *Nonstop* (Supraphon 1984), among others. The records sold over 200,000 copies, a relatively high figure by the standards of the Czech music industry.¹⁹ In 1988, David received a gold record from Supraphon for surpassing one million total record sales.²⁰ The rapid production and popularity of his early recordings reflected a broader revival of the domestic music industry following the stagnation of the normalization period in the 1970s.

David's rapid rise was also reflected in the national popularity poll Zlatý slavík (Golden Nightingale), where in 1981 he placed second, just behind the long-standing winner Karel Gott. In this sense, David emerged as a pioneer of a new wave of Czech pop singers inspired by rock music, disrupting the dominance of the 1960s generation led by Gott, who had long held sway over the poll. David recalled that "*There was a huge hype around us because suddenly there was something new. At that time, only trained voices could be heard on the radio [...] – rock music didn't get much airtime on radio and television. [...] But I sang songs that I put my heart and soul into. And it wasn't bel canto [...]*."²¹ Even Gott acknowledged David's impact, noting that he was impossible to overlook: he sang in

15 TŮMA, Jaromír. Davidovy nápady v běhu Kroků. *Melodie*, 1983, vol. 21, no. 7, p. 197.

16 CHMEL, Ladislav. Kroky Michala Davida. *Zápisník: časopis Hlavní politické správy československé lidové armády*, 1982, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 50–51.

17 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 30.

18 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 30.

19 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 30–31.

20 *Michal David: žít tak, jak se má* (2021).

21 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 30.

a modern style, he phrased in a modern way, he had a strong voice and a natural talent for movement.²²

Listeners were drawn in not only by David's "boyish timbre,"²³ but also to his personality, physical attractiveness, and youthful appearance. Crucially, his rise was also supported by the effective management of Kroky's leader, František Janeček.²⁴ David became an icon of Czech youth in part due to his involvement in Jaroslav Soukup's successful films *Vítr v kapse* (1982), *Láska z pasáže* (1985), and later *Discopříběh* (1987). In these films, he contributed either as a singer or as both performer and co-author of the music, often in collaboration with Zdeněk Barták.

From the early 1980s, David performed extensively both in Czechoslovakia and across other Eastern European countries.²⁵ At the same time, foreign-language versions of David's songs were being produced for international audiences: David stated that "*we recorded a single in Italian with the songs 'Vejdem' and 'Nenapovídej' for [the Austrian branch of] CBS. We are also preparing another single with the band Kroky – 'Nonstop' and 'To zas byl den.' The contract also includes the release of three of our LPs on CBS: the first of these is already being recorded – it is the Italian version of the album Nonstop.*"²⁶ In collaboration with the Czech foreign trade company Artia, Panton released an export English-language version of the LP *Michal David + The Paces – I'd Love to Live* (1983), its title referencing David's first authored song.

David as Composer

David began composing songs as a child: "*Of course, they were just little tunes, unusable melodic sketches.*"²⁷ He wrote his first complete song at the age of fifteen, the aforementioned "*Chtěl bych žít tak, jak se má.*" The success of this song solidified his ambition to establish himself as a songwriter: "*Well, then one day I was on a train [...]. I was sitting in a compartment, and there were some young guys next to me with a guitar. Suddenly I heard them singing 'Chtěl bych žít!' [...] this experience was a turning point for me. It suddenly became clear to me that what I was doing had a future.*"²⁸

As a composer, David was officially registered with the Czech Copyright Protection Association in 1982. The following year, he applied for membership in the Young Composers' Association at the Union of Czech Composers and Concert Artists (SČSKU). In January 1985, The Presidium of the Central Committee of the SČSKU approved his membership. The recommendation supporting his admission noted that David was

22 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 123.

23 JEHNE, Leo. A jedním dechem. *Melodie*, 1983, vol. 21, no. 10, p. 319.

24 CHMEL, op. cit., pp. 50–51.

25 KYTKA, op. cit., p. 17.

26 KYTKA, op. cit., p. 17.

27 HRIVŇÁKOVÁ, Olga. Dobrý pocit zo života mi dáva hudba. *Rytmus*, 1986, vol. 18, no. 7, p. 23.

28 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 27.

working as a freelance artist, was not a member of any political party, and had released approximately fifty titles on vinyl records. It further described him as an exceptionally prominent figure in Czech popular music, both as a performer and a composer: “*He is a representative of the music of the younger generation, to which he has given a distinctive character at a high professional level thanks to his talent, thus laying the foundations for new arranging and compositional techniques in popular music.*”²⁹

During the 1980s, David composed around a hundred songs, a relatively modest output compared to older contemporaries such as Bohuslav Ondráček and Karel Svoboda, who were among the most prominent Czech pop composers of the time.³⁰ Unlike them, however, David was also an active performer, and his time for composing was considerably limited.³¹ Janeček noted that David wrote melodies and arrangements with remarkable ease and was receptive to feedback: “*All you had to do was mention it and he would almost immediately come up with two new versions to choose from.*”³² As a later example, David famously composed the international hit “*Dlouhá noc*” (2000) for Helena Vondráčková in just twenty minutes.³³ Still, he considered it unrealistic to compose an entire LP on his own. For him, a successful album meant achieving “*two hits, two very good songs, and two decent ones.*”³⁴

