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## **Popular Music on the Radio in the Communist and Post-Communist Era**

—The Issue of Continuity and Discontinuity Drawing  
on the Example of the Czech Situation<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

The following text focuses on the issue of the transformation of the radio presentation of popular music in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic during the post-communist transition. Through selected phenomena, the text specifically discusses and compares the role of popular music in the broadcasts of the state-owned Czechoslovak Radio and subsequently in the programming of the first Czech private radio stations of the 1990s. The aim of the text is to show the extent to which the emerging private broadcasting of the early post-communist era reflected the long-standing traditions of the radio presentation of popular music, dating back to the first half of the 1920s, when regular radio broadcasting began in Czechoslovakia, and then especially to the 1960s, when modern pop music entered fully into the programming of the monopoly state radio. In this sense, the text considers the issue of periodisation of the development of radio broadcasting in the early post-communist period, or rather the question of the extent to which the fall of communism in

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1989 marked a real revolution in the radio presentation of popular music, and whether the fundamental changes took place only later under the influence of the consolidation of the principles of the market economy.

### Czechoslovak Radio before 1989

Regular radio broadcasting from one of the first European stations began in Czechoslovakia on 18 May 1923 through the company Radiojournal s. r. o., in which the Czechoslovak state held a majority share for most of its existence.<sup>2</sup> From the beginning, the public broadcasting was linked to the awareness of the new medium's social responsibility. In this sense, radio was perceived as an important tool of enlightenment that would raise the cultural standards and education of the masses.<sup>3</sup> In the field of music, which has always formed a dominant part of radio broadcasting,<sup>4</sup> the educational concept envisaged that the new medium would provide the general public with access to “good music”, such as the opera and concert hall genres.<sup>5</sup> In the context of the interwar development of the market economy and the music business, however, this concept gradually came into the conflict with the requirements of listeners and their demand for entertainment, specifically through popular and light music.<sup>6</sup> A similar conflict between the radio management's ideas and the demands of the public, and their understanding of what constituted “high artistic quality” and “cheap entertainment”, occurred during the restoration of the market economy after 1989, as will be discussed later.

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<sup>2</sup> See Anna PATZAKOVÁ, *Prvních deset let československého rozhlasu* (Prague: Radiojournal, 1935).

<sup>3</sup> Eva JEŠUTOVÁ et al., *Od mikrofonu k posluchačům: z osmi desetiletí českého rozhlasu* (Prague: Český rozhlas, 2003), 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. In the interwar period, radio divided music into three categories: classical, popular, and light music. The proportions of broadcasts of the various genres (not only music) in the 1930s (in the rough indicator of thousands of minutes) were as follows: opera (2.7), operetta (1.0), classical music (16.1), light music (30.4), dance music (3.7); for verbal genres: dramas (1.1), comedies (1.9), sketches, literature, etc. (0.9); for news: sports and current affairs (2.0), press releases (4.9), humanities topics (2.9), science topics (1.9), social topics (6.7), foreign language lessons (0.9). JEŠUTOVÁ, *Od mikrofonu k posluchačům*, 100.

After the Second World War, the influence of radio continued to grow, the number of concessionaires increased<sup>7</sup> and so did the rate of letter responses. A major milestone was reached in 1948, a year marked by the rise to power of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, after which the radio was nationalised and its broadcasting became an important instrument of state cultural policy. However, both the original dominant position of music in the programme<sup>8</sup> as well as its educational concept, with the emphasis on the promotion of “artistic values”, remained the same. This approach continued in the post-war period in the spirit of the statement by Mirko Očadlík, a leading radio employee in 1945–1950 and a musicologist, that “the fact that many songs which have been published in print and which are sung in yards and pubs do not make it onto the radio at all shows that we are still very strong guardians of taste in this field and that all our energies are directed towards the task of bringing this programme of ours to the highest level.”<sup>9</sup>

Pop music of the modern type entered the Czechoslovak media space only in the 1960s. In 1959, the youth and pop culture-oriented magazine *Mladý svět* [Young World] was founded. In 1962, the first nationwide popularity poll of pop singers *Zlatý slavík* [Golden Nightingale] was established, and, in 1963, the first press platform for modern popular music was created in the form of a specialised magazine called *Melodie* [Melody]. Innovations also reached Czechoslovak Radio, where, in 1964, the first Czechoslovak hit parade, *Houpačka* [Swing], was created.<sup>10</sup> It remained the most listened-to programme on Czechoslovak Radio for several years and, through its creator and host, the journalist Jiří Černý (b. 1936), it influenced the radio (and club) presentation of recorded popular music in Czechoslovakia for at least the next twenty years.

