

# HARE KRISHNA MANTRA IN PRAGUE STREETS: THE SACRED, MUSIC AND TRANCE\*

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**Abstract:** *The article introduces one of the regular outdoor musical events in Prague – the harinam, a procession of Hare Krishna devotees. This event is set in the broader context of music as an integral part of religious rituals and/or holidays. The universal connection of music and spirituality is found in two extreme positions: as culturally determined or as universalistic/objectivistic. One of the traditions that understand spirituality as intrinsically present in music and thus the connection of the sacred and music as objective, is an Indian tradition. Its two basic approaches, that is, the Vedic “Apollonian” concept and the “Dionysian” concept, present in various directions, e.g., Tantrism, are actually present in the Hare Krishna procession. Our attention is drawn to the interpretation of the strikingly culturally specific elements of this “Dionysian” stream. Using Judith Becker’s (2004) concept of trance, the Prague harinam shows itself to be like a culturally conditioned form of universal models of spiritual music.*

**Key words:** *Hare Krishna, mantra, trance, deep listening, ethnomusicology*

This text belongs in the broader context of ethnomusicological research of musics in Prague conducted at the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University. The material of this article derives from the dissertation-in-progress of Veronika Seidlová; she is investigating changes of shapes and functions of Indian mantras between India and the Czech Republic.<sup>1</sup> Our goal, however, is much narrower. We intend to describe two concepts of sacred music which we see in the case of Prague Hare Krishna devotees.

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## Harinam in Prague

It's a warm sunny Wednesday afternoon in April 2011. I am standing on Republic Square (Náměstí republiky) in Prague, the place crowded with tourists blocking my view and I am getting a bit nervous. I have come across Czech Hare Krishnas singing and dancing in their orange and white robes in the Prague Old Town so many times, but now, when I deliberately want to join their regular music procession, I simply cannot find them. From the official website of the Czech Hare Krishna movement I have learned that they start their Nagar-kirtans (devotional singing in the town) every Wednesday and Friday at 4 p.m. from here. Now, it is 4.15 p.m.; I have been waiting here for half an hour and nothing...and this square is so large... Finally, I hear some drumming and see a few orange robes on the corner of the luxurious art-nouveau Municipal House. The little group starts moving and turns around the corner to the street Na Příkopě ... I quickly join the end of the procession made up of two young ladies in colorful saris. I walk with the procession for the first time and do not know the devotees personally, nor do they know me. However, I talked to one of the representatives of the movement about my research and he encouraged me to go and see the harinam (another name for the Hare Krishna Nagar-kirtan) anytime without announcing.

The group walks quite fast, close in twos and threes, playing instruments and dancing while clapping their hands, and nearly all of them with or without instruments chant the Hare Krishna mantra:

“Hare Krishna Hare Krishna  
Krishna Krishna Hare Hare  
Hare Rama Hare Rama  
Rama Rama Hare Hare.”

They keep singing only these words but in many different tunes. The tempo and the melody are changed and set by a leader of the group in a call and response pattern, the leader singing one phrase, the group repeating the whole phrase once again after him. All the melodies are simple, generally in a regular four-beat meter, with a one voice line, easy for people to repeat and even memorize. The group also chants the most typical tune of this mantra, commonly heard in India. (However, Indians usually chant the words in a different sequence: Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare, Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare). The tune goes as follows:



Transcription by Veronika Seidlová, 2011

After a while of observing and participating in the procession, I can count sixteen people altogether. Men exceed women in numbers (twelve to four). Gradually, I also find out that the procession members are more or less lined up according to a certain ideal pattern which might reflect a certain hierarchy. Men and women walk separately, first men, women behind them.

Four men in their 40s and 50s lead the procession. They wear an Indian shirt and dhoti (traditional Indian men's garment, a rectangular piece of unstitched cloth, usually around seven yards long, wrapped around the waist and the legs and knotted at the waist), both of orange color, which is a color traditionally worn by Hindu monks. This traditional Indian outfit is interestingly combined with modern sport shoes, trekking sandals and socks in many colors. All of these men have a particular white marking on their foreheads (tilak) – a sign of Vaishnavas.<sup>2</sup> In appearance, male Vaishnavas – especially the monks – are usually easily recognizable not only by the aforementioned tilak, but also by a specific hairstyle called shikha. This Sanskrit word refers to a long tuft, or lock of hair left on top or on the back of the shaven head.<sup>3</sup> This,

<sup>2</sup> *Vaishnavism* is a tradition of Hinduism, distinguished from other schools by its worship of Vishnu or his associated *Avatars*, principally as Rama and Krishna, as the original and supreme God. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikha>; The Hare Krishna movement founded in 1966 in New York City by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada as part of the broader *Gaudiya Vaishnava* movement founded by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486–1534) in India in the 16th century. Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaudiya\\_Vaishnavism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gaudiya_Vaishnavism).

<sup>3</sup> Though traditionally all male Hindus were required to wear a *shikha*, today it is seen almost only among Hindu celibate monks and temple priests. However, Swami Prabhupada made it a compulsory sign for all the male members of his Hare Krishna movement. He often referred to the *shikha* as a “*flag*,” a term which illustrates the idea that the body is a temple with a flag on top. Srila Prabhupada

in European conditions a quite extravagant hairstyle, is also worn by the four Czech men in orange. From close up, I also notice characteristic small wooden beads on their neck – a third compulsory feature of a Krishna devotee.

The procession of Hare Krishna devotees is one of the very few more-or-less regular occasions when you can listen to live music in the Prague streets. This unusualness, strengthened even more by the clear spirituality of the procession is, for us who are brought up with ideas of enlightenment stressing the importance of the separation of the church (sacral) and the civic (profane) and, thus, the exclusion of the sacred from civic space, very unexpected. Some people even seem wary. Orange robes, partly-shaved men's heads and red marks on the forehead of women, unusual melodies and musical instruments, all of this attracts attention and asks for an explanation.