David also differed from composers like Ondráček and Svoboda in his working methods. For example, Ondráček developed his melodic and harmonic structures organically, later writing them out in detailed orchestral scores: “*I write in complete silence (for others), but in fact I experience a crazy racket. [...] I hear the whole scores.*”³⁵ According to critic Jiří Černý, Svoboda represented a different approach: “*Karel composed at his instrument. He would sit down at the piano and ideas would quickly come to him. He was, I would say, a compromise between the genius composer who can come up with ideas everywhere... and the instrumentalist type who has to sit down at the guitar or piano, play around, and something will come out of it and he'll grab onto it.*”³⁶ David, by contrast, clearly belonged to the instrumentalist role: “*I just play around on the piano until I get a musical idea. If I like it, I start developing it.*”³⁷ He composed songs at home on the piano and recorded them on a tape recorder. Like Ondráček and Svoboda, David prioritized melody first, only later considering the other components of the song.³⁸

For David, melody typically came first, with the lyrics added afterward – a process he found more liberating than composing to pre-written text. While lyrics were important

29 Czech Museum of Music, NM-ČMH Sp 7/2008, fund: Union of Czechoslovak Composers (1949–1969) and Union of Czech Composers and Concert Artists, files 109/4 and 145/5 (personal files of Michal David).

30 BLÜML 2025, op. cit., pp. 320–348.

31 KYTKA, op. cit., p. 17.

32 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 96.

33 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 62.

34 VESELÝ, Petr. Vida David. *Melodie*, 1988, vol. 26, no. 3, p. 11.

35 BLÜML 2025, op. cit., p. 332.

36 Ibid., p. 333.

37 KYTKA, op. cit., p. 17.

38 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., pp. 85–86.

to him, he did not interfere with their form: “*There are singers and composers, such as Petr Janda, who, even though they are not lyricists, have a clear idea from the outset of what their song should be about and usually then require the lyricist to write about that theme. I don’t work that way. When I compose a melody, I give it to the lyricist and usually wait with interest to see what he comes up with.*”³⁹ At the same time, however, David emphasized the close personal and creative relationships he had with Kroky’s lyricists – Jaroslav Machek, Richard Bergman, František Řebíček, Eduard Pergner – noting that they always knew exactly “*who I was, what I would say, and how I would say it.*”⁴⁰ Like Ondráček and Svoboda, David also drew inspiration from Anglo-American models. His early influences included hard rock, followed by progressive rock and jazz rock. In connection with his band Čtyři, Nina Dlouhá also noted the influence of jazz legends such as Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Erroll Garner, and Oscar Peterson.⁴¹ In the early 1980s, David stated that he closely followed developments in keyboard playing and admired bands such as Saga and Supertramp.⁴² His favorite singer was Madonna.

Unlike Ondráček and Svoboda, David had another source of inspiration: the Italian popular song tradition. This style played a significant role in post-WWII European popular music, particularly through the Sanremo festival. In Czechoslovakia, the reception of Italian pop and popular music from Romance-language countries carried political implications. During periods when the communist regime resisted musical imports from English-speaking countries, especially jazz during the Stalinist 1950s and rock during the normalization era, music from Romance-language countries served a partial alternative. However, this association also burdened it with negative connotations in the eyes of jazz- and rock-oriented critics. In 1967, Jaroslav Přikryl described contemporary European pop music as shaped by two main currents: one with roots in the Anglo-Saxon world, and the other originating in Romance-language countries, particularly Italy, whose influence was felt in most European socialist countries.⁴³ Nevertheless, during the liberalization of the 1960s, the Czech music scene focused almost exclusively on Anglo-American pop, viewing Italian music as stylistically outdated, pandering, and artistically inferior.⁴⁴ This perception began to shift in the early 1980s, when Italian melodies became a fashionable trend, much to the dismay of jazz and rock critics. David embodied this trend. Having lived in Italy from 1968 to 1970, he had reportedly learned “*all their melodic songs*” by this time⁴⁵ – spoke fluent Italian and had a natural affinity for Italian music. His repertoire included Czech cover versions of Italian hits such as “*Tornerai tornerò*” (“*Líbezná*”) and “*Stella stai*” (“*Třetí galaxie*”). Among Italian artists, David was particularly drawn to Ricchi e Poveri, Roberto Vecchioni, and Umberto Tozzi.

39 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 65.

40 Ibid., p. 66.

41 DLOUHÁ, op. cit., p. 100.

42 TŮMA, op. cit., p. 198.

43 PŘIKRYL, Jaroslav. Před druhou Bratislavou. *Hudební rozhledy*, 1967, vol. 20, no. 9, p. 279.

44 BLÜML 2025, op. cit., pp. 150–151.

45 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 129.

