

Trever Hagen

Living in the Merry Ghetto: The Music and Politics of the Czech Underground

Oxford University Press, 2019

The book *Living in the Merry Ghetto: The Music and Politics of the Czech Underground* seems to be the culmination of Hagen's publishing activities related to the Czech "underground" and especially to the music ensemble The Plastic People of the Universe. Prior to this work, the Czech underground and its association with the anti-communist political opposition was already explored by Skilling (1980). Afterwards, several English-language academic popular music studies on rock and underground music during state socialism in the Eastern bloc appeared in the 1990s (Ramet 1990; Ryback 1990; Mitchell 1992). The Czech underground as a style of music and as a socio-cultural phenomenon associated with the anti-communist state opposition has probably become one of the most salient topics of Czech music history and of late socialism in Czechoslovakia, and it has also reached a broader international audience. In light of this, several detailed works by the former underground representatives themselves have been recently published in Czech by the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, Academia, as well as by a few other publishers in the Czech Republic (Stárek and Kudrna 2017; Kudrna 2018).

In his book, which is very well-structured and reads smoothly, sociologist Trever Hagen successfully follows up on an established body of previous research published in both Czech and in English, as

he enriches it with the perspective of music sociology. His study therefore examines music as a key element "in" and "as" society, as well as treating music as a key component in producing social relations. In this way, Hagen greatly exemplifies Simon Frith's argument that "making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them" (Frith 1996, 111). Drawing from the example of the Czech underground community, the author aims to demonstrate how an intergenerational and socially heterogeneous group of people in the period from the 1950s to 1980s communed together through music, and how, in this regard, their "communing" was aesthetically mediated. To do so, Hagen aptly uses the concept of "cultural ecology" (in chapter one), introduced by the music sociologist Tia DeNora (2000) and the music psychologist Eric F. Clarke (2005), which can be understood as "the various places, venues, props, narratives, people, bodies, and symbols that come to be connected together using music (as bridging material) to create a space from which to understand the world and act upon it" (3). Hagen regards underground musicking in socialist Czechoslovakia as a cultural resource that was appropriated by its practitioners to furnish a particular "cultural ecology" and sustain a particular way of life. At the same time, the underground "cultural ecology" of the "second" (or "non-official") culture allowed for the rejection and substitution of perceived noxious, oppressive, and unwanted practices associated with the "first", or "official", culture. Thus, both the musical and non-musical activities of the representatives of the "second culture" served not as an intentional form of political opposition,

a direct action, or a protest against the communist regime, but rather as a strategy of “resistance-as-immunity”. Referring to works by the musicologist and psychologist Even Ruud (2013), Hagen shows how, in this way, music was used to alleviate and protect against “unhealthy” social environments, as it served as kind of “cultural immunogen” (17–18). Furthermore, Hagen reveals how Czech underground music functioned as an aesthetically mediated community activity and as a learned way of togetherness that helped reject the threatening cultural forces.

Concerning methodology, Hagen’s publication draws on ethnographic research, including participant observation and interviews. In addition, it is also enriched by an analysis of archival data from the Security Services Archive, deposited in Prague’s Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes. The author’s ethnographic approach is subsequently also reflected in the book’s writing style: while almost all the chapters deal with past events, they are simultaneously also accompanied with ethnographic glimpses into more or less contemporary musical events in the 1990s and 2000s. In turn, these events directly refer to the pre-1989 Czech underground activities in their programme and audience. Hagen, for example, personally witnessed the festival *U Skaláka – Magorovo Vydří at Meziříčko* (in existence since 1989), as well as several other events. Furthermore, he also conducted interviews with the most salient personalities of the Czech underground scene and with some academics writing about it (e.g. with the editor and translator Martin Machovec). Moreover, the most cited figure in the book is František Stárek (quoted in seven interviews from

2008 to 2011), the former underground musician and editor-in-chief of the 1980s samizdat periodical *Vokno*, and co-author of the recent Czech television documentary, *Fenomén underground*. Stárek, who is also a current employee of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, seems to be one of the author’s main gatekeepers to the underground community.

However, it is a pity that the story lacks the perspective of the female underground community members, as well as some viewpoints from non-musicians and “ordinary” underground sympathisers who were “mere participants”, not chief performers and intellectual leaders. Instead, the latter are of the most interest to Hagen. Although the underground formed a community with a strong internal solidarity and achieved recognition within the anti-regime political opposition, it did not, however, as Hagen argues, receive wider public support in the 1980s. One may therefore ask what kind of issues could be possibly revealed by incorporating some more extensive biographical narratives with the “key”, as well as the more “ordinary”, underground sympathisers? It is necessary to mention here that the underground movement in Czechoslovakia attracted people of various family, social, class, educational, and occupational backgrounds. Therefore, it would be important to learn who were in fact the underground sympathisers? What were the differences, as well as commonalities, within the scene?

In the remaining part of this review, I highlight the author’s main points that are developed in particular chapters. From the perspective of the Czech reader, who might already be familiar with the locally published “underground” scholarship, Hagen tends to summarise and refashion

some known data. Nevertheless, his contribution is a new interpretation of these known facts, including the presentation and analysis of interviews with some important witnesses, contributing the micro-historical perspective of directly involved actors to the work. Additionally, the interviewees evidently are also aware of the fact that they are telling their stories to a foreign scholar.