### Sacred music?<sup>4</sup>

When Bruno Nettl intends to list universals of music (which itself is a cultural universal), already in second place after singing, he writes:

In all societies, music is found in religious ritual – it is almost everywhere a mainstay of sacred ceremonies – leading some scholars to suggest that perhaps music was actually invented for humans to have a special way of communicating with the supernatural. And, too, it seems that, in all cultures, music is used in some sense for transforming ordinary experience – such as producing anything from trance in ritual to edification in a concert. (Nettl 2001: 9)

Without accepting the argument about the origin of music yet, there is no doubt about the dense connection between music and the sacred. For good reasons, we also state its use in the transformation of ordinary experience. It

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felt that the *shikha* hairstyle was an important facet of his Krishna Consciousness movement, indeed a vital facet: “*I have no objection if members of the Society dress like nice American gentlemen; but in all circumstances a devotee cannot avoid tilak, flag on head, and beads on neck. These are essential features of a Vaisnava*.” Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sikha>.

<sup>4</sup> In this text we use the expression “sacred” to designate music which is used for religious occasions in the broadest sense, which means when *existential experience of our relation to anything which transcends individual life* (Sokol 1998: 11) is discussed. Although we do not accept Volek's distinction between sacred music and uses *which became part of liturgical rites* (1998: 24) and spiritual music in a broader sense. This distinction is difficult to apply in other than very petrified religious forms.

seems to us quite possible to connect both features stated separately by Nettl: the omnipresence of music in spiritual rituals and its ability to transform the experience of the time. If we accept Sokol's (2004) idea of roots of religions in holidays and their (collective) celebrations, it is easy. First of all, it seems very probable that here there could also be the origin at least of some kinds of music, perhaps just for the almost exclusive collectivity of music, presuming performers as well as listeners. The ability to organize a collective (dances, liturgy, etc.) is also relevant. Secondly, continuing Sokol's concept, a holiday and its celebration turns its attention from the ordinary and temporary (of this time) toward the transcendental (thus, into different – even time – space). Such a transformation of time is in the very substance of music: its course brings the participant into different time-space through the tempo changes, punctuation of time, etc. One more feature of music corresponds to the celebration of holidays: its impracticality, thus seeming uselessness.<sup>5</sup>

All this – collectivity, special organization of time and impracticality – lies in the anthropological fundamentals of the symbiosis of celebrations (primarily religious) of holidays and music.

## Theoretical reflections

Theoretical reflections of this striking universal symbiosis of music and the sacred lead in various directions. One of them – today undoubtedly prevailing in Western musicology – is summarized by Tomislav Volek (1998), who, however, predominantly uses the material of European Christian churches.<sup>6</sup> He denotes as sacral music used for the liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant services. Its shape evidently differs according to confession as well as time. Volek adopts the basic idea from the Greek musicologist Thra-sybulos Georgiades (1961). According to him, musical features do not make music sacred. Sanctifying is the reason – the function of music, and, more precisely: sanctifying is only “das Weihende,” the sanctifying word. The sacrality of music is thus conditioned by the sacrality of the word.

The second direction in the reflections of sacred music can be called universalistic explanations: music and the sacred coexist symbiotically because

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<sup>5</sup> Some musical styles certainly coordinate, e.g., work activity or movements, but it is not possible to explain the origin of all kinds of music through this function.

<sup>6</sup> Where he tries to generalize, e.g., in the case of Islam (p. 21), he reaches the limits of his understanding and his conclusions are wrong.

their natures are necessarily joined, either because they are directed by the same rules or because they are connected causally. Although today's Western musicology is dominated by the above-described first direction (if such more general problematics are discussed), we cannot miss the second direction either. Its roots are in ancient Pythagorean harmonics: According to Socrates (as quoted in Plato's *Republic*), musical modes are the primary milieu where moderation in clear form rules and so they are basic models for virtues. The chief representative of this direction is Florentine Renaissance humanist Marsilio Ficino (1433-99), in whose thoughts resonate the ideas of Plotinus (3<sup>rd</sup> century), as well as Arab-Islamic theorists, above all Al-Kindi (9<sup>th</sup> century).

The framework of Ficino's thoughts is the idea of the so-called ensouled world, where all subjects produce vibrations. They compose the music of the spheres, the general harmony of the universe which gives power (and, thus, also meaning) to words/sounds of an individual. In the ideal case, music is the expression of this harmony approachable through the senses. Ficino, although a physician, considered the effects of music more powerful than medicine.

For our text, especially interesting is Ficino's work *De Divino Furore [Divine Furor]* (1959), where he is concerned with songs performed in a state of "prophetic furor." According to Ficino, prophetic furor is a state in which heavenly beings rule over a soul, or the soul of a man wanders in ecstasy in supernatural space. The sources of singing in this state are *the similitudes linking heaven and earth* (Tomlinson 1993: 196). More concretely: *magical music allows humans to close, at various points and at will, the circle of similitude which constitutes the universe.* (Sullivan 1997: 4) To concretize Ficino's ideas it is necessary to add that the soul should be molded by liturgy, the disciplined arts (including prayers as well as pictorial and musical practice) (Werner 1984: 7), and only then can the soul, in the state of possession, meet transfiguring images originating in different types of realities.

Ficino had, in the European tradition, many followers such as Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), who – in his summa of modern mathematics, *The Harmony of the Universe* (James 1993) – measures the exact movement of planets, compares the differences in their speeds, and deduces musical intervals<sup>7</sup>. Another of his followers, Isaac Newton (1643–1727), remained convinced all

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<sup>7</sup> Mars, for example, covered a perfect fifth, from C to G, the ratio 3:2, while Saturn sounded out perfect third. All the planets could produce glorious glissandos...as they intoned their way around the orbits, until each planet produced its own song. (Levenson 1994: 112).

his life that *the soul of the world, which propels into movement this body of the universe visible to us, being constructed of ratios which created from themselves a musical concord, must of necessity produce musical sounds...* (James 1993: 167)

The last in the row of European thinkers who will be mentioned here is the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009). According to him, music reveals basic laws (of mind, which are, however, at the same time absolute laws): *music and mythology bring man face to face with potential objects of which only the shadows are actualized, with conscious approximations...of inevitably unconscious truth which follow from them.* (Lévi-Strauss 1983: 17–18) How similar to the ideas of Ficino (whom Lévi-Strauss does not mention, but considers Plotinus, along with Ficino, as his muse). Music uncovers, through the evident, the heavenly order/codes of unconscious truth or *the similitudes linking heaven and earth.*

If this universalistic line of reflection of sacred music is marginal in the European tradition of the last centuries, it is, on the contrary, common in non-European cultures. Surprisingly close to Plato's formulation is the discourse of some classical texts of Chinese Confucianism related to the mutual relation of music and social conditions: *music of an ordered empire is calm; music praises the harmony of its government. The music of a disordered empire is painful and thus expresses the suffering of its people.* (Yu Ti – Diary on Music).<sup>8</sup> Music is thus a sort of microcosm ruled by the same order – the Order of Heaven – as the whole universe.