In addition to Anglo-American popular music, continental European popular music, and the Italian song tradition, David also listened to classical music. Journalist Ivan Kytka once expressed surprise at the number of classical records he saw during a visit to the David's home. In 1984, David stated: *"I still don't shy away from classical music. I'm interested in Bach, Beethoven, Haydn, Chopin, Schumann, Schubert..."*⁴⁶

Unlike Ondráček or Svoboda, David did not function as an autonomous composer in the classical sense. Instead, he operated more as a singer-songwriter, in line with rock traditions. His compositional work was closely tied to arranging and shaping the sound of his home band Kroký. In this context, he approached composition with modern keyboard instruments in mind. *Melodie* reported that synthesizers had begun to appear on the Czech music scene as early as 1976, but it was not until the early 1980s that electronic instruments entered the mainstream. David played a key role in this shift, seeking to distinguish himself from the dominant guitar rock of bands like Olympic and Katapult. His affinity for synthesizers stemmed from his love of jazz rock. Thanks to his father, who was living in exile in Switzerland, David acquired a Korg Polysix synthesizer in the early 1980s. Later, Kroký also got a high-end Yamaha DX7 keyboard.⁴⁷ David further introduced the Roland SH-101 synthesizer, or "keytar," to the Czech scene. It became a signature element of his stage performances and was featured on the cover of the LP *Nonstop*. The sound of David's songs was finalized collaboratively with the band, following rock practice: *"František Janeček and I distribute the arrangements and cassettes, on which I make a demo recording, or we rehearse at the piano. I believe that today it is not enough to just play by the book, but it is necessary to determine in advance the type of song to which everyone can contribute something. A studio band that only plays from the scores doesn't have the same sound as players who improvise and add something of their own."*⁴⁸

During the 1980s, Janeček expanded Kroký to include a variety of singers, each chosen to represent a distinct personality and performance style, targeting specific listener demographics. For example, former model Markéta Muchová was intended to appeal to soldiers, while child singers Pavel Horňák and Josef Melen were aimed at younger audiences. Targeting children as an audience made commercial sense, as Jaromír Tůma observed: *"Michal David – it seems – arrived at just the right time, when the children's audience, so to speak, was awakening. In the 1970s, no one was targeting the 12–15 age group; it was a 'sleeping force' which, as it now turns out, is a potential buyer of records and a source of poll votes [...]"*⁴⁹ David adapted the songs he composed for these performers to suit their roles and vocal abilities. In retrospect, he described two types of songs in this context: those deliberately written in a simple, accessible style, *"so that even the kids could listen to*

46 KYTKA, op. cit., p. 17.

47 "It was an investment of around 65,000 Czechoslovak crowns, which was a lot of money. Owning a DX7 was almost a matter of prestige, especially if you wanted to keep up with the times and use the fashionable sound of the Rhodes FM piano. Anyone who had a DX7 was 'in'." KRIVKA, Jiří. Yamaha DX7. *Muzikus*, 2004, vol. 14, no. 12, p. 90.

48 TŮMA, op. cit., p. 198.

49 Ibid.

them”;⁵⁰ and more harmonically complex songs created for specific projects, such as the film *Láska z pasáže*.⁵¹ David also occasionally composed for singers outside Kroky, including Helena Vondráčková, Karel Gott, Petra Janů, and Hana Zagorová.

In 1987, David left Kroky and founded his own band, Allegro. He justified the move by citing limited creative space in the original group and a desire for a more demanding repertoire: “*Besides, I recently turned twenty-seven and I’m tired of singing simple songs about discos, disco romances, and so on.*”⁵² David also attributed the shift in repertoire to changes in the Czech scene during the political thaw of the late 1980s and the growing maturity of the audience, which was increasingly exposed to Anglo-American popular music: “*Even on our radio, foreign music is played more often than before. Listeners can compare. Of course, this comparison should force us to play more demanding stuff.*”⁵³ This transition was partly reflected in the album *Bláznivá noc* (1988), and more fully in *Michal David – Allegro* (1989). Before recording the latter, David expressed a desire to emulate the work of singers such as Phil Collins, Peter Gabriel, Stevie Wonder, and “*mainstream black singers in general.*”⁵⁴ In line with global trends, he also spoke of incorporating more acoustic instruments such as the flute and saxophone. Pavel Vrba’s lyrics were intended to support David’s evolving image as a more mature and sophisticated performer.

David often styled his songs according to current hits and trends, particularly those popular in discos, the most significant form of entertainment for Czech youth in the 1980s.⁵⁵ His work from that decade reflects a progression of stylistic influences, beginning with Smokie (“*Chtěl bych žít tak, jak se má,*” 1980), followed by echoes of the Bee Gees (“*Aspoň jednou měl bych dříve vstát,*” 1982), ABBA (“*Břímě návyků,*” 1982), The Sweet (“*Fox on the Run*” – “*Škola v přírodě,*” 1984), The Police (“*Every Breath You Take*” – “*Obyčejný příběh,*” 1985), Anna Rusticano (“*Strano*” – “*Zdalo se mi o ní,*” 1986), Falco (“*Rock Me Amadeus*” – “*Ted už to vím,*” 1987), and finally the glam metal style of Europe (“*Můžem se mít rádi,*” 1988). David acknowledged his occasional close adherence to original songs: “*Sometimes I copy something from someone else. Not on purpose, of course. I’ve talked about it with other composers, and it happens to all of them that other people’s music sometimes gets mixed up in their own compositions.*”⁵⁶ He also recounted a curious incident in which he unknowingly used Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” melody in the chorus