Chapter Two provides an introduction to the historical background of the Czech underground and its precursors, which can be traced back to the works of the Group 42 artists, the poetry of Egon Bondy, and the concepts of “total” realism and “non-artistry” (*neuměleckost*) (25–30). Since the 1960s, Czechoslovakia experienced the spread of rock ‘n’ roll music, the establishment of the local *bigbít* scene, and the successive development of an alternative cultural infrastructure based on the non-official self-distribution of texts (*samizdat*) or audio recordings (*magnitizdat*). Foreign radio broadcasts also played an especially important role in terms of distribution, providing the main opportunity for the informal musical learning of the new sounds coming from the West. In this way, music and other locally unavailable Western products were adopted through their imitation, as well as through the transformation and adjustment of local commodities and cultural artefacts to this Western influence (e.g. the local drink Kofola as an imitation of Coca-Cola; 31–36). In this way, Hagen argues, both the sound of The Velvet Underground, as well as the creativity of the Czech group Aktuál (established by artist and performer Milan Knížák), became the musical reference for The Plastic People of the Universe (aka The

Plastics). This reference includes Aktuál’s concept of anti-musicality and “destroyed sounds”, and Czech lyrics, together with the performance of the absurd. Moreover, the Plastics began their musical journey by also incorporating more Western influences: a psychedelic rock ‘n’ roll sound, elaborate stage performances featuring pyrotechnic props, English lyrics, and costumes. However, Hagen claims that other local bands, such as The Primitives Group, were engaged in more than the musical imitation of Western sounds and ideas because their performances created an atmosphere of freedom that was otherwise unavailable in Czechoslovakia. These proto-underground bands represented the first model of a “cultural ecology” – a community which consisted of something more than a mere encounter between musicians and their audience. They represented a network of mutually cooperating people with a unique aesthetic approach and a particular way of life.

In chapters three and four, Hagen’s book then examines how the Czech underground community was assembled within the conditions of the 1970s domestic cultural policy of so-called “normalisation”. This included state censorship and the strategy of excluding those musicians whose lyrics and musical style were regarded by the Czechoslovak state establishment as non-conformist and suspect. In this regard, all musicians who intended to perform legally had to pass obligatory requalification exams, including a test of musical theoretical and practical skills, as well as demonstrating a knowledge of basic Marxism-Leninism principles. So, it was the governmental strategic obstacles which pushed the 1970s non-conformist

musicians into the underground. Moreover, these restrictions also affected their aesthetic, moving it towards a clearer expression of a raw and dark sound, created in opposition to the nice and optimistic ethos of the state's cultural preferences: in this way, musicians intended to produce music that intentionally challenged the official aesthetics. This was also the case with The Plastic People of the Universe, who refused to accept the state's requirements, and so they lost their "official" status of musicians. The band then started playing a distinctively different music repertoire than in the 1960s. For instance, they performed with long messy hair, and without make-up, costumes, or fire stage effects.

Furthermore, organisational approaches, including settings, also changed due to the different socio-political climate of the 1970s. In this time, organisers started organising musical events increasingly outside of Prague in the villages and towns of Czechoslovakia, developing the strategy of organising non-official and illegal performances distanced from the centres of Czechoslovakian public life. These concerts – particularly the three "Festivals of Second Culture" – were arranged by Ivan Martin Jirous as part of wedding celebrations, as they could otherwise not gain the status of legal concerts. The need for self-protection and togetherness became more apparent when the State Security authorities (STB) started to haunt underground community sympathisers, who in turn travelled far to organise and hear the music. In this context, Hagen shows how the Czech underground "cultural ecology" concentrated on the area of the ethnically cleansed and thus depopulated region of northwest Bohemia, what was formerly Sudetenland. This region,

strongly marginalised from the 1950s, experienced a genocide during WWII and the subsequent post-war deportation of the German population by the Czechoslovak state. Especially because of the persecution of the underground community by the STB in the mid-1970s, the community decisively closed and developed a strategy of "cocooning". Thus, underground sympathisers established their own secluded "cultural ecology", which they referred to as the "Merry Ghetto" (76). They regarded it as their own secure space for self-realisation, a "parallel place where one could be a different self than was available in the official culture" (75). They thus produced "a form of social and cultural immunity to unwanted pollutants" (151). Contrary to some other countercultures, they emphasised distinct emotional and cognitive skills such as joy, merriness, collective spontaneity, creativity, trust, solidarity, and fellowship, rather than the "no future" dispositions of the punk culture which was emerging at that time in the West.

Drawing from Czechoslovak non-official culture and musicking in the 1970s and 1980s, the author then presents the development of a form of "aesthetic resistance" to "the sea of mental poverty" (92) and to the production of the late socialist state's official culture in chapters five and six. To demonstrate the concrete features of this "aesthetic resistance", Hagen presents further characteristics of local underground musical practices, and their aesthetic and cultural conceptualisations based on antithetic notions to the official aesthetic commitments of the communist regime. For underground sympathisers, this "stubbornness" became a fundamental moral expression, featuring the rejection

of values and objects identified with the official state establishment. This approach encompassed various strategies of rejecting the norms: the concept of “truth to self”, primitive “non-musicality” (such as the performances by the bands Hever a Vaselina, Umělá hmota, or Aktuál), and playing “with spirit” (79–89). Besides the isolated and now consciously politicised underground community (in the sense of its direct identification with the Czech dissident movement), Hagen also presents a broader non-official culture and musicking in socialist Czechoslovakia, which encompassed various “alternative” musicians, musicians living in the so called “grey-zone” (among them, also “folk” musicians), the activities of the Jazz Section and the festival Prague Jazz Days, and the Brno Scene in the years 1982–84. Special clusters, such as Radotín High School nearby Prague, attended by the children of dissidents, also emerged in the 1980s. In addition, a more punk-oriented “second generation” of the undergrounders was born in the 1980s (e.g. the band *Psí vojáci*), and the Merry Ghetto provided them with an “agency sustaining habitat” (127).