On the contrary, causal is understood as the relation between the supernatural realm, music and human reality by the North American Blackfoot Indians (like many other North American tribes):

In many Native American cultures, songs are thought to come into existence principally in dreams or visions... Music has supernatural power. In Blackfoot culture, it is the song that, as it were, holds the power. Thus, each act must have its appropriate song. In a ceremony in which a medicine man is trying to influence the weather, he will have a bundle of objects which he opens and displays, but their supernatural power is not activated until the appropriate song is sung. (Nettl 2001b: 262)

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted according to Dvorská 1990.

Both of the abovementioned examples thus represent the universalistic connection of music and the supernatural realm, although, first, it is understood as analogical and, second, as causal.

The undoubted representative of the universalistic line is also the Indian tradition which is so strongly presented on the sidewalks of today's Prague when the Hare Krishna procession walks and dances there. First, Veronika will accompany them on their regular route to the Góvinda restaurant, where their weekly production ends. Afterwards, we will try to lay the fundamentals of understanding what is actually happening in today's Prague streets by short characteristics of traditional Indian understanding of sound.

One of the four men in orange is undisputedly the main leader of the whole procession. While constantly walking fast, he plays an Indian harmonium hanging on a thick belt over his shoulder, the instrument placed in front of his belly. For those who have never seen or played an Indian harmonium – it is a massive wooden box, half a meter long, approx. 30cm wide and almost as tall, where air is pumped inside with the left hand and keys are played with the right one. Although it was given the adjective “portable” when it was brought by the Christian missionaries from France to India during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the missionaries were obviously not expected to play it while walking, for which it is quite heavy (around 10kg, but it can reach up to 17). In India, where it was further developed by Indians in unique ways adjusting to the needs of Indian music and became an inherent part of the Indian sound environment (and especially of Hindu and Sikh devotional group singing), it is mostly played while seated on the floor. I have to admire the physical condition of the Hare Krishna group leader who carries the harmonium for the next two full hours – and he is not only playing, pumping the air and walking at the same time, but is also the leading singer for the whole procession! Enthusiastically, he sings in the portable head-set microphone in front of his mouth and, later on, he even adds little jumps and dance steps.

Another devotee in orange plays the double-headed clay drum mridangam, which hangs on the body in a hand-made cloth case with a belt, the case embroidered with a picture of the black head of the God Jagannath<sup>9</sup>. The third man in orange is playing kartals, the hand-held brass Indian cymbals with a diameter of about twenty centimeters, and the fourth man in orange next to

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<sup>9</sup> Jagannath is considered an aspect of the god Vishnu or his avatar Krishna.

him raises his hands above his head, singing and dancing. Behind them walks a younger member of the movement in a white dhoti and white Indian shirt, also with a shaven head with shikha and with little Gandhi-like glasses. On a belt, he carries a big speaker, wirelessly connected to the singing leader with a microphone. He is followed by two bhaktas, disciples who are not yet full members of the movement. They can be identified by the lock of hair, but their heads are not shaved. One of them wears cargo pants with a plain shirt and plays the mridangam; the other one in ethnic-like cotton pants and shirt claps his hands and sings. Behind them I can see slightly older men who obviously are not members, but supporters of the movement – a man with long blond hair in shorts, who plays the mridangam, a man in cargo pants and an orange cap playing small kartals, then a burly man in his fifties with a smiling and sweating face while singing, and finally a long-haired man with a big backpack, looking like a homeless person. The procession is closed by three younger women and a lady in her fifties, obviously the mother of one of them. All the young ones have long hair in a braid, wear an Indian sari with an unusually long blouse and sneakers. The older lady wears a Panjabi dress (Indian woman's dress made of a longer tunic, trousers and shawl) but without the shawl. All of them chant, clap their hands and walk with special little dance steps in a zigzag manner, two steps to the left, two to right.

Various tourists follow the procession for a while taking pictures, but apart from two curious Japanese girls nobody keeps walking as long as I do. There is actually one more member of the parade, although he is not part of it, neither is he singing or dancing. It is a young Krishna devotee in a cream dress who rotates around offering fresh handmade coconut sweets to the tourists, and to the Czechs he sometimes offers a book with Czech translations of the movement's theology. The offer is followed by a request for a donation.

Leaving the broad pedestrian zone of Na Příkopě, we arrive at a rapid pace at Můstek and dive into the crowd on a narrow walkway that leads up the right side of Wenceslas Square (Václavské náměstí). On one side shop window displays, sausage and tobacco stands on the other, rushing locals and slowly walking tourists. People naturally make way for us, wait till the procession passes while watching it curiously and continuously taking photos – if not with a camera or camcorder then at least with a mobile phone. It is interesting to watch their smiling faces and positive reactions when they are observing the joyously singing and dancing Hare Krishnas – not even once have I seen an upset face nor have I heard comments about having to

make space for the procession. Constantly, we are passing by smiling people, and some of the onlookers, usually youngsters, even start fooling around for a while, screaming euphorically something like: "Holy shit! Let's go with them!" Even a businessman in a suit smacks another one on the shoulder and shouts: "The hell with everything, let's join them, what do you say?" None of them really joins though.

When we reach the top of the Wenceslas Square, we walk around the statue of St. Wenceslas on the horse and go down the other side of the square. The Russian-speaking shopkeepers in Melantrichova Street are coming out of their shops with glass and souvenirs, exchanging looks and greeting gestures with Hare Krishnas as with somebody you see very often.