50 ŠPAČKOVÁ, Michaela. Za strážníka se nade mnou ohrnují, stačí dvě skleničky a už mě milují. Michal David a jeho jazzem odchovaný pop. Přečetli jsme. *Krajské listy*, September 1, 2019, <https://www.krajskelisty.cz/praha/22549-za-strizliva-se-nade-mnou-ofrnuji-staci-dve-sklenicky-a-uz-me-miluji-michal-david-a-jeho-jazzem-odchovany-pop-precetli-jsme.htm> [cit. 2025-09-05].

51 Ibid.

52 VESELÝ, op. cit., p. 11.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 See BLÜML, Jan. K problematice tzv. diskoték v československé populární hudbě s přihlédnutím k olomoucké scéně. *Musicologica Olomucensia*, 2016, vol. 24, no. 2, p. 7–17. Furthermore, MACHEK, Jakub. Non-stop, I Want to Live Non-stop. The Role of Disco in Late Socialist Czechoslovakia. In *Global Dance Cultures in the 1970s and 1980s*. Flora Pitrolo – Marko Zubak (eds.). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, pp. 173–193.

56 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 61.

of “Já si koupím klavír.”⁵⁷ David often worked with sonic and structural templates, testing and varying them across multiple songs from a given period. In his review of David’s first two LPs from 1982, Leo Jehne noted that “*the introductions (and in some cases the thematic material derived from them) to the songs ‘Já si koupím klavír,’ ‘Jsi zláštní’ [...] and ‘Jé-í-té-ká’ are either almost identical or very similar.*”⁵⁸ Similar musical and lyrical characteristics can be found in the songs “Decibely lásky” (1986) and “Cesta na měsíc” (1987) and others. A particularly effective chord progression at the beginning of the chorus in “Největší z nálezu a ztrát” was later reused in a prominent spot in “Posel dobrých zpráv.” It is likely that, in composing for the prestigious commission for Karel Gott, David simply drew on the proven model from his earlier song.

What set David apart was the unique combination of his musical roots and the selection of stylistic models, which were also shaped by the tastes of the Czech audience, itself influenced by the offerings of domestic publishers and media. On a creative level, David stood out for his striking, instantly memorable melodic slogans found both in vocal lines and instrumental accompaniments, as well as his seductive sonic arrangements. Finally, he also had a keen instinct for identifying modern pop trends and audience preferences, consistently producing music that fulfilled its intended function with precision and appeal.

Musical Style and Analysis

Recent music-theoretical scholarship on 1980s popular music illuminates several stylistic developments from the decade and offers valuable tools for analyzing Michal David’s work. Trevor de Clercq, for example, observes how songwriters increasingly blurred the boundaries between formal sections, even within the prevalent verse-chorus forms structures of the era.⁵⁹ He advocates for a more flexible formal labeling system that incorporates clear musical markers like cadences, but also listener perception shaped by prior exposure and experience which he frames through “exemplar” and “prototype” views models of song organization. Although David’s song forms are relatively generally straightforward, and largely adhere to verse-chorus designs, de Clercq’s analytical framework proves useful in contextualizing David’s use of pre-choruses and instrumental solos. While David’s harmonic language remains primarily tonal (rather than modal), with only occasional use of borrowed chords and light chromaticism, he frequently employs modulations near the end of songs to heighten tension and intensify the chorus. To interpret the synthesizer-driven soundscapes that characterize David’s music, Megan Lavengood’s research on timbre 1980s pop – particularly her concept of a “novelty” layer – offers a compelling prism through which to understand and classify

57 Ibid.

58 JEHNE, op. cit., p. 319.

59 DE CLERQ, Trevor. Embracing Ambiguity in the Analysis of Form in Pop/Rock Music, 1982–1991. *Music Theory Online*. 2017, vol. 23, no. 3, https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.17.23.3/mto.17.23.3.de_clercq.html [cit. 2025-09-05].

composite musical effects in a song.⁶⁰ Building on Allan Moore's four-layer model (beat, bass, melody, and harmonic filler), Lavengood introduces a fifth layer that encompasses timbral effects often produced by synthesizers or other "exotic" instruments. In David's music the synthesizer often emerges as a focal point in the texture, whether due to production choices or because the songs were composed on the instrument and arranged around its sonic qualities. Christopher Doll's work on "expressive modulation" in pop and rock further illuminates David's compositional strategies. Doll outlines how momentum toward the chorus can be achieved through increased loudness, textural density, or ascending modulations.⁶¹ One of the initial observations that prompted this analysis was David's frequent use of stepwise ascending modulations to extend a song's duration and amplify its emotional impact. These modulations usually occur in conjunction or elide with an instrumental solo (guitar, synth) in such songs as "Padá a sněží", "Největší z nálezu a ztrát", "Discopříběh", "Pozdrav", etc. These "expressive modulations" not only create striking harmonic contrasts but also reinforce David's role as a soloist and performer. Moreover, they often coincide with modal shifts from minor to major between verse to chorus, or with upward key changes that serve as a hallmark of his musical style.