As Hagen argues, the concept of “truth to self” also resonated with regional dissident movements in the wider region of East Central Europe and with their “anti-politics” or “non-political politics” principles. In this way, Czech underground music therefore also became associated with the Czechoslovak dissident movement. This also increased the *cause célèbre* position of the Plastics, offering them new distribution opportunities and further recognition abroad. While live performances were nearly impossible for the Plastics in the 1980s, their legend continued on in

the recordings, through which they were described as the “truth-bearers” and exemplars of all independent activity to new generations. Here, Hagen mentions an important fact: those recordings that were smuggled from Czechoslovakia and produced in the West became recontextualised musical works, delivered to consumer groups that their authors were not originally intending to reach.

As music sociologist Anna Szemere shows with Hungarian examples, many underground cultures and countercultures from the ex-socialist states experienced an identity crisis after the fall of communism. Hagen argues that this is not the case with the Czech underground scene. As the title and contents of Hagen’s penultimate chapter, “Underground Is Life”, indicate, the Czech underground is still uniquely present. The book’s conclusions therefore outline a brief analysis of the underground “renaissance” or “afterlife” after 1989 and up to the present. In chapters seven and eight, Hagen aims to show how the “afterlife” of the underground practices from the past “bear their weight in the present”. Former dissidents and musicians who started to perform illegally in the 1970s now play at festivals such as *Magorovo Vydří* or *U Skaláka* – events intending to enact an underground ethos that continues to this day. As the author points out, the Plastics’ performances have, for instance, also appeared at commemorative ceremonies dedicated to the persecution of the underground movement during the communist era. Quoting Václav Havel, Hagen refers to the current recognition of the 1970s underground members’ activities as those of former “invisible workers of the opposition”, who – among others – shaped the

process of building democratic conditions in the 1990s. Very important facts regarding the processes of cultural memory, nostalgia, and remembering are then just briefly mentioned: first, the Plastics appear at various events as a “memory-object” (148), as an instrument of collective remembering. Second, key “undergrounders” of the 1970s are present as “witnesses” of the communist era and act as mediators, helping to construct knowledge about past realities. Because of the book’s wider historical scope, the author does not make an in-depth analysis of the different modes of contemporary perceptions and remembrances of the Czech underground and its current recognition as an important topic of Czech history in the second half of the 20th century.

In sum, Hagen’s book on the one hand presents a basic and brief outline of the Czech underground for international readers who do not know much about Czechoslovakia and its cultural production in the 1970s and 1980s. On the other hand, his work is not intended as a mere contribution to the historical study of music and resistance within the former Eastern bloc, nor does it only tell the story of the most famous underground band, The Plastic People of the Universe. Hagen’s publication instead provides a relevant musical sociology perspective to the phenomena. With this approach, Hagen manages to demonstrate the broader significance of the Czech underground phenomenon, representing it not only from the perspective of the concept of “resistance”. By describing the uses of music primarily as a social force, Hagen’s book challenges the usual notion of the Czech underground as an explicit representative of the opposition to the Czech anti-communist state. Moreover, the

usage and development of some of the main concepts in this book (e.g. cultural ecology, cultural immunogen) is Hagen’s key contribution to the scholarship of music, making the book a very worthy read.

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Frigyesi, Judit Nirán
Writing on Water. The Sounds
of Jewish Prayer

Budapest: Central European
 University Press, 2018

When we enter Prague's Old-New Synagogue on a Saturday morning, for example, a special, heterophonic soundscape opens up to our ears. We will be surprised even more, if we have already heard sound recordings of *hazzanim* – virtuoso synagogue singers. However, the records of their vocal art would represent only a fraction, a condensed glimpse of a multi-layered musical culture as a lived experience, the tip of an iceberg facing the outside world, the main part of which is audible as a whole only in a live setting, inside the synagogue. The musical performance of the ritual, which lasts over three hours on a Saturday morning, for example, is always a little different in sound, unrepeatable. Although seemingly bound by ritual rules and the traditional Jewish musical system, variability and improvisation play a significant role in it. To some extent, it is also shaped by chance, but its conditions are precisely defined. Ethnomusicologist Judit Nirán Frigyesi, who has been studying the liturgical music of East Ashkenazi Jews for more than four decades, even compares it to an “avant-garde” noise-music or aleatoric music (2002, 143–44). But how is it possible to write meaningfully about such music practice (or about any, for that matter)? In her last book, *Writing on Water. The Sounds of Jewish Prayer* (for an earlier Hungarian version of the book, see Nirán 2014), Nirán Frigyesi shows us how this

can be achieved. For instance, already in the first chapter, we can find the first of the countless examples of such writing:

Budapest, 1976. I take my place of sacred isolation, the only woman and the only non-believer in the empty women's section of a secret Jewish prayer house. Soon, prayer will descend on me through the arabesque of white lace. And so I will remain: close to them, flying with the gestures of their souls, while tied to the earth by the loneliness of my alien existence. It begins slowly, almost unnoticeably. Speaking dissolves into a melodious noise and, like flecks of shimmer from the end of the world congeal in beams, the scattered words melt into chanting. I observe them as though this were a film. The morning prayer is like a flight of birds. Little muted cries fly off their lips and whirl about in all directions, and the sing song fragments braid themselves into solid vibration. I listen to the sounds as if they were music and as if music were a peregrination, a fairytale, a caressing hand, glitter and gleam of a trickling stream – ancient, transparent and legendary. Suddenly, a chill runs down my spine. It is as if a door, behind which a memory previously unknown and unrecognized lay hidden, had been flung open, their prayer and me – I, here, among them [...] I needed a few days to come to my senses. Even with a calm mind, I had to admit that I had never heard a sound more mysterious – and yet casual – than the sound of that prayer house (12–15).