The Astronomical Clock shows exactly 4.50 p.m. as we arrive at Old Town Square. Crowds of tourists are already waiting here to take a snapshot of the famous moving clock as soon as it strikes five. Something unexpected happens here. The devotees stop walking and start playing on the spot. Then they start going in a circle while dancing with both hands raised above their heads and singing the mantra with even more energy than before. The tempo of the music is getting faster and faster, the sound louder and louder. The tourists bored with waiting watch them curiously. A group of maybe thirty young Italians is standing closest to the Hare Krishnas. A few of them immediately join the circle and start dancing too, being maybe a bit tipsy and showing off. However, within two minutes, almost all of the thirty Italians dance in "snake" like in a disco club and are joined by exultant Englishmen and by some more foreigners, already unidentifiable. Suddenly, a wild mass of maybe sixty people is whirling around! The drummers are crazily banging the drums and the leader of the harinam is now almost shouting the mantra in the microphone, bending backwards as if he didn't have a harmonium but an electric guitar in his hands. The dancing mass seems to go completely wild. The sound is so loud that you cannot hear your own voice, not to speak about the mechanical crowing of the cock on the clock which should perform any minute and which is actually the thing all the tourists are waiting for. The Hare Krishnas seem to be completely carried away. However, their timing is perfect – exactly one minute before the clock strikes five, the drummers give a few last big slow strokes, the leader slowly shouts the last "Hare Krishna!," and the dancers burst out laughing, catching their breath and wiping off sweat from their foreheads. As soon as the spontaneous happening is over, the cock on the Astronomical Clock finally crows, Death starts moving her hand holding the sandglass and the Apostles start appearing

in the little windows. The crowd claps hands and the devotees of Krishna, quietly drumming, set off towards the Charles Bridge...(I must leave them at this moment because I have to attend a compulsory PhD. seminar at the University.)

I join the harinam again the next week. The leader of the procession is the same but some of its members are different. However, the group is as big as last time with the same division of roles, instruments, etc. This week, the weather became unexpectedly chilly, so all the devotees are wrapped up in large woolen shawls and thick fleece sweatshirts. Nevertheless, one could still see them from quite far because, this time, they carry a big dark red velvet banner with golden embroidered words of the Hare Krishna mantra.

They follow the same route and timing as last time and, on Old Town Square at 4.50 p.m., I surprisingly witness exactly the same scene with excited dancing in the circle together with another group of spontaneous young male tourists from Southern Europe. Today, the devotees somehow seem to be even more exultant than last week. Mainly one young man in orange, who carries a heavy wireless speaker on a shoulder strap, is dancing as enthusiastically as if it weighed nothing, and he is almost flying above the ground.

Later, while walking towards the Charles Bridge, this devotee also distributes little leaflet-stickers, advertisements of the oldest ISCKON vegetarian restaurant Góvinda at Palmovka. The leaflet is in Czech and invites us to the singing of mantras, reading from the Vedas and a degustation every Thursday at 6 p.m. Together with a personal invitation for Thursday, I also get from him a little 3cm by 3cm orange paper, printed on one side in English and in Czech on the other. It reads:

“Chant Hare Krishna [...] Rama Rama Hare Hare And be happy! This mantra meditation is an ancient method used to free the mind and soul from the miseries experienced in this material world. Its chanting purifies the heart and leads one to the self-realization and the perfection of human life. [www.Harekrsna.cz](http://www.Harekrsna.cz)”

The man would want to talk to me more, but he forgets that he is also carrying the speaker, so he cannot stay behind. The leaders are already calling him to move forward. We are now passing through Karlova, maybe the busiest medieval street in Prague, and are approaching a little square in front of the Charles Bridge. Here, we have to wait for the lights to cross a road with cars and trams, and it becomes another opportunity to make a little happening with

the waiting people. The next, obviously regular stop is a place under the bridge tower. Here, the stone walls and ceiling amplify the sound of drums so much that the volume becomes both great and almost unbearable to me. The devotees have evidently looked forward to this acoustical effect and clearly enjoy it a lot, their eyes absently shining, faces smiling with even more joy (if it is even possible). The tempo of the music graduates and they are ecstatically banging on the instruments and jumping on the spot or spinning in the circle, fully immersed in the music. It seems to me that they (and mainly the leader) are maybe falling into something like a trance, or an altered state of mind, but the whole thing lasts very shortly, maybe a minute or less...or maybe it just feels short, because just watching them, it unwillingly gives me goose bumps and even tears in my eyes, and I get a bit lost. The Hare Krishna girls are waving to me to join them dancing, but I just cannot stop watching the leader. Before I find myself "back," it is over and they have already started walking back via the same street to Old Town Square.

Interestingly, the second stop on the Square today does not cause the same effect as the first one. I suppose this is because it is 5.30 p.m. and, therefore, there are not enough bored tourists waiting for the Astronomical Clock. Nevertheless, the Hare Krishnas seem to enjoy the harinam more and more, just playing for themselves. By now, they have been intensively playing, singing and dancing while walking for one full hour and a half without even a little break, some of them carrying heavy instruments – and they do not seem to be tired at all, but on the contrary.

In Celetná Street, the procession again attracts some young people, who walk with us up to the Powder Tower and in front of the Municipal House, where the devotees stop and play on the spot for a few minutes. It is 5.45 p.m. and the harinam finishes with the last few strong strokes on the drums and a wild improvisation on the harmonium, while shouting: "Hare Krishna!" Then they quickly pack things in a car with coordinated experienced movements and are ready to move to the nearby Góvinda restaurant (run by the Czech ISCKON) in Soukenická Street, where a program for the public starts at 6 p.m. I am immediately approached by the girls, who warmly invite me to the event. So I walk there with them while chatting. I tell them about my fieldwork on mantra singing in the Czech Lands, and I am told that the Hare Krishna mantra is the best because it purifies the heart of all who listen to it, and that is why this kirtan (public devotional chanting) is done. I also learn about the harinam leader: he is 59 years old (which I cannot believe, because he looks at

least twenty years younger), he has a rock band, and he has been leading the Prague harinams for last thirteen years.