We now turn to an examination of common musical techniques, stylistic influences, and formal structures in selected songs by David. For this section, we have selected three representative songs from the 1980s: "Decibely lásky" (1986, lyrics by Richard Bregman), "Největší z nálezu a ztrát" (1984–1985, lyrics by Eduard Pegner), "Bláznivá noc" (1987, lyrics by Richard Bregman). These selections were made for several reasons. First, they represent the peak of David's career as a composer in the mid-1980s and are emblematic of his musical style. Second, they are widely recognized and remain popular today. Third, each was composed for a distinct occasion and varies in style, illuminating the breadth of David's work. Finally, from a music-theoretic perspective, these songs are notable for their engaging and technically interesting structures. To conclude this analysis, we consider the influence of the Italian popular music style, which is most frequently linked to David's work, and assess its significance as a shaping force in his musical language.

"Decibely lásky"

By concentrating on a narrow window of time – the mid-1980s when David enjoyed peak success – one can begin to trace the defining elements of his musical language and structural approach. A fruitful entry point is the song "Decibely lásky," from the album *Děti ráje*. This track evokes the vibrant atmosphere in a dance club: the DJ setting the mood, the immersive soundscape, the energy of the crowd, and the excitement of the moment. The concept of "decibels of love" fuses the sonic intensity of dance music with

60 LAVENGGOOD, Megan L. The Cultural Significance of Timbre Analysis: A Case Study in 1980s Pop Music, Texture, and Narrative. *Music Theory Online*, 2020, vol. 26, no. 3, <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.3/mto.20.26.3.lavengood.html> [cit. 2025-09-05].

61 DOLL, Christopher. Rockin' Out: Expressive Modulation in Verse-Chorus Form. *Music Theory Online*, 2011, vol. 17, no. 3, <https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.11.17.3/mto.11.17.3.doll.html> [cit. 2025-09-05].

the euphoric emotions reflected in the song's upbeat and energetic musical arrangement. David constructs a clear formal structure comprising standard elements – introduction, verse, pre-chorus, chorus – set against a borrowed rhythmic style and layered with prominent synthesized instrumentation. The song begins with a faded-in, sustained synthesizer chord, quickly interrupted by a forceful drum machine pattern that launches the introduction. Although the song is in C major, the initial sustained F-major chord introduces some initial harmonic ambiguity quickly resolved by a familiar I-V-vi-IV-V progression. This progression, based on a modified descending-thirds sequence, is common in popular music history; however, David sets it to a quasi-reggae beat emphasizing off-beat metrical accents. The introduction's instrumentation is entirely synthesized, featuring overmodulated percussion hits, record scratching, drum machines, and a metallic-sounding synthesizer melody that emerges from the texture. The repetitive motives and danceable beat clearly signal music designed for a club. Adding textural interest in the verse are wordless “ahs” interwoven with the synthesizer melody; what Lavengood might describe as a “novelty” layer, evoking earlier pop idioms and enriching the timbral palette. In the pre-chorus, the harmony shifts down a whole step to B-flat major, introducing a contrasting tonal area. This section aligns with a moment of lyrical reflection, as the singer notes that the clubgoers came for a shared purpose – to be entertained – and affirms the rightness of their decision. Leading into the chorus, the progression returns to C major with four emphatic quarter-notes on the chords C-G-F-G (I-V-IV-V) creating a strong lead-in to the tonic. The ascending melodic line and chord progression in the chorus amplify the song's energy further enhanced by David's vocalizations “Oh Oh Oh” which evoke the image of dancers enthusiastically raising their fists in time with the beat. The remainder of the song maintains this instrumentation and structural pattern, concluding with a brief outro that reiterates the chorus and reinforces the song's celebratory tone.

“Největší z nálezů a ztrát”

Whereas “Decibely lásky” showcases many of Michal David's musical hallmarks, his stylistic range extends beyond dance-oriented music into more introspective ballads. A particularly compelling example is the ballad “Největší z nálezů a ztrát,” which foregrounds more of David's background as a jazz pianist through its more sophisticated formal and harmonic design.

David composed the song for the 1985 film *Láska z pasáže*. Director Jaroslav Soukup instructed him to write a moving song that would resonate deeply with the audience in the film's final scene: “*And preferably make them cry... That's the sequence where Táňa Kulíšková is riding the subway and remembering her boyfriend (Lukáš Vaculík), who died.*”⁶² The song was recorded in 1984, featured in the film a year later, released as a single, and quickly became a major hit. David has referred to it as his favorite song, remarking:

62 SPÁČIL – PŠENICOVÁ, op. cit., p. 15.

*“I just can’t get enough of it. [...] It didn’t take long to write.”*⁶³ His colleague Petr Hannig considered the song a world-class hit.⁶⁴ Although František Janeček is listed as a co-author of the song, David clarified that Janeček’s contributions were often limited to providing “musters” – a common practice in the music industry where producers receive songwriting credit for initiating or shaping a project.⁶⁵ Lyrically, the song explores the emotional complexity of young love. The narrator attempts to dismiss negative thoughts about his partner (“I hate goodbyes”) and tries to focus on the positive aspects of their relationship, both in memory (“You’re still in my head”) and in everyday experiences such as riding the tram together or eating at a self-service cafeteria.