Judit Nirán Frigyesi – a musicologist, ethnomusicologist, writer, associate professor at Bar Ilan and Tel Aviv Universities, whose research focuses on 19th and 20th century music and literature, the music of Béla Bartók, ritual musics outside of the European tradition, and especially the prayer chant of Ashkenazi Jews, is known

as one of the icons of Jewish music studies. Her recent book brings us back to the very beginnings of her music-ethnography research in 1970s Hungary, grounded in stories about the forming moments of her academic journey. However, ethnomusicology is only one of the facets of her life imbued with creativity, while flitting between Tel Aviv, Budapest and New York. Frigyesi's artistic works include short stories, poems, photographs and photomontages, film and multi-media. This book, which, for her, is ultimately "an attempt to grasp the meaning of sound in prayer" (v), is a product of her diverse creative expressions. Although the text is full of "thick descriptions" of music practices and original interpretations of the elusive soundscapes of the secret and semi-secret traditional Budapest Jewish *shuls* (prayer rooms), the outcome is a multi-faceted reflexive narrative – a very poetic and contemplative ethnographic memoir.

As anthropologist Paul Stoller argues (2007, 182), memoirs are something that many anthropologists may want to pursue at some point on their path, because as a genre, they can extend substantially the readership for ethnographic literature. Nevertheless, Stoller also remarks that memoir is generally a slippery slope, as the text might become "a tedious exercise in solipsism" (ibid.) On the contrary, Nirán Frigyesi's story is undoubtedly original and captivating. She endeavours to make sense of the knowledge of the sounding prayer embodied by her field consultants – mostly male Orthodox Jews, all of them holocaust survivors, who have been trying to become invisible in the niches of the communist-era Hungary. The book in this sense reveals a social world, hidden or publicly unspoken

of, where sound, orality, and melodic flexibility are of crucial cultural value as religious ideals (see also Frigyesi 2001). The author describes her initial exploration and eventual immersion in this world characterised by silent sounds, indirect references and clues.

Yet what had initially started as an "innocent" research on the prayer chant's melodic structure, soon revealed the darker layers of the social reality of the Jewish minority in communist-era Hungary. The political regime's official antipathy toward religion, especially the Jewish one, becomes palpable through the fragments of recorded interviews, when the informants whispered that their places might have been bugged. On rare occasions, the author even brought her tape recorder to the prayer rooms to record full services. However, her endeavor quickly turned out to be not only ethically challenging, but even personally dangerous: it was well known that in some of the Jewish community centers, "there was no lack of undercover police" (43), and she was surrounded by people (friends and members of synagogues) who were directly threatened by the police. The author also describes a complicated situation in the book, when her elder informant encouraged her to record his interview during the Shabbat (therefore omitting a religious prohibition) in one of the community buildings, but then, he hid the switched-off recorder in a closet before the members had arrived for an afternoon communal meal. That evening, she has been secretly threatened by another member of the community, accusing her of being a spy (59). Another time, she was given "recommendations" to emigrate (193–4). She eventually left the

country in 1980, together with her research partner, who had meanwhile become her husband. The act of emigration not only cut her off from her family, friends, teachers, and informants, but it also forcefully impacted the much more subtle, deeply personal processes running underneath – coping with trauma and negotiating her own identity. From a personal perspective, the author describes the suffering of the children of the holocaust survivors, being haunted by the tragedy from the family's past, which has been generally buried in a heavy silence, and pierced with occasional indirect comments about “those who did not come back”.

Throughout the book, it becomes obvious that the field research that Niran Frigyesi was consigned to as a young student at the Budapest Academy of Music by Benjamin Rajeczky (more or less coincidentally because of a grant from an ethnomusicologist from behind the “iron curtain”, Alexander Ringer, and with an initial comparative research problem which turned out to be non-functional) eventually changed her life. At first, this represented only an interesting research topic for her, which no one in Hungary had dealt with so far. As she has not talked about her Jewishness at the Academy, she kept wondering why was it just she and the only other Jewish colleague at the musicology department who were given this research task by the institute. How could they have known? Nevertheless, the task triggered her reflections on her ambiguity towards her own “tribe”:

It was easy to call them “religious” (while I am secular) and “uneducated people from some backward village” (while I am

an intellectual from the capital)... I tried to focus on my task and make myself believe that it was a purely scholarly undertaking: the ethnographer collects strange melodies and customs. But wearing the costume of the ethnographer among men who could have been my grandfathers, I began to feel ridiculous. It was not only the silent beauty of their religion – sounds of a life of withdrawal – that shook me, but the sudden intimacy with thoughts and attitudes so different from mine (33).

As she attended the services, recorded the singing of old men and memories of the pre-war Jewish world, which in their eyes had been lost forever, she was not only probing the issue of “participation” in her participant-observation method of research, but also gradually finding through them her own way to Jewishness, including its religious dimension:

It is not true that witnessing the life of others makes you more experienced. When you peek through the keyhole, catching a glance that betrays a faith you do not share, all that remains is confusion of the heart. Placing your body next to theirs does not mean that you are with them. You have to open the wounds and slip inside through the torn surface of your life. You must gulp down your sorrows and your nights, until your eyes open to see them (xxv).