By the time we reach the tearoom of the vegetarian restaurant, there are already about ten people waiting for the program to start. Another ten people join later. The harinam leader is already there, setting a microphone on a low stage. Then, while sitting with crossed legs, he plays and sings together with a drummer and a kartal player for one more hour, with the public answering in a call and response pattern. The repertory contains not only the Hare Krishna mantras, but also devotional songs about Krishna. The public consist of both the official devotees and friends of the movement. People are sitting on low chairs, singing and clapping their hands. No dancing or going “wild”... The performance is followed by a lecture from the Bhagavad Gita and by a Prasadam – a vegetarian Indian dinner free or paid for on a donation basis. The whole event finishes slightly after 9 p.m.

## Sacred sounds of India

For an understanding of what is actually happening during a Prague *harinam*, let us turn our attention to traditional<sup>10</sup> Indian understanding of sound and word. In Indian cosmology, the importance of sound is so fundamental that some researchers use, for this fact, Sonic theology<sup>11</sup>. For the explanation of this concept, they usually go back to the oldest Vedic text – Rigveda. In it the term *Vak* appears; two of its several meanings are relevant for us: (a) speech generally and (b) the goddess Vak as the revealing Word. In Rigveda and Atharva-Veda there is a hymn to the goddess Vak:

I am the one who says, by myself, what gives joy to gods and men. Whom I love I make awesome; I make him a sage, a wise man, a Brahman. (8) I am the one who blows like the wind, embracing all creatures. Beyond the sky, beyond the earth, so much have I become in my greatness. (Beck 1993: 29)

The terminological merge of speech and its godly personification reveal a lot: among other things, the emphasis of aural and oral aspects language,

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<sup>10</sup> We dare to use this rather vague expression because we present more detailed historical data; at the same time, it is clear that the discussed phenomena are transmitted, although partly transformed.

<sup>11</sup> See Beck 1993, and, consequently, Burchett 2010.

its ability to communicate with the sacred realm and also its understanding as a principle of productive energy. The goddess Vak was later identified with the developing concept of Brahman, the Absolute<sup>12</sup>. This concept of language as a powerful sacred (active) sound also penetrates further Brahman literature.

The basic term of Sonic theology is the term *mantra*. Its nature is already clearly understandable from its etymology: the Sanskrit root *man* (= to think) is connected with the instrumental ending *tra*, expressing that mantras are instruments, bearers (in the sense of agent) of ideas or – as Burchett suggests – *an instrument of producing (a special kind of) thought*. (2010: 813)

As one of the shortest descriptions of mantra, it is possible to use that of Beck: *A mantra is a chant formula of words and syllables in the Sanskrit language* (1993: 31) with Burchett's addition that *they may constitute a single syllable or an entire hymn; they may convey clear semantic meanings or they may appear completely nonsensical*.<sup>13</sup> (2010: 813) Nevertheless, we will come closer to an understanding of the concept through the respected characteristics of Gonda, who tries not only to catch the emic conceptions, but also the later development from Vedas to Hinduism and Tantrism:

*A Mantra* is a word believed to be of “superhuman origin,” received, fashioned and spoken by inspired “seers,” poets and reciters in order to invoke divine power(s) and especially conceived as a means of creating, conveying, concentrating and realizing intentional and efficient thoughts, and of coming in touch with or identifying oneself with the essence of divinity which is present in the mantra. (Gonda 1963: 255)

It is also possible to approach mantras from a different angle: through an ancient Indian concept of language. Sanskrit words are not considered simple symbols of reality, thus arbitrary labels on reality (a concept common in Western linguistics) but as *sound forms of objects, actions and attributes, relating to the corresponding reality in the same way as the visual forms* (Hopkins 1971: 20), and differing from them only by the medium of perception. This relation

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<sup>12</sup> The goddess Vak became identified with the evolving concept of Brahman (vag vai Brahman), the power of speech in the Vedic ritual, such that the earliest meaning of the word Brahman [which is the later, Upanisadic term for the Absolute; Beck. 8] is a “sacred word” or “sacred formula” (Rg-Veda 10.125) and, thus, by extension the Veda in general.” (Beck 1993: 29).

<sup>13</sup> Burchett writes about uses of mantras for several reasons: besides transcendental, also for very secular reasons.

of word (signifier) and signified is the intrinsic relation of the word to reality and thus a powerful instrument of influence. In mantras, thus, two influential means merge: the sound itself of a pronounced word capable of invoking *divine powers* (that is why it is necessary to care about correct pronunciation) and the word as a manifestation of reality with which it is possible to manipulate.

Later on, we will discuss several categories of mantras, but for all of them it is true, as Jan Gonda writes, that they are perceived as *not products of discursive thoughts, human wisdom or poetic phantasy, but flash-lights of eternal truth, seen by those eminent men who have come into supersensuous contact with the Unseen*. (1963: 247)

One more note is appropriate here; it follows the concept of sound as an “objective” communicator with the sacred realm and is related to music. The sound of music is of the same music and, thus, of the same power. That is why, in Indian musical theory (it is difficult to distinguish here music aesthetics and music psychology) the concept of *ragas* has developed as an objectified collection of rules of how to shape a musical performance. The concept of *ragas* has a universalistic nature similar to the ideas connected with the effects of words and sounds, which means it did not take into consideration the individual and cultural biography of the listener. It is wedged into the broader (*rasa*) theory<sup>14</sup>. Keeping the rules of *ragas*, one of eight fundamental mental states or forms of consciousness (*rasa*) is supposed to be established, and also the harmonization of the spiritual and concrete physical environment. The *raga* rules determine in which mode (ladder) the music is performed as well as which tones are more important than other ones, the way of melodic ornamentation is prescribed and also the time in which the musical performance should take place (most often it is a three-hour interval in the 24-hour day cycle, but in some cases, e.g., the rainy season).

One could expect that, in our discussion of mantra singing in the Prague streets, we will pay more attention to Indian music theory. However, this is not necessary because this complex theory is targeted primarily to the style which we would most likely describe as art music; the simple melodies of mantras do not provide enough material for it.

The fundament for our understanding of the Prague *harinam* is, thus, the Indian concept of mantras. It combines the power of sound (strengthened by

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<sup>14</sup> For more details, see Becker 2004.

singing) as sound invoking “divine powers,” and the power of the word which has an immediate relation to reality and which can therefore manipulate with it. We will try to approach a little closer through the categorization of mantras and an understanding of the context of these categories. In our opinion, we come closer not only to Indian and Prague reality, but also to two universal modes of sacred music.

