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ADAM MICHNA Z OTRADOVIC AND HIS 'CHRISTMAS EVE'

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Abstract

The Czech devotional verse 'Vánoční noc' ('Christmas Eve') by Adam Michna z Otradovic, first published in his *Česká mariánská muzika* (Prague, 1647), and one of the best-known poems by its author, is offered in partial English translation. As a poem it is *poesia per musica*, intended for musical setting; a close reading of details of the poem in its musical context yields unexpected layers of meaning, and suggests that it may serve as a model for improving modern interpretations of Czech Baroque poetry more broadly.

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Of the literary and musical products of the seventeenth-century Bohemian Lands, Adam Michna's 'Vánoční noc' ('Christmas Eve', a lullaby to the Christ Child), first printed in his *Česká mariánská muzika* (Prague, 1647), remains

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Sing - ing her in - fant Son to sleep, her care to prove,
 For you, O Sa - viour of us all, soft bed I laid;
 Sleep, with a kiss up - on your brow, hush now your cries;

Ma - ry her pa - tient watch did keep in song of love:
 ox - en and men in wor - ship fall, in crea - tures you made.
 sleep, for your Mo - ther rocks you now, soon close your eyes.

Sleep now, O sleep, my pre - cious child, O Son of God,
 Sleep now, O sleep, e - ter - nal King, su - per - nal Lord,
 Now my Child sleeps; bow si - lent - ly, an - gels of God;

sleep now, in slum - ber sweet and mild, O God's own Word,
 gift that sur - pass - es eve - ry thing, by all a - dored,
 na - tions of earth, come kneel with me, here lies your Lord.

Ex. 1. Michna, “Christmas Eve”, with translations of stanzas 1, 2, and 6.

the best-known. (For modern editions of text and music, see Sehnal, 1989, pp. 22, 49, and Čejka, 1999, pp. 15–16.) It is one of the most familiar Christmas carols sung in the Czech Republic: transmission over more than three and a half centuries through hymn-books, both Catholic and Protestant, has made it the common property of the people as if it were an anonymous folk-song. The partial translation in Ex. 1 is free, but preserves the original metre and rhyme scheme.

The Czech text of the stanzas in question follows, for comparison, and also in order to make the line division and rhyme-scheme clear. The orthography is modernized (as usual in modern critical editions of such texts) in order to make the text more easily readable.

Chtíc, aby spal, tak zpívala
 synáčkovi:

matka, jenž ponocovala
miláčkovi.

Nynej, rozkošné děťátko,
Synu Boží,
nynej, nynej, nemluvňátko,
světa zboží.

Tobě lůžko jsem ustlala,
Spasiteli:
tvory k tvé chvále zvolala,
Stvořiteli.

Nynej, krásu a korunu
svrchovaná,
nynej, milujících cen
vinšovaná.

Na dobrou noc, ej, hubička,
nynej, dítě:
kolíbat bude matička,
nynej hbitě.

Spí miláček, umlkněte,
anjelové,
se mnou k Bohu přikleknete,
národové.

This song belongs to an old tradition of devotional singing in the Czech vernacular, which had been retained (rather than abolished as heretical) by the Jesuits as part of their Counter-Reformation missionary activity in the Bohemian lands, though Michna departed markedly from earlier Czech models of hymn-writing in important respects (Ducreux and Ameln, 1985, p. 175). Michna, a wealthy townsman, born around 1600 at Jindřichův Hradec [Neuhaus] in South Bohemia, was in fact closely dependent on Jesuit patronage. Educated in the Jesuit college at Jindřichův Hradec (attested in 1611-12 and 1615-17), he worked as an organist, also in that town, from 1628 (for biographical information, see especially Sehnal, 2013, and Sehnal, 2016). Some of his compositional output, which was entirely of sacred music, was published from the Jesuits' printing house at the Klementinum in Prague; the *Česká mariánská muzika*, dedicated to Cardinal Harrach, archbishop of Prague, was one such collection, and its "brief notice" to the pious reader expresses the composer's hope that these songs would prove serviceable not only to accomplished mu-

sicians in larger towns but also to “simple cantors” (“sprostní kantoři”) in the “most simple of villages” (“nejsprostnější městečka”).

Whatever its enduring popularity in simple villages and among simple cantors and their successors, Michna’s poetry and music have suffered wilful neglect from academics, especially during the postwar communist regime, on account of the religious nature of the texts. Jiří Sehnal’s edition of the *Česká mariánská muzika* (Sehnal 1989), commissioned by the Supraphon publishers and ready for publication in 1971, was abruptly halted, and then declared an “undesirable title” – until a Soviet cosmonaut providentially heard a Czech broadcast of some of Michna’s hymns, including ‘Christmas Eve’, during a space flight in 1988, and found that they “pleased him enormously”, suddenly making their publication possible the following year (Sehnal, 2016, p. 6). The only monograph on the author to appear during the 1970s “Normalization” period was that of Zdeňka Tichá (1976), which fastened on the erotic imagery of many of his poems, denying its devotional impulse, expounding it in terms of Michna’s own sexual experiences, and suggesting that the same is true of the poetry of his contemporaries. The details need not detain us.