And it seems that this is also why, when she emigrated from Hungary by train to Paris, she carried in her suitcase, instead of personal belongings, the cassette tapes with the singing of men she would never meet again.

What can be of special interest to the Czech public regarding this story is the fact that among those cassette tapes, there

were also her unique field recordings from the Old-New Synagogue in Prague and the recorded musical memories of its cantor, Viktor Feuerlicht (1919, Mukachevo – 2003, Prague), of his occasional deputy, Miki Roth (1908, Mukachevo – 2000, Prague), and of a few others, which she made during her two short field trips in the late 1970s. As there is a dearth of sound recordings of cantors from the Czech lands, the field recordings by Judit Nirán Frigyesi (which are currently published on the website of the National Library of Israel) belong to a very few published exceptions (for more, see Seidlová and Knapp 2008). As the book also contains ethnographic details from her field trips to Prague and fragments of the transcribed interviews with local cantors, the book presents a treasure for the researchers of Jewish music from this area, because it includes the very first published ethnomusicological first-hand accounts of Jewish religious music practices during communism in Czechoslovakia, especially from the harsh 1970s.

Although it is important to emphasise the great ethnographic value of Judit Nirán Frigyesi's book, the reader should be advised not to expect "only" a music-ethnography with an autobiographic value. At times, the book turns into a series of prose poems, deliberately leaving out the academic disciplinary constraints or genre expectations, such as in the case of the poem "It's a Tape," written "in the memory of those who did not come back": "ashen trails on magnetic tape / scars on the face of remembrance / a systematized, complete and collected / opus magnum..." (56).

On the one hand, this form of representation directly connects to the trauma mentioned above, which is known to bring

specific vulnerabilities in the lives of survivors and their descendants (see Shmotkin et al. 2011). On the other, it reflects the "crisis of representation" and related experimental ways of writing which circulate in anthropology since the late 1980s. As Nirán Frigyesi explains in the preface:

Many of us suffer from the demand of scholarship to clarify what is not possible to clarify and to systematize what is not possible to systematize. I collapsed under the weight of this demand. I began to feel that by sticking to the rules of scholarly writing, I betrayed the people who entrusted me with their music, culture, thoughts and philosophy. My scholarly writing failed to transmit what was most important to the practitioners of these rituals: the poetics in the sound of prayer (vi).

Giving voice to the actors, self-reflexive writing, and the blurring of genres in ethnographic writing are some of the solutions advocated by many anthropologists as the cures addressing the crisis of representation. Nirán Frigyesi's book fully embraces this idea, as it also incorporates poetic imagination and poetic prose blending in poems about her field experiences. What I appreciate the most are not only the beautiful verbal descriptions of seemingly "ugly" voices (see Frigyesi 2007) and "messy" music practices, therefore conveying in a unique way that what really matters to Frigyesi's informants – the poetics of the Eastern-Ashkenazi prayer chant, but also the passages which convey the *poetics of researching* such music, or of ethnomusicological research in general. That a research practice, which ultimately is about personal relationships with people who at some point may cease to be

“informants” while becoming part of the researcher’s life, can even enter researcher’s dreams with vivid and vibrant sounds.

The fascinating textual mosaic of the book is thoughtfully intertwined with the author’s enigmatic black-and-white photographs. While focusing on the imponderabilia of everyday (Jewish) life among the decaying buildings of 1970s Budapest, the images metaphorically communicate the meanings in Niran Frigyesi’s work, highlighting its gentle, intimate and somewhat mystical feeling. As such, the book is a sort of a play of different types of unrivaled verbal and visual representations. I have to admit that for me, personally, it represents the single most important title on Jewish music I have ever read, and a reminder of why I actually practice ethnomusicology in the first place.

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Maria Sonevytsky ***Wild Music: Sound and*** ***Sovereignty in Ukraine***

Wesleyan University Press, 2019

Maria Sonevytsky’s book *Wild Music: Sound and Sovereignty in Ukraine* is a distinguished achievement of contemporary ethnomusicological scholarship. It deals ethnographically with various Ukrainian “ethno-music” (*etno-muzyka*) phenomena that can be considered *borderline*, not only in their geographic and cultural designation (Hutsul and Crimean Tatar), but also in their conceptual and political characterization. Namely, Sonevytsky is predominantly interested in analysing the ambiguous terrain that exists in the space between concepts and orientations such as nationalism/anti-nationalism, exoticization/empowerment, femininity/feminism, apolitical/political, rural/urban, pro-Russian/pro-European, and

East/West. She therefore follows Alexei Yurchak's maxim to "refuse all reductionist diagnoses of the current situation, whichever side they come from" (72), and in this way refrains from succumbing to any simplistic binary interpretations, which too often take a leading position in both popular and academic discourses. Instead, Sonevytsky offers a nuanced and multidimensional glimpse into the complexities and contradictions of the Ukrainian cultural and political landscape of the last two decades, which she analyses through the lenses of various musical and "sounding" phenomena. The result is both ethnographically rich and theoretically compelling, and exceedingly timely and relevant in its thematic and conceptual delineation.