In the following text we will discuss two different concepts of mantras in the sacred context<sup>15</sup>: as a part of Vedic sacrificial ritual or as part of religious practice of Tantric Vaishnavism or, more specifically, the *Bhakti* movement.

In the Vedic sacrificial ritual *yajna*, mantras, together with sacrificial fire, are the constitutive elements of the ritual. For the ritual, its connection is fundamental: Howard (2000: 238) even describes the correspondence of the arrangement of stones in the sacrificial altar and mantras which were sung during the placement of the stones. Mantras are agents of sacrifice. Even before the beginning of any ritual event, it was necessary to recite sacred sounds, mantras. *If ritual acts and ceremonies are to be performed successfully the consecratory word is an indispensable requirement* (Gonda, note 26). In this sense, the ritual function of mantras is close to functions of “songs” in the rituals of North American Indians. If the ritual is successful, the right song should be sung and, actually, it is the song which makes the ritual successful<sup>16</sup>.

It was, indeed, the objectivity of the effects of the sacred sounds which necessitated a maximally perfect performance. It was done by Brahmans, members of the highest Indian caste. They orally transmitted and transmit the way of performance of ritual, either in families or schools/tradition to which they belong. Every school developed its own support system for memorizing long texts which would be recited and also for avoiding mistakes in performance<sup>17</sup>. The second security element of the proper functioning of the sacrificial ritual is a written version with markings indicating the way of performance<sup>18</sup>. Each of the four Vedic texts uses different forms of markings. (Marginally: various schools differ in their interpretation of the same performance markings.)

While performing mantras in the framework of Vedic ritual, the emotional involvement of an individual is not considered decisive (the effectiveness

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<sup>15</sup> According to the subject of our article, we do not discuss the private use of mantras for secular needs, although even this use has a certain supernatural dimension.

<sup>16</sup> Nettl 1989: 128 ff.

<sup>17</sup> For more details, see Howard 2000.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

of a ritual is necessitated by keeping complicated rules), in the framework of the *Bhakti* movement<sup>19</sup>, in which inner involvement and striking emotionality are fundamental features, the approach to their performance is, in many aspects, the opposite. If the Czech Hare Krishna devotees call their mantra chanting during regular processions through Prague *kirtans*, they are referring exactly to the Bhakti movement, the egalitarian ideas of which were broadly attractive (understandably in India, strictly divided according to castes). They still seem to be attractive, not only in India, but in the West, too. The Hare Krishna movement is proof of it.

In the narrower sense, the term *kirtan* designates a form in which strophe and refrain alter. More often, however, *kirtan* has a broader meaning: it is devotional singing by which a soloist and a choir alternate in a responsorial way<sup>20</sup>. The Bengali saint Chaitanya (1486–1534) is usually called the originator of *kirtan* singing. He is also considered the founder of the *Gaudiya Vaishnava* movement, of which Hare Krishna is a part. The above-mentioned emotionality and inner involvement have their expression in the way of singing. Contrary to many Hinduistic directions, modest in their singing of mantras, *Chaitanya and his followers proclaimed that the loud singing of God's name(s) was more effective in the requisition of salvation, since [it] is more expressive and thus conducive of the kind of Bhakti [devotion] sentiments required for the highest spiritual experience, namely, love of God.* (Beck 1993: 201)

We can consider two of the described modes of mantra use and their contexts as two different ways of an approach to the sacred as well as two different approaches to reality in general: one is through a maximum of discipline and exactness, the other through intensive inner involvement, emotionality and spontaneity. Our main attention is focused on the Prague *harinam*; we will confront it with the abovementioned Indian theoretical models. Before that, however, we will introduce its other phase: a video which is available on the Internet and by which the Prague Hare Krishna group presents itself. Thus the video can be considered an emic voice of the Prague Hare Krishna devotees.

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<sup>19</sup> Sanskrit. term referring to religious devotion in Hinduism, understood as active involvement of a devotee in divine worship. The term is used within the Vaishnava monotheistic branch of Hinduism, referring to the love felt by the worshipper towards the personal God. Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhakti> (26. 7. 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Jackson 2000: 265.

## Harinam through its own eyes

*Harinam in Prague*<sup>21</sup> is a 24-minutes-long movie about the Hare Krishna music procession in Prague, freely downloadable from Google in the Google video section. Harinam means a music procession, a public chanting of the name (-nam) of the God Hari, e.g. Krishna. The video captures the procession of the Krishna devotees in the freezing cold evening streets in the center of Prague. In a few flashbacks, it also shows the devotees preparing themselves for the parade in the outskirts of the town and their journey by public transportation.

The subtitles say that the movie was shot and directed in 2007 by a certain "bh. Ezequiel." The mysterious shortcut "bh." obviously means "bhakta" – a Krishna devotee who has not been initiated yet and therefore has not received a full new name with a suffix -das (servant). After an extensive search I find out that the filmmaker comes from Spain, was 28 when he made the movie, and became a professional filmmaker with experience in advertisements. That all makes sense because Ezequiel made his movie about *Harinam in Prague* in such a way that it seems like an advertisement for the Hare Krishna movement. What is really interesting about the movie is the way he does it.

Ezequiel's short movie resembles a computer action game. This is achieved by skillful fast cuts, the camera, and mainly by unexpectedly different music. The movie doesn't start with an obligatory Indian sound and chanting of a Hare Krishna mantra, but surprisingly with a remix of electronic music of The Prodigy, whose music was used in *The Matrix* – the iconic sci-fi action film!