A creation of a standard hit parade, similar to those the listeners knew from foreign radio stations (especially Radio Luxembourg), which were based on the sales numbers of gramophone records and whose repertoire was automati-

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<sup>7</sup> In 1959, almost every family in Czechoslovakia had a radio receiver. In 1937, there were 927,693 licensees, with the number rising to 2,637,000 in 1952, and 3,316,300 in 1958. Cf. Dušan HAVLÍČEK, *O novou českou taneční hudbu: vývojové tendence taneční hudby v ČSR v letech 1945–1958* (Prague: SČS, 1959), 7.

<sup>8</sup> According to the 1955 statistics, music accounted for a total of 62 % of the radio programme, which was broadly similar in the 1960s. JEŠTOVÁ, *Od mikrofonu k posluchačům*, 256.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>10</sup> Jan BLÜML, “Sportka melodií a Houpačka: první rozhlasové ‘hitparády’ Československého rozhlasu v kontextu pop music šedesátých let,” *Muzikologické fórum* 10, No. 2 (2021): 234–250.

cally changed according to weekly reports from shops, was out of the question in the context of the Czechoslovak planned economy, where such reports did not exist. The programme's starting point was thus Černý's subjective selection of songs, the primary objective of which was to confront the audience with the widest possible spectrum of music and to educate them artistically.

In this sense, the programme closely followed the domestic tradition of cultural enlightenment and the educational mission of radio defined in the 1920s. The principle stayed the same but it now shifted to modern popular music and to music that was not available in Czechoslovakia.<sup>11</sup> Commercial goals typical of the Western music industry played only a marginal role at that time, although, with the growing tendencies toward liberalisation and the acceptance of Western pop culture, the Czechoslovak media also increasingly resonated with considerations of the application of market economy practices—in which, however, their promoters, including Jirí Černý, tended to see only the positives, without realising the potential contradiction between the nurturing of public taste and commercialisation.

The hit parade *Houpačka* had a domestic and a foreign section, with the Czechoslovak works always having a higher response from the audience. During its more than four years of existence, the show received nearly one million voting cards, which, in addition to Czechoslovak listeners, were also sent by listeners from Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Austria, the USSR, and the GDR. In total, the programme featured 322 domestic recordings and an equal number of foreign recordings. The recordings were often brought to the radio through alternative channels. In the case of domestic music, Černý favoured the amateur scene and emerging genres, such as rock and folk. In this sense, through amateur recordings (sometimes even made in the “kitchen”<sup>12</sup>), *Houpačka* discovered and popularised a number of artists who later became stars on the professional scene. As far as the foreign repertoire was concerned, its main source was the private collections of Czechoslovak musicians, discophiles and others who maintained regular contact with foreign countries.<sup>13</sup>

The unavailability of foreign (mainly anglophone) music in communist Czechoslovakia was partly compensated by the possibility of recording radio

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<sup>11</sup> JEŠUTOVÁ, *Od mikrofonu k posluchačům*, 308.

<sup>12</sup> Jaroslav RIEDEL, *Kritik bez konzervatoře: rozhovor s Jirím Černým* (Prague: Galén, 2015), 31–43.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

programmes on tape recorders, which had been accessible for personal use since the late 1950s. In this sense, listeners to Houpačka were systematically encouraged by the hosts of the hit parade to make recordings. Consequently, Houpačka recordings appeared in newspaper advertisements as items for exchange, purchase, or sale.<sup>14</sup>

In 1969, the first Czechoslovak hit parade had to end after a politically controversial song reacting to the 1968 occupation appeared in the programme. However, the career of the journalist Jiří Černý continued over the next years thanks to both his collaboration with the popular music magazine *Melodie* and his listening shows with recorded music, with which the journalist regularly toured Czechoslovak clubs and through which he significantly influenced the tastes of the domestic audience.<sup>15</sup> During the 1970s and 1980s, Černý's work for Czechoslovak Radio was followed up by younger journalists and disc jockeys, whose programmes were based on principles similar to those behind the earlier Houpačka broadcasts, especially the idea of music enlightenment and popularisation of alternative forms of popular music unavailable in official Czechoslovak productions, with an emphasis on rock music.<sup>16</sup>

### **Czech private radio stations after 1989**

According to a sociological survey by Jaroslav Kasan, at the beginning of the 1990s radio was the most widespread source of music listening in Czechoslovakia.<sup>17</sup> According to the author, the growing number of new private stations also contributed to this fact. What follows is a look at those media and their relationship to popular music, especially in the context of the history of one of the first Czech private stations, Radio Faktor.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Jan BLÜML, "Popularizace angloamerického rocku v Československu v době normalizace na příkladu brněnské scény," *Musicologica Olomucensia* 32 (2020): 25–49.

<sup>16</sup> For more on the issue of Czech popular music and media in the 1970s and 1980s see Lubomír DORŮŽKA, *Populárna hudba—priemysel, obchod, umenie* (Bratislava: Opus, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> Jaroslav Kasan, *Výzkum hudebnosti 1990* (Prague: Výzkumné oddělení Českého rozhlasu, 1991), 45.