Maria Sonevytsky, a Ukrainian-American scholar with a PhD in ethnomusicology from Columbia University, and now an assistant professor at the University of California, Berkeley, scrutinizes in her book a variety of musical examples from Ukraine that are in one way or another related to West Ukrainian Hutsul, rural Ukrainian, or Crimean Tatar people, identities, and sounds: music performances at protests (Orange Revolution, Maidan Revolution), songs and performances from the Eurovision Song Contest, festival performances (ArtPole, Dreamland), radio soundings (Radio Meydan from Crimea), the Voice of the Nation (Holos kraïny) singing competition, the Ukrainian *aventyka* movement, and singers and artists such as Ruslana, Dakha Daughters, DakhaBrakha, Oleksij Zajets, Suzanna Karpenko, Jamala, and DJ Bebek. Sonevytsky's main goal in bringing all these disparate examples into

one book is to discuss the interrelatedness of two concepts crucial for understanding the current Ukrainian political situation, which are also two common denominators of all the given examples listed above: Wildness discourse and the notion of political sovereignty.

With Wildness, Sonevytsky refers to practices of exoticization and stereotyping in music and performance that represent Ukraine or its constituent people (Hutsuls, Crimean Tatars, rural Ukrainians, or Ukrainians in general) as exotic, wild, uncivilized. However, these same exoticizing and self-exoticizing tropes are often also used by various Ukrainian musicians as tools for self-empowerment (i.e., Wildness refashioned as local epistemology), but in a way, as Sonevytsky argues, that does not neatly or inherently resolve the problematic aspects of such approaches. The author of the book in this way ties the notion of Wildness to the concept of political sovereignty, as it is often through practices of musical and artistic (self-) exoticization that many Ukrainian musicians construct and imagine new cultural and political alliances, and new political possibilities that could potentially liberate Ukraine from its problems and failures. Sonevytsky herself articulates these goals in the following way:

My aim in this book has been to center various local Ukrainian epistemologies through various iterations of "wild music", to witness how Ukrainian musicians and audiences strategically remediate tropes of exoticism in order to imagine the future of sovereignty in Ukraine. Wildness rebels against the constraints – both musical and political – imposed on it, but is nonetheless articulated within these constraints,

at times at the risk of reinscribing forms of essentialism, exoticism, or nationalism. Unable to break its frame, Wildness nonetheless consistently operates as a technology of escape, as a future-orientated promise that might finally release an imperilled state such as Ukraine from the “colonial matrix of power” that situates it on the perpetual limen of either the authoritarian East or the liberal democratic West (177).

In the main chapters of the book, Sonevytsky analyses multiple manifestations and uses of “wild music”, as she attempts to interpret them through various overlapping and sometimes conflicting – mainly local and occasionally non-local – perspectives gathered through ethnographic research. In this way, she is able to unearth multiple layers of signification behind each specific instance of “wild music” – a method reminiscent of Geertz’s thick description (1973), but which she actually calls “interpretive moves” (borrowed from Steven Feld, 1984), an approach particularly suited to analysing musical texts and performances. In this way, she compares and juxtaposes statements by musicians, managers, festival organizers, radio owners, journalists, music audiences, Western commentators, Ukrainian ethnomusicology students, villagers, urban cosmopolitans, and intellectual elites, all of them coming from various regions, classes, ethnicities, genders, and religions. In addition, Sonevytsky skilfully interweaves most of the chapters with rich and telling ethnographic vignettes that bestow the whole book with a sense of grounded and experiential immediacy, and in this way they successfully tie theory with practice.

Sonevytsky’s principal chapters, where she elaborates most succinctly and compellingly on the issues of Wildness and sovereignty, are Chapters One through Four. In Chapter One, the author examines Ukrainian ethno-pop star Ruslana, and her diverse uses of Hutsul sounds and images in music videos at different points in her career. Sonevytsky in this way demonstrates the singer’s move away from her early ethno-nationalist leanings (“Znaiu Ya,” or “I Know”), through her auto-exoticism phase (“Wild Dances”), and finally to her eco-activist stage of “pragmatic patriotism” (“Wild Energy”). Sonevytsky argues in this way about Ruslana’s potentially empowering and supposedly non-binary (pro-EU/pro-Russian) expressive strategies (although the non-binary part is not among the strongest arguments in the book), while she simultaneously critiques Ruslana’s (self-)exoticizing and self-eroticizing gestures. Particularly valuable in this chapter are the author’s interviews with Hutsul villagers, who comment on Ruslana’s representations of them as “wild” people, many feeling “shame” in this regard, but some also “pride” (44–48).

Sonevytsky proceeds in Chapter Two to a discussion of Ukrainian “freak cabaret” group Dakh Daughters, and their uses of Hutsul sounds and narratives in their 2013 Maidan performance in Kyiv. The author’s rich textual and ethnographic analysis in this chapter deftly demonstrates that the group’s incorporation of Hutsul elements as sounds and images of Wildness and sovereignty cannot be pinned down to simplistic and binary interpretations of Dakh Daughters’s music and performance. For example, some of their members stated they imagine Ukraine’s future

not in binary terms, as either Western or Russian, but as something else (60). Furthermore, the chapter also offers an important and multi-layered examination of the status and role of political art in a post-socialist and revolutionary context, as it shows how Dakh Daughter's videos and performances from before until after the Maidan Revolution advanced from "a privileged stance of political ambivalence to a position of ambivalence as political conviction" (82).