For those who haven't seen the movie yet: *The Matrix* is a science fiction action film written and directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski. It was first released in 1999 and became the first installment in the famous *Matrix* series of films, comic books, video games, and animation. The film depicts a future in which reality as perceived by most humans is actually a simulated reality created by sentient machines to pacify and subdue the human population, while their bodies' heat and electrical activity is used as an energy source. Upon learning this, computer programmer "Neo" is drawn into a rebellion against the machines, involving other people who have been freed from the "dream world" and into reality. The film contains many references to the cyberpunk and hacker subcultures and to philosophical and religious ideas such as Hinduism (the concept of Maya or "illusion" in Advaita Vedanta philosophy),

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<sup>21</sup> <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=-8096811527582997164#>.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Descartes' evil genius, the Judeo-Christian idea of Messianism; Gnosticism, Buddhism, mystics of Kung-Fu and Occultism, etc. Specifically, it draws on Jean Baudrillard's book *Simulacra and Simulation*, which is even featured in the *Matrix* film and was required reading for the actors. (However, Baudrillard commented that *The Matrix* misunderstands and distorts his work.) In Postmodern discourse, interpretations of *The Matrix* often reference Baudrillard's philosophy to demonstrate that the movie is an allegory for contemporary experience in a heavily commercialized, media-driven society, especially of the developed countries.<sup>22</sup>

Ezequiel clearly draws on the abovementioned ideas and the aesthetics of *The Matrix* movie. At the beginning, he introduces the streets of Prague – through a red camera filter, he shows an old homeless man on the street on a dark, cold night. The atmosphere of mystery, horror, tension and a certain aggressive, hostile depression is evoked by a film symphonic music – fast string and wind instruments quickly take turns and get even faster and louder in contrast to dramatically slow motion shots of walking “lost” freezing people, of blindfolding lights and neon signs of the metropolis, of fast foods and casinos. All this is followed by a short, blurred slow motion shot of a few men with drums and a red banner with a Hare Krishna mantra. Then the camera turns back to the abandoned homeless beggar. We hear a creaking sound of electronics and the crazy cacophony grows stronger and stronger, but suddenly it breaks with the sound of a jet plane just taking off. A pure white quotation without any further comments appears on an empty black screen:

“In this age of quarrel and hypocrisy the only means of deliverance is chanting the holy name of the Lord. There is no other way. There is no other way. There is no other way.” Chaitanya Caritamrta Adi 17.21.

While we are reading the quotation, we hear a few arhythmic confused dull strokes. In a few seconds, again a high dramatic sound of a jet plane rising fast. As soon as the sound of the jet becomes unbearable, suddenly comes a fast cut – and we hear rumbling rhythmic electronic music full of deep bass sounds, something that I myself would call tribal techno.

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<sup>22</sup> Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Matrix](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Matrix) and <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/mclemee/mclemee135> and Meinhold, Roman (2009). *Being in The Matrix: An Example of Cinematic Education in Philosophy*. Prajna Vihara. Journal of Philosophy and Religion. Bangkok, Assumption University. Vol.10., No.1–2, pp. 235–252 ISSN 1513-6442, available at <http://www.roman-meinhold.com/matrix.pdf>.

As the credits reveal at the end of the movie, the music is by a Hare Krishna devotee who is also a DJ, Jaya Sacinandana Dasa. My colleagues Peter Balog and Veronika Avellaneda Svobodová pointed out that the music was clearly inspired by or directly remixed from music of The Prodigy used in the *Matrix* film. The Prodigy is an English electronic dance music group which achieved mainstream popularity in the 1990s and 2000s (over 25 million records sold worldwide.) They make use of various styles ranging from rave, hardcore techno, industrial and breakbeat in the early 1990s to electronic rock with punk vocal elements in later times.<sup>23</sup> And actually I find similar electronic music in one of the fight scenes of *The Matrix* where the warriors fly in the air in slow motion as in a computer game.

Again as in *The Matrix*, there is a slow motion shot in Ezequiel's movie capturing the parade of energetic young men in a white or orange Indian thin cloth "skirt" (dhoti), drumming in the streets of Prague – they resemble fighters or action movie heroes. Bundled up in sweatshirts and caps, they proudly carry the Hare Krishna banner and dance. They jump in the same rhythm; some of them have their gloved hands raised above their heads. Farther behind them, we can see cheerful Hare Krishna women in long skirts, as well as ordinary people from the street. Electronic music is complemented by regular shouts of men as kind of tribal inspiration.

Then the pictures purposely start moving fast, in scattered shots. In a fast spinning sequence, we see a man waving from the car, the harinam leader with a portable microphone, another devotee with an amplifier on his back which looks like a little do-it-yourself mobile techno sound system, a drunken young Rom yelling "Hare Krishna!" then once again we see the leader who is the main vocalist and a harmonium player at the same time with the instrument strapped to himself – he is bending backwards in ecstasy, in a pose like a rock star with a harmonium instead of an electric guitar – and finally comes a shot of how the Hare Krishna boys jump together under "the horse" on Wenceslas Square – from a distance it seems like a Masai ritual. The aesthetics of *The Matrix* (or of some older computer graphics) are then once again recalled with a green flashing cursor writing the exact dates on the screen: "Prague, meeting time 16:30, temperature -10." Electronic music also resounds when the Ezequiel's film shows young men preparing themselves for the harinam – how they iron their dhotis ("skirts"), how they store in the boot of the car

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<sup>23</sup> The current members include Liam Howlett (composer/keyboards), Keith Flint (dancer/vocalist) and Maxim (MC/vocalist). Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Prodigy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Prodigy).

their portable amplifiers and megaphones as if they were going to a techno march, and how they vigorously run together to the subway. The camera captures their joyous faces and their behavior as decisive and active.

For a little while, the movie also shows short random interviews with people on the streets of Prague asking questions about the movement and showing people's positive reactions towards it. However, the camera soon returns to the Hare Krishna men. Instead of the electronic music, we now hear their own music with drums, harmonium, cymbals and exultant loud singing, which, as evening and the cold progress, is becoming more and more ecstatic.

Their music, at least its rhythm and tempo, the repetitiveness and the base sound, now does not seem so different from techno anymore. With the graduating tempo the ecstasy progresses, and for some short moments, some of the men seem to be even passing into a trance. As Veronika Avellaneda Svobodová remarks, this is mainly visible at minutes 9' and 20' of the movie when the tempo of the kirtan (common public chanting) gets faster and reaches a value of bpm (beats per minute) similar to genres of electronic music, e.g. techno or psytrance (120–150 bpm depending on the subgenre). In these moments, the devotees are evidently specifically excited, collectively carried away, which fades out after the song is over.<sup>24</sup>

In the final part of the Ezequiel's movie as if it blurred what is reality and what is dream... More and more rejoicing people from the street join the parade, until there is just one big orgasmic party that celebrates Krishna. The film *Harinam in Prague* ends with breathing-out and calming down also symbolized by the sound of the air emitted from the harmonium, as when one shuts the accordion, and the camera finally shows a misty, tired but happy and knowing smile of the leading singer saying good-bye with the Hare Krishna statement "Hari, Hari bol"<sup>25</sup>.