The structure of the poems mirrors that of the most modern devotional repertory cultivated in Italy at the time, and is based on the popular model of the Italian canzonetta of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This repertory, originally secular, often replaces the predominantly seven- and eleven-syllable lines of traditional Italian verse with shorter rhyming lines. The change is often associated with the poet Gabriello Chiabrera (1552–1638), another product of a Jesuit education.

And this change highlights the essential relationship between Michna’s verse and his music: like its Italian models, his poetry is *poesia per musica*, verse designed to be set to music. (Chiabrera’s poetry is one of the principal sources of texts set by Italian composers of Claudio Monteverdi’s generation in the early seventeenth century (see Ossi, 1992).) And like its models, Michna’s verse invites musical settings with clarity of form and harmony. We may indeed underestimate the musical context of his verse: the songs of Michna’s *Loutna česká* (Prague, 1653) have elaborate surviving instrumental ritornelli to be played before and between stanzas, and ritornelli, either improvised or composed, may have been a normal possibility in the performance of songs like ‘Christmas Eve’. Even in the Italian sphere, however, the development of *poesia per musica* between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and its tendency to formal clarity, is not yet fully understood, nor its impact on Catholic devotional poetry in German and Czech, such as that of Michna. The issue is complicated by longstanding prejudices about the nature of early seventeenth-century modernity in music.

Michna adopts the Italian principle of versification based on syllable-count, rather than on quantity of syllables, though the latter principle was still being advocated for Czech at that time in the extensive introduction to Komenský (1659, published from exile in Amsterdam), and the versification used by Michna's German contemporaries was based on accentual stress. The eight-and-four-syllable rhyming lines of Michna's 'Vánoční noc', like its clear division into two balanced halves, each repeated in the music, are typical of such canzonette, and that is no doubt a prime reason for the contemporary (and lasting) popularity of this song.

The directness and simplicity of the songs, including this one, are deceptive, however: their artfulness deserves close attention. One or two details from the present example will suffice. First, Michna emphasizes his short rhyming four-syllable lines, in a way that cannot be matched in an English translation, by choosing single rhyming words of four syllables whose pairing is carefully chosen, first as near synonyms, then as complements, and finally to provide a clinching climax as the focus moves from the Bethlehem stable to universal humanity (in the stanzas quoted above, "synáčkovi/miláčkovi", "spasiteli/stvořiteli", "svrchovaná/vinšovaná", "anjelové/národové"; the pattern is maintained in the other stanzas).

Moreover, there are allusions built into this song, to an ancient custom of "crib-rocking" (*Kindelwiegen, kolébání*) popular in Central Europe. In a quasi-theatrical ritual, attested since the fourteenth century, lullabies were sung, accompanying the rocking of a crib containing an image of the Christ child, at Christmas. (The literature on the crib-rocking is extensive; for a recent summary, see Rawson, 2013, pp. 113–17, and for a historical account of its fortunes within German Lutheranism, see Rathey, 2017.) Michna's verse mirrors the ritual: it begins with a narrator setting the scene (first half of the first stanza), and the rest of the song is placed in the mouth of the Virgin. She is rocking the infant, and he has not fallen asleep until the final stanza, which fades out with a *pianissimo*.

Musically, this allusion is subtly underlined also in the second half of each stanza, which begins each time with an oscillating, "rocking", semitone motif in the bass (at bars 13–15 and 19–21 in Ex. 1 above). At this period, that bass motif appears to have been a conventional representation of sleep; two well-known examples will illustrate this. Ex. 2 shows the opening of the aria 'Oblivion soave', from Act II of Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (Venice, 1642), the lullaby for Poppea sung by her nurse, Arnalta, in which the oscillating semitone motif appears in bars 5–9. Ex. 3 is from the *Historia der Geburt Jesu Christi* by Heinrich Schütz (Dresden, 1664): each appearance of angels to sleeping humans is introduced by this motif (here in bars 1–5), and two such appearances specifically call for the enactment of the crib-rocking.

The image shows a musical score for Claudio Monteverdi's 'Oblivion soave'. It features two staves: the top staff is for the voice, labeled 'Arnalta', and the bottom staff is for the continuo. The music is in 3/8 time and G major. The lyrics 'Ob - li - vi - on so - a - ve' are written below the voice staff. The voice part begins with a rest, followed by a series of eighth notes and quarter notes, with a long melisma on the final 've'. The continuo part provides a steady accompaniment with a mix of eighth and quarter notes.

Ex. 2. Claudio Monteverdi, 'Oblivion soave', opening, from *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*, Act II.

The image shows a musical score for Heinrich Schütz's 'Fürchtet euch nicht'. It features four staves: the top two are for voices, labeled 'Violetta I' and 'Violetta II'; the third is for 'Cantus (Angelus)'; and the bottom is for 'Organo'. The music is in 3/8 time and G minor. The lyrics 'Für - chet euch nicht' are written below the Cantus staff. The organ part features a prominent bass line with a '6' (first inversion) indicated under the first two measures. The vocal parts enter with a melodic line, and the Cantus part has a more rhythmic, dotted pattern.

Ex. 3. Heinrich Schütz, 'Fürchtet euch nicht', opening, from *Historia der Geburt Jesu Christi*.

It will be clear, I hope, that Michna's artistry as a poet and composer deserves far closer attention to detail than it has hitherto received, and that this is only likely to bolster his reputation as the greatest of Bohemia's poet/composers of the seventeenth century.

Declaration of competing interest

Authors declare no conflict of interest in this article.

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