Chapter Three then moves away from the examination of Hutsul sounds (in Chapters One and Two) as sounds of Wildness and sovereignty to a deliberation in this regard of Ukrainian rural vocal timbres, as presented in the Voice of the Nation (Holos kraïny) competition / TV reality show (for example, by singers Oleksij Zajets and Suzanna Karpenko). These "wild" timbres, often described by their practitioners as sounds of "bloating goats", and "on the border of yelling", and nourished through the Ukrainian *avtentyka* movement, are usually rejected from the competition, and therefore from being the "voice of the nation", but their failure, as Sonevytsky argues, is a productive one. With their performances of rural sovereignty, singers like Zajets and Karpenko establish a critique of a restricted model of the "nation" as advocated through these kinds of competitions and TV shows, and call for a more heterogeneous and inclusive one that would give space to disenfranchised rural voices. It would be relevant in this regard, if the author would also show how much space these kinds of rural voices and constituencies are allocated in a broader Ukrainian media space (national and private), and therefore how

well incorporated or marginalized they are in general (because the Voice of the Nation competition is mainly dedicated to pop, and not to *ethno-muzyka* or *avtentyka* performers, who might instead find more welcoming space in some other Ukrainian TV or radio shows).

Chapter Four switches to yet another marginalized and minority group, Crimean Tatars, and to their sounds of Wildness and sovereignty. This chapter also brings a nuanced and multidimensional discussion of layers of meaning behind the concept of "Eastern" sounds, which Crimean Tatar musicians and radio personnel often use in their self-designation, and are often simultaneously read as either "validating" or "intrusive" by different actors in the Crimean public space. Moreover, the "Eastern" designation can similarly often connote (self-)exoticizing or threatening "wildness". By analysing different "Eastern" sounds and public soundings coming from the Crimean Tatar Radio Meydan (which existed until 2015), or through the music of singer Jamala or DJ Bebek, the author astutely shows how the trope of "Eastern" can signify a multiplicity of intersecting meanings: exotic otherness, counterpublicness, indigenous sovereignty, sonorous capitalism, and/or aesthetic cosmopolitanism. Sonevytsky extends the analysis of the Crimean Tatar sound sovereignties and Crimean Tatar-Ukrainian music solidarities also to most of the other chapters in the book (Introduction, Chapter Two, Chapter Five, and Conclusion). This also corroborates her main arguments about the future of Ukrainian sovereignty, which should be based on heterogeneous civic publics (a point to which I will return at the end of the review). Chapter Five,

about the Ukrainian “ethno-chaos” group DakhaBrakha, is the least engaging chapter, as it offers very thin and monologic textual and cultural interpretations, without giving much attention to the ethnographic multiplicity of local meanings that are otherwise so well elucidated in previous chapters.

Nevertheless, the book as a whole makes an important contribution to the contemporary ethnomusicological scholarship, and it does so in many senses: ethnographically, theoretically, topically. Moreover, it provides a compelling examination of the current Ukrainian cultural and political situation, as well as the related questions of nationalism, patriotism, imperialism, and the role of minority and marginalized groups in the shaping of the future Ukrainian sovereignty. The only issue that could further solidify Sonevtsky’s main arguments in the book would be a discussion of other important Ukrainian minorities and their music and cultural expressions (e.g., Russian ethnic and language groups, Roma people), which would – together with Hutsul, rural, and Crimean Tatar constituencies – probably be pivotal for any deliberation of a viable Ukrainian civic state.

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Susanna Trnka
Traversing: Embodied Lifeworlds in the Czech Republic

Cornell University Press, 2020

Traversing: Embodied Lifeworlds in the Czech Republic is the title of the recently published book written by an anthropologist Susanna Trnka (of Czech origin, currently based in New Zealand). This impressive monograph provides the reader with fresh, and for many, also unexpected, perspectives to contemporary Czech society as well as to Czech history, with a focus on the construction of national identity. *Traversing* is based on thirty years of anthropological/ethnographic research in the Czech Republic (and the former Czechoslovakia). Moreover, Trnka’s overall theoretical approach in the book is interdisciplinary. She masterfully combines anthropological knowledge with philosophy. This makes her work genuinely exceptional, and her book is a significant contribution to both disciplines.

As the title suggests, the key concept that Trnka’s book introduces is “traversing” – “ways of seeing, experiencing, and moving through the world and the kinds of persons we become through them” (3). Trnka coins the term “traversing” to expand on the philosophical thought of Martin Heidegger and Jan Patočka, and to thus emphasise and examine embodiment as crucial to our understanding of being-in-the-world. In particular, Trnka pays attention to three movements that we make as embodied actors in the world: (1) how we move through time and space, (2) how we move toward and away from one another, and, finally, (3) how we move

toward ourselves and the earth we live on (3). In her own words:

Traversing foregrounds human independence and interdependence, agency and creativity. It posits culture, history, and technology in terms of how they shape us in terms of how we traverse through life, and in turn examines how our movements act to create culture, recast history, and engage with, or disavow, technology. Asserting the dynamism of any given society and any given life, it highlights how we move through life, just as life moves through and around us, necessitating that we never stay in exactly the same place and time but must continually navigate our “thrownness” or situatedness in a specific historical moment (4).

The concept of traversing, which is to a large extent formed by phenomenological philosophy, is nevertheless explored through admirably copious ethnographic data and through an analysis of “key moments” that occur across many Czech lives spanning various generations. This in-depth intertwining of anthropology and phenomenological philosophy enables Trnka to discuss topics such as “truth” and the “meaning of life”, which somewhat extend beyond the possibilities of anthropological interpretation. Moreover, the theoretical and methodological framework that Trnka utilises does not lead to cultural generalisation; on the contrary, it acknowledges the very individual and particular agencies of distinct social actors in contemporary Czech society. As part of her critical and reflexive anthropological approach, Trnka does not forget to frequently reflect on her own position (of a semi-native anthropologist) in the field. Her in-depth cultural knowledge of the

most intimate Czech lifeworlds, based on thirty years of anthropological fieldwork in various parts of the Czech Republic, is hugely impressive.