In Veronika's excellent description of the video, there are a lot of important observations. Most important for us is the relation of the connection to the film *The Matrix* (and here, thus, to the Hinduistic image of the world as Maya, an illusion) and *techno* music. We are sure that precisely this style is not here for the simple reason of its use in the film *The Matrix*, because of the director's taste or because of the effort to attract *techno* fans. On the contrary, the connection seems to be much deeper.

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<sup>24</sup> E-mail conversation with Veronika Avellaneda Svobodová from 3rd of July 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Vaguely translated as "Lord, Lord, speak."

## Music and trance

As Peter Balog (2009) argues the main value creating the *techno* subculture<sup>26</sup> is the concept of otherness as differentiated from the surroundings. Above all, the complex musical language is used for this purpose for which fast tempo, repetitiveness, electronic sound, continuousness and loudness with physical response are characteristic. Besides the stimuli of musical language, the feeling of otherness is also created by visual components, uninterrupted movement and also often chemical stimulants (drugs). In the most concentrated form, all of these elements are present in psytrance<sup>27</sup>, musical (and subcultural) style, where the otherness also has a more concentrated form, the form of general ecstasy<sup>28</sup>, escape, trance<sup>29</sup>. Escape from the place or its new experience (psytrance events usually happen in isolated and visually especially suitable places)<sup>30</sup> and, of course, ecstasy from the usually experienced sound toward altered experience of reality<sup>31</sup>. Blissfully smiling, dancing Krishna devotees certainly experience outside reality differently from Praguers and tourists who are standing around.

The connection of trance with sacred music is nothing new: Muslim Sufis, participants in Bali ritual *Barong*, as well as Pentecostal Christians fall into trances. We are, however, along with Rouget (1985) and Becker (2004) convinced that there is not “one trance,” but that there is a culturally determined event, in a certain way, learned behavior<sup>32</sup>, which is bound to its own

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<sup>26</sup> We use the expression “subculture” because it is common; Balog preferred the term “counter-culture.”

<sup>27</sup> Psytrance belongs in the group of psychedelic (strongly affecting the psyche) music which appeared in the '60s and attempted to imitate the mind-altering experience of use of drugs, mainly LSD.

<sup>28</sup> From the ancient Greek ekstasis (I displace). (1) intense pleasure. (2) state of emotion so intense that a person is carried beyond rational thought and self control. (3) a trance, frenzy, or rapture associated with mystic or prophetic exaltation. Source: <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/ecstasy>

<sup>29</sup> In this text we use the expressions “trance” and “altered state of consciousness” as synonyms.

<sup>30</sup> The meaning of the place is conceptualized by insiders in the term “setting,” which is understood as a Genus Loci of a given place and the general atmosphere of the environment. In the correlation with the individual mood of the person – “set” – it basically influences the psychedelic experience. See Avellaneda 2010: 28.

<sup>31</sup> Psytrance belongs in the realm of electronic dance music. The above-mentioned repetitiveness, in psytrance usually several rhythmic lines, leads toward trance. The experience of ecstasy is supported, e.g., by the use of various electronically modulated sounds, which stimulate listeners' fantasy on the iconic principle (Avellaneda 2010: 35 ff.)

<sup>32</sup> For more details about the way and degree of “teaching,” see Becker 2004: 45 ff.

category created in previously created religious narrative, often taught by respectful elders. This behavior is accompanied by physical reactions caused by stimulation of *specific brain areas that results in physical reactions such as crying, or rhythmical swaying or horripilation* (Becker 2004: 29). Even more important is the fact that trance causes strong emotions, mainly joy, and many trancers quote the experience of high arousal, a feeling of loss of oneself and a connection with the whole, a feeling of closeness to the sacred, of cosmic wholeness out of time and space. At the same time, however, trance is nurtured by similar emotions and feelings (in other words: it needs them for its emergence).

One more question appears: Which kind of music “belongs to trance” or “causes a trance”? At the same time, however, we cannot ignore the fact that music of the Sufis and American Pentecostal Christians differs substantially. In this context, Becker speaks (using the term and concept of Bourdieu) about the *habitus of listening*. (Becker 2004: 699 ff.) Thus it depends on the way we learn to listen to music and what we expect of it. A trance is stimulated by such a kind of music which is supposed to do so. Some common features, however, could be found. The main one is a certain dynamic intensity connected, on one hand, with expected emotional intensity and causing, on the other hand, appropriate neural stimulation. Similarly, faster tempo and a certain metro-rhythmical regularity/repetitiveness are expected, which could provide sufficient time-space for the emergence of a trance.

To summarize: Only anyone who faces a trance as culturally accepted (perhaps even appreciated) behavior, who is emotionally sufficiently excited, who longs for a transcendental experience and who is taught to listen to music to lead him into a trance could experience it.

This is exactly the case of Prague Krishna devotees: they long for transcendental experience (above all, they are God’s devotees) and for joyful emotion (during their Prague procession as well as in their video presentation, their broad smiles are striking) and for escape from this world of illusions (in the video, pictures of urban “misery,” a begger, a casino...keep returning). And the *techno* style is, for many of them, connected with the film *The Matrix* or, more likely, with the *techno* subculture to which perhaps some of them recently belonged and which is built on the feeling of otherness/ecstasy, escape.

In the Prague procession three lines merge. The first is the singing of Indian mantras, those *flash-lights of eternal truth*, which ascertain contact with the

Unseen, in Prague streets not as sophisticated instruments of Vedic ritual but, in the concept of the Bengali saint Chaitanya, proclaiming obedience and *the loud singing of God's name(s)*. The second line is the concept of trance as escape from this illusory, ephemeral world, ecstasy bringing those emotional and transcendental experiences. The third one is today's Prague Krishna devotees; mantras are (as *techno* music could be, for some of them), the right medium for bringing them, through its sound shape and extra-musical context, into the sought-after spiritual reality.

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