<sup>18</sup> See Petr ŠRAJER, "Stalin and Podzemí: Pirate Radio Stations in Post-Socialist Czechoslovakia (1989–1991)," *Mediální studia* 16, No. 1 (2022): 7–24, and Petr ŠRAJER: "Private Czech Radio Broadcasting, Its Music Programming and Audience in the 1990s Illustrated with the Regional Station Radio Faktor," *Hudební věda* 59, Nos. 2–3 (2022): 348–386.

Radio Faktor was founded in the regional town of České Budějovice by Ladislav Faktor, a local lawyer, producer, musician, and composer. He applied for the licence in August 1990, after he had left his job at the regional studio of Czechoslovak Radio České Budějovice. Due to the legal vacuum at that time in relation to the newly emerging media market and the inability of the then authorities to process the licence application in a reasonable timeframe, Faktor started broadcasting illegally. The first broadcast of the pirate station, aptly named Podzemí [Underground], took place in the primitive technological conditions of a basement room in České Budějovice on New Year's Eve 1990. The radio received its broadcasting licence in May 1991.

The plans of the first candidates for a private radio broadcasting licence were, from today's point of view, quite utopian and based on the experience of cultural education in the manner of the work of Jiří Černý, at that time already a cult figure of Czech popular music journalism. In this sense, Radio Faktor planned to broadcast alternative and underground music, jazz, the regional amateur scene, poetry, etc. A large number of the founders of the first private radio stations were representatives of the rock generation and swayed the music programming to reflect their interest in the classic rock of the 1960s and 1970s, which experienced a massive comeback in the 1990s. This was also the case with Radio Faktor, which highlighted the work of The Beatles, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Frank Zappa, and other leading music groups of the mentioned era.

In the first phase, not only the presenters of Radio Faktor but also its other staff members were almost without exception recruited from the ranks of experienced disc jockeys who had been professionally involved in presenting club dance and listening shows with popular music during the period from the 1960s to the 1980s. Those disc jockeys were of key importance to the emerging private radio stations: (1) they were among the few who owned extensive collections of music, (2) they knew the tastes and mindset of the audience, which was essential at a time when there were still no listenership or target group surveys available, (3) they knew how to work with sound equipment and speak into a microphone, which they had often learned in various courses at folk conservatories before 1989.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jan BLÜML, "Czech Popular Music before 1989 and the Institution of the 'Discotheque'," in: *Popular Music in Communist and Post-Communist Europe*, eds. Jan Blüml, Yvetta Kajanová, and Rüdiger Ritter (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019), 99–112.

The period immediately after 1989 was characterised by a high demand for Western popular music. However, its availability was very low. In 1990, the share of foreign recordings in the market of Czechoslovakia was only ten percent. At the beginning of 1991, Czechoslovak shops could obtain about one-fifth of what appeared in the global music charts.<sup>20</sup> The lower availability of foreign music in post-revolutionary Czechoslovakia was also due to other factors. One of them was the pricing policy of the foreign companies that entered the Eastern European market, which protected the neighbouring German market with unreasonably high prices, while at the same time reinforcing the long-standing practice of local music piracy, although such a concept was not known or used in the Czech environment before 1989.<sup>21</sup> A significant part of the foreign music records distributed in Czechoslovakia in the immediate post-revolutionary period were recordings from Poland, where the proportion of illegal copies was reportedly close to 100 percent in 1990.<sup>22</sup>

The problem of building music archives concerned the media in the entire post-communist region. This was also due to the fact that the major Western labels considered the supply of new music to Eastern radio stations to be commercial suicide, arguing that those radios often openly encouraged their listeners to record broadcasts.<sup>23</sup> As already mentioned, this trend had existed in Czechoslovakia since the 1960s.

In the beginning, the music programming depended on the taste of the disc jockeys who hosted the programmes. After 1993, however, this practice began to decline in favour of establishing a more standardised programming model with a predetermined repertoire and genre structure. This happened under the influence of advisors from Western countries, as the Radio Faktor employee Karel Deniš recalls: “The first breakthrough was the internship of a radio expert from the American Peace Corps, who taught us marketing and business, but also threw out some sophisticated rock songs (including those of Frank Zappa, which we had played a lot). He gave us also a book on the gold

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<sup>20</sup> Josef VLČEK, “Letem světem populární hudby,” *Lidové noviny* (February 22, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> Michael C. ELAVSKY, “Czech Republic,” in: *The International Recording Industries*, ed. Lee Marshall (London: Routledge, 2015), 95–113.

<sup>22</sup> Miranda WATSON, “Record Piracy Jumps 61%,” *Music & Media* (February 15, 1992): 3.

<sup>23</sup> Machgiel BAKKER, “Labels Divided Over East European Investments,” *Music & Media* (December