The musical setting of “Největší z nálezu a ztrát” is characterized by a keyboard-driven melodic pattern and chord progression that exemplify David’s frequent use of sudden, ascending modulations as well as a notable example of brief mixed meter. While the instrumentation includes both electric and acoustic pianos, synthesizers play a prominent role, functioning in both supportive and melodic roles. One synthesizer timbre features a bright, wavering quality that contrasts with the piano’s more straightforward tone, while another resembles a vibrato-rich string pad.

The song’s form adheres to a clear verse-chorus structure typical of contemporary music, yet its harmonic motion is distinguished by localized chromaticism. Following the opening chord progression, the first part of the verse features a sequence of C-C+-Cadd6-C7, which can be easily executed on the keyboard by sustaining a C pedal and chromatically altering the fifth of the C-major triad chord up a half-step (G, G#, A, B-flat). The remainder of the verse transitions into ii-V-I progressions common in jazz harmony (Dm, G7, C). Notably, David inserts a duple bar (2/4) within the prevailing quadruple meter just before the second verse, momentarily disrupting the dreamy atmosphere established earlier. In the chorus, he continues to draw from jazz-influenced harmonic language, employing a descending sequence that complements the portrayal of emotional conflict in the lyrics, culminating in the song’s titular phrase “finds and losses.”

Beyond its notable chord progression, the song’s most compelling feature lies in the striking ascending modulations that define its second half. After concluding the third verse in C major, David modulates upward by major second to D major. As in earlier sections, this modulation is linked to an instrumental solo, but in contrast to other uses of modulation that serve merely to heighten tension, these shifts intensify the emotional trajectory of *Láska z pasáže*’s melancholic conclusion. Heard and seen in context, the ascending modulations take on a pleading, emotionally charged quality. Each modulation is executed smoothly, with the new tonic consistently prepared by its dominant, lending a sense of inevitability to the harmonic motion. At this higher pitch level, David’s vocal timbre becomes notably raspier and more emphatic, while the synthesizers increase in melodic activity. This vocal modulation became a hallmark of David’s style

63 NEČAS, op. cit., p. 15.

64 See Czech Radio podcast Zeman vyznamenává jen své sponzory a podporovatele, říká novinář k ocenění Michala Davida, October 18, 2018, https://plus.rozhlas.cz/zeman-vyznamenava-jen-sve-sponzory-a-podporovatele-rika-novinar-k-oceneni-7644738?utm_source=chatgpt.com [cit. 2025-09-05].

65 NEČAS, op. cit., p. 9.

marker across his broader output. He once remarked: “*When I sing on my breath, my voice is clear, but as soon as I put my weight into it, my voice becomes distorted. I don’t like singing without contrast, shouting in one tone.*”⁶⁶ The song concludes with a final modulation up another step to E major as David’s voice and the synthesizers continue to ascend until the fadeout. David’s musicality is fully on display through its singable melody, localized chromaticism, steadily intensifying structure, and climactic modulations, all interwoven with the yearning lyrics and drama of the film’s final scene.

“Bláznivá noc” and “St. Elmo’s Fire”

As a final example, consider “Bláznivá noc,” the title track from David’s 1987 album. In contrast to the dance track and ballad discussed earlier, “Bláznivá noc,” with lyrics by Richard Bergman, functions more as a popular “sing-along,” though its arrangement offers enough variety to reward attentive listening. Typical of the era, the song is set in and around a dance/disco club, where two young people discover that their passion stems from dancing together during a “crazy night.” Several features distinguish this song from David’s other work. While the familiar layers of synthesizers and drum programming are present, live instruments such as an electric guitar and saxophone introduce contrast to the synthetic textures. As noted earlier, this album represented a transitional point in David’s output and showcases increased experimentation with solo instruments like the saxophone. Additionally, the synthesizers, used in conjunction with the saxophone, function as a horn section, delivering punctuated accents and brief countermelodies during the chorus. The song ends with a call- and-response between David and background singers, who resemble enthusiastic fans rather than professional singers, exchanging vocalizations (“oh,” “yeah,” “la”) that eventually fade out.

An unusual aspect of “Bláznivá noc” lies in its key and harmonic progression, which again suggests composition at the keyboard rather than on a guitar. The tonic is ambiguous, shifting between E-flat minor in the verse and G-flat major in the chorus, relative keys that are not strongly emphasized through definitive cadences. Either key can present challenges for guitar performance without the aid of a capo, yet the harmonic palette – E-flat minor, D-flat major, G-flat major, C-flat major – share several common tones that facilitate smooth voice leading on the keyboard. Moreover, “Bláznivá noc” exemplifies the archetype described in the articles by both de Clerq and Doll, in which a standard verse-chorus structure begins in a minor key and moves to a brighter major in the chorus – (an “expressive modulation”) that further amplifies the energy and tension. The interactive “audience” response at the end of the song simulates the club or live concert atmosphere described in the lyrics.