The book is structured into an introduction, conclusion and five main chapters. In Chapter One, titled “Footsteps Through the City: Social Justice in its Multiplicity”, Trnka contextualises the idea of being and feeling Czech as well as the construction of Czech national identity in relation to history and space. She takes the reader on a tour to the capital city of Prague with a focus on the celebrations of 28 September (St Wenceslas Day), but she also detours to Ostrava (a town known for its metallurgical industry and environmental pollution) and to the south Bohemian town of Český Krumlov (which she does not represent through the usual lens of tourism, but in terms of the “unspoken” histories of the local German, Jewish, and Roma inhabitants).

Chapter Two, “Digital Dwelling: The Everyday Freedoms of Technology Use”, discusses the notion of space and a sense of belonging in the 21st century in relation to technological developments and its impact on the social lives of individual actors. Trnka not only highlights the limitations and dangers of the uses of technology (emphasised also in Heidegger’s late philosophy), but also shows how new technologies, namely the internet, can serve as a site of personal freedom and as an expression of one’s agency. Last but not least, the second chapter offers important theoretical contributions to the understanding of the idea of how the notion of “space” (in the temporal, geographical, and social sense) is shaped and expanded by the employment of 21st century digital technologies.

In Chapter Three, “Ballroom Dance and Other Technologies of Sexuality and Desire”, Trnka explores the embodiment of the ballroom dance as an important social ritual for acquiring gender-normative relations amongst Czech teenagers while also focusing on heteronormativity, and the embodied and symbolic masculine dominance in such acts. Nevertheless, Trnka shows that the “worlds” of both men and women are closely intertwined, and that the gender divisions in the Czech lifeworlds are constantly negotiated in the economic realities and labour demands of the post-socialist period. Next, Chapter Four, “New Europeans: Twenty-First-Century Families as Sites for Self-Realisation”, depicts the shifting partnership arrangements under the new socio-economic realities and expectations. In this part of the book, Trnka also skillfully explores the idea of family life as a site of self-realisation, particularly through the case of Czech women and their relation to motherhood, as she places the whole discussion within the context of Patočka’s emphasis on interrelationality and the mother-child relationship as a primary form of interaction with the world. “Making Moods: Food and Drink as Collective Acts of Sustenance, Pleasure, and Dissolution” is the title of Chapter Five. This section offers interesting insight into the Czech foodways and drinking habits, including alcohol consumption. Trnka shows how food and drink are used as powerful social mediators for producing and managing specific moods, namely those of pleasure and extraordinary temporality (in Patočka’s terms, they are grounded in the mundane activities of the first and second movement, but simultaneously also enable the third movement towards

“truth”/self-transcendence). However, both food and drink (especially alcohol) is a “double-edged sword” and, thus, in this chapter, Trnka reveals how she was encouraged to overeat until feeling sick or how the line grows thin between the joys of alcohol consumption and alcoholism. In Trnka’s argument, the employment of food and drink as technologies of pleasure enable the production of a space for the enjoyment of the mundane and for the simultaneous momentary transcendence of it, and to “traverse across its boundaries to acknowledge our place in something much greater” (169).

In the last chapter, “Reconnection: Between the Power Lines and the Stars”, which constitutes the conclusion of the book, Trnka seriously takes up the suggestions by the three philosophers Heidegger, Patočka, and Kohák that we need to rethink the use of new technologies in our daily lives, to be aware of both its dangers and possibilities, as well as their insistence for us to reconnect with nature, from which the new technologies are dividing us. Nature, according to the aforementioned philosophers, as well as to Trnka’s ethnographic observations, plays a crucial role in our being-in-the-world, and we as humans need to both actively experience it and thoughtfully rethink our place within it. In practice, this can take a form of vacations at weekend cottages (so-called *chatas*), going to summer camps, or “tramping” within Czech lifeworlds. As Trnka says in her own words at the very end of her book:

Traversing is our way both of navigating our thrownness and of trying to surpass it, however fleetingly. Embracing nature – however historically, culturally, and technologically mediated that “nature” is

– is one possible route toward reconnection and toward grasping a glimpse of what lies both beyond and within the quotidian tasks and worries that often largely structure our everyday existence. So too, potentially, is embracing a lover, caring for a child, or converting a garden party into an Event that reconstitutes our sense of space and time. Each of these acts holds within it the possibility of enabling us to transcend the ordinary, just long enough to see where it is that we are actually (momentarily) standing. What we come back with enables us to live as thoughtfully as we can, amid both the power lines and the stars (188–189).

To conclude, Trnka’s book is not only theoretically innovative and inspiring, but also pleasurable to read. The writing is well-organised, explanations are clear, and the theory is properly backed by numerous ethnographic vignettes that further illustrate

the particularities of the phenomena being discussed in relation to the everyday lives of various social actors. In the book, Trnka “harvests the fruit” of her long-term research, which I believe will become a crucial postmodern anthropological and philosophical work of great importance, helping us to better understand the particularities of Czech lifeworlds. However, the theoretical remarks expanding on phenomenology and on embodiment can be easily applied or tested also in other cultures and countries of the world. Thus, the book can be heartily recommended not only to all Czech anthropologists and philosophers, but also to anyone with a deep interest in a human’s way of being-in-the-world.

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