

Flanna Sheridan: POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF CHANGES IN ROCK MUSIC IN PRAGUE SINCE THE LATE 1960'S

(M.A. thesis assessment by Miloš Calda)

Characteristics:

Flanna Sheridan has submitted a thesis that is in some respects exceptional. It is a reflection of the history of Czechoslovakia in the postwar decades through the prism of unofficial culture, above all rock-related music. The author interviewed a number of persons who were actors in the cultural resistance to the regime as well as some who have provided valuable observations. Flanna's thesis consists of three chronological parts: I. The 1960's and 1970's with Emphasis on the Czech Underground, II. The 1980's and 1990's, and III. After 2000. The author defines her purpose in the following manner: „The purpose of this paper is to explore the evolution of independent music in the Czech Republic from the late 1960's until the present with regard to its political and social context.“ In her conclusion, Ms. Sheridan states: „This paper has been intended to be a survey of aspects of social and political trends through the eyes of a foreigner interested in the journey from popular music of the 1960's the current status of the music scene in the Czech Republic.“ It follows that the submitted thesis is descriptive, that it lacks the usual format of a hypothesis that is verified or refuted in the process.

The thesis points to various difficulties faced by the non-Czech person to grapple with various Czech idiosyncrasies and intricacies (some of these problems will be discussed in the Remarks section below). In the opinion of the present reviewer, it is the interview that represent the most valuable contribution of the submitted thesis. Let me emphasize that some protagonists of the Czech nonconformist culture she interviewed have precious insights and bear witness to the cultural, political and social development of Czech society in the last half a century.

The thesis offers some interesting insights, although a bit clumsily formulated, eg (p. 72): „Does the shift from live music performed by real people to the preference for DJ's playing pre-recorded music affect society? I believe that it does. Creating music has been a way of drawing people together in all cultures since the beginning of time. Folk music is indicative of native cultures.“

Several pages, in my humble opinion far too many, are devoted to Prague's *Radio 1* charts.

Remarks:

„The importance of Ginsberg's coronation as “King of May” lies in the relevance of the day itself. May Day has traditionally been a celebration of the leftist labor unions marked by political speeches. Though it originally began as an international protest for eight-hour workdays, it evolved to showcase the power of the working class (Flett). After a state enforced break in the celebration, May Day festivities resumed in 1965 (Česká televize).“ The author confuses the ancient tradition of „majáles“, the student spring event, with May Day protests organized by labor unions and later by Socialist and even Communist parties.

„Kriegl [sic!] was one of only four people to vote against occupation in 1968.“ There is no context given here. What was the institution which organized the vote? Certainly the vast majority of Czechs and Slovaks were against the Soviet-led invasion. The family name of František Kriegel is consistently misspelt in the submitted thesis.

Another consistently misspelt family name: Vratislav Brabenec of the Plastic People of the Universe appears in the thesis as „Brabanec“

„Nazis had banned jazz in 1939 when Germany occupied Czechoslovakia. By 1945, the Czechoslovakian communist regime became more lenient toward jazz.“ There are factual errors here: (1) The nazis did not ban jazz in 1939. There are many excellent Czech swing recordings made in 1939, 1940, and 1941 (now reissued in CD format by Radioservis). The Nazi suppression of jazz started later than the author claims, surely in connection with the state of war between Germany and the United States declared in December 1941. (2) The Communist regime was established in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 only. In fact, the period 1945-48 represented the heyday of jazz and swing in Czechoslovakia. The Communist regime repressed jazz for almost a decade (1948-1958) and only in the late 1950s, in connection with limited thaw throughout the Communist bloc, the regime became more lenient.

„Of the 40 songs listed above, only one is by a band from the former Soviet Bloc. Laibach, a Slovenian band..." Slovenia was a part of Yugoslavia, a communist-ruled country that had never belonged to the Soviet Bloc.

"This paper has been intended to be a survey of aspects of social and political trends through the eyes of a foreigner interested in the journey from popular music of the 1960's the current status of the music scene in the Czech Republic." However, the focus of the thesis is on nonformist genres and artists. The mainstream popular music (represented by crooners like Karel Gott and TV "personalities" is (thank God) largely neglected.

Final assessment:

Flanna's list of sources is (mostly) limited to internet materials. It is a pity that some key book publications about popular music in Czechoslovakia were not used, eg *Dějiny české populární hudby a zpěvu* by Josef Kotek or writings by other Czech authors like Jiří Černý. However, I must concede that the number of publications on the subject is rather limited. The text itself would have deserved a more careful editing...

The thesis is descriptive and lacks better consistency. However, I appreciate the author's courage to take up a challenge of a rather unconventional topic.

I propose evaluation between 2 and 3 („very good“ to „good“), depending on Ms. Sheridan's defense.

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(doc. M. Calda)

September 7th, 2011.