To conclude these analytical vignettes – demonstrating how the sonic elements found in David’s music were ubiquitous across national boundaries during the 1980s – consider “St. Elmo’s Fire (Man in Motion)” a song by British singer John Parr featured in the American

66 TŮMA, op. cit., p. 198.

movie of the same name. Released in 1985, the track was a major hit in the United States and United Kingdom, and featured a roster of prominent musicians and songwriters, including producer David Foster (co-writer with Parr), and members of Toto, Mr. Mister, and REO Speedwagon. “St. Elmo’s Fire” shares several notable lyrical and musical parallels with “Bláznivá noc.” Whereas the narrative unfolds around a bar rather than a disco club, both songs depict a sense of yearning and personal transformation – embodied by the “Man in Motion” in Parr’s song and the young couple seeking a “crazy night” in David’s song. This theme of inner fire or emotional drive is a recurring motif in pop music, but the resonance between these two examples is particularly striking. Musically, the similarities are equally compelling. “St. Elmo’s Fire” is another keyboard-driven track featuring synth horns complemented by prominent guitar riffs and support. Both songs employ ascending choruses built on the I-IV-V progression, situated in the upper range of both singers. Differences include the more dominant role of the guitar in Parr’s track and the absence of audience interaction at the end. Nevertheless, even if David was unaware of Parr’s song, his own compositional and stylistic choices align closely with those prevalent in the Anglo-American world pop landscape of the time.

David’s Connections to Italian Popular Music

In addition to the dance music and Western influences evident in his ballads and mainstream popular songs, David drew inspiration from Italian popular music, in particular the style of song found at the Sanremo music festival. As noted earlier, David spent part of his early life traveling through Italy with his mother, gaining exposure to a wide array of popular song traditions. While Sanremo winners represent a blend of musical genres, by the late 1970s dance music had become the dominant style. A clear example of how David and his colleagues modeled their work on Sanremo Festival songs is Tuto Cutugno’s “Solo noi” from 1980. Cast in 6/8 meter, the song features a proto-1950s chord progression: I, vi, IV, V (D, Bm, G, A) and blends acoustic and electronic instrumentation. The dramatic opening melody – ascending strings layered over distorted electric guitar in D major – resolves unexpectedly into D minor where the main body of the song begins. The lyrics, implied by the title, reflect the narrator’s belief that everything would be better if he and his partner were together, despite her apparent departure – a sentiment reinforced by the shift to a minor key. As the text grows increasingly desperate, Cutugno’s vocal delivery intensifies, becoming raspier and more emotionally strained. David demonstrates a similar ability to modulate his vocal style in response to lyrical content and harmonic progression, moving from relaxed to impassioned delivery as the music ascends. The vocal stylings of other Italian singers, such as Drupi, who enjoyed popularity in Czechoslovakia during this time, also permeate David’s performance practice.⁶⁷

67 NEČAS, op. cit., p. 49.

In what appears to be more than mere coincidence, the 1987 song “Výtah do nebe” written for David by František Janeček opens with a sequence strikingly similar to that in Cutugno’s “Solo noi.” Composed in the same key (D major) and meter (6/8), Janeček’s song modifies the opening progression slightly to D, D/F#, Em, A, yet retains the same fundamental harmonic functions found in “Solo noi” (I, vi, IV, V). The lyrical theme of “Výtah do nebe” reimagines the metaphor of dreams and an “elevator to heaven” as an unattainable ideal in a romantic relationship. Instead, the couple must remain grounded, navigating life’s challenges together – a sentiment that aligns with the song’s more stable harmonic structure. Despite its clear modeling on Italian pop, Janeček’s composition diverges in several notable ways. “Výtah do nebe” stays in D major throughout and is synth-driven, consistent with David’s broader 1980s sound. The song concludes with an ascending step modulation, from D to E major, brightening the musical atmosphere and allowing David to extend his vocal range and employ a raspier, more impassioned delivery in the fade out. In this instance, Janeček and David borrow the general framework of Italian pop – the basic chord progression, melodic contour, and meter – but adapt it to fit David’s distinctive musical style. This example underscores David’s close association with Italian pop, evident not only in his vocal mannerisms and stylistic choices, but also in his frequent covers of Italian songs and collaborations with composers who composed songs in an Italian pop style for him to sing.

As a final example, we can compare one of David’s original songs written in an Italian-inspired style to a contemporaneous Italian popular song to better understand how David assimilated specific stylistic elements in his own music. Anna Rusticano, a successful singer with several major hits, released the song “Strano” (“Strange”) in 1983. Composed by Adelmo Russo and Claudio Scotti Galletta, “Strano” shares several traits with Cutugno’s “Solo noi,” including its compound duple meter and chord progression (BM, G#m, C#m, F#M). Like “Solo noi,” it features a string-based orchestration rather than synthesizers typical of Janeček and David’s works. Rusticano also demonstrates a wide vocal range, beginning with a subdued delivery and culminating in an emphatic, emotionally charged conclusion in the upper range of her voice. From a harmonic standpoint, the most striking feature of “Strano” is its abrupt modulation following one of the choruses – from B major to D major – during an instrumental break. However, before the song continues in the new key, it unexpectedly returns to the original key of B major for the final chorus. This harmonic twist mirrors the lyrical theme, with the narrator reflecting on the unpredictable nature of love – its “strangeness” embodied in the music’s tonal shifts. Czech scholars even noted this feature of Italian pop songs like “Solo noi” and “Strano”: “[...] *mannerisms of Italian origin, or ‘triplets-character pieces’ full of disappointed, unhappy, hopeful, and I don’t know what kind of love and romantic enticement.*”⁶⁸

David’s “Zdálá se mi o ní,” from the *Discopříběh* album (1986), serves as a fitting conclusion to this analysis, as it encapsulates many musical traits discussed thus far. Like “Solo noi” and “Strano,” the song is set in compound duple meter and features a repetitive chord progression within a verse-chorus structure. The progression closely mirrors

68 BLÜML 2025, op. cit., pp. 132–133.

those found in the Italian models, providing David with ample space for expressive vocal and instrumental stylings. While synthesizers are prominent, a processed electric guitar countermelody – introduced at the outset and recurring throughout – adds a distinctive layer to the texture. This contributes to the dreamy atmosphere, further enhanced by the heavy reverb on the drums (or drum machine) and a more economical use of musical space (i.e., less dense) than in other songs analyzed here. Lyrically, the song evokes romantic imagery of horses, roses, and love persisting through all circumstances, illustrating the versatility and emotional range of David's vocal delivery. He begins in a low register (starting on middle C), leaps an octave for the second verse, and extends his range further for the chorus, ultimately spanning more than an octave and a half. His husky timbre lends poignancy to the message and sustains intensity through to the final chorus, which features a step modulation from C to D major. This modulation, while technically straightforward, allows David to extend the material sequentially and heighten the expressive impact. Though not a dance track, "Zdálo se mi o ní," incorporates melodic hooks, an effective arrangement, and sufficient variation to demonstrate how David builds upon established models like Italian popular songs to craft a style distinctly his own.

Conclusion

Michal David emerged as a leading figure among a new generation of young Czech pop stars in the 1980s, distinguishing himself as a singer, instrumentalist, and composer. Unlike the older generation of songwriters, who primarily composed for large dance orchestras and classically trained cantilena-style vocalists, David embraced the singer-songwriter model rooted in rock traditions. His work reflected a shift toward the emerging paradigm of electronic music, positioning him at the forefront of stylistic innovation in Czech popular music.

Czech critics have long dismissed David's work as banal and artistically insignificant, often framing it as emblematic of the official culture of the normalization era. However, this analysis reveals that David's work in the 1980s while not vast, encompassed songs tailored for a variety of occasions, audiences, and vocal styles. His compositions frequently exhibit structural inventiveness and sonic appeal, reflecting contemporary global trends. The persistent critical disdain toward David's work has been shaped by the intersecting ideologies of rockism and anti-communism, forces that merged within the unique cultural environment of communist and post-communist Czechoslovakia/Czech Republic resulting in deeply biased assessments. In contrast, foreign observers, unencumbered by these local ideological frameworks, are positioned to offer a more objective and nuanced view of David's composition contributions – an interpretive shift that this study has foregrounded.

As a composer, David distinguished himself through a distinctive fusion of jazz, rock, and pop influences, drawing from both the Anglo-American and European continental traditions. While critics often emphasize the Italian dimension of his style because

David included cover versions of Italian hits in his repertoire, sang songs written by his colleagues in the Italian style, recorded his songs in Italian, etc., this influence was not nearly as strong, and he transformed those models into his own musical voice.

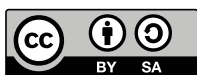
Michal David's creative output aligned with the prevailing practices of pop authors on the international stage. He demonstrated a keen ability to capture current musical trends and respond to the tastes of the audience, translating foreign influences into a distinctly personal style. This style was primarily shaped by his perspective as a keyboard player and was characterized by clear formal structures, memorable melodies, melodic hooks and riffs, jazz-influenced harmonies and instrumental solos, a tendency to maximize the impact of songs through repeated choruses and modulations, as well as appealing arrangements and sound design using modern musical instruments and technologies. David was the main performer of his songs, and he complemented their sound with his distinctive vocal style and dynamic stage presence during concerts. The key to understanding David's success on the Czech scene lies in the multiplicity of his talents, as Ladislav Štáidl noted: "*Michal is a time-tested hit composer, a very skilled instrumentalist, and a good showman. Such triple-unity musicians are common in the Anglo-American world, but in our part of the world they are as rare as, for example, a one-horned rhinoceros.*"⁶⁹

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69 NEČAS, op. cit., p. 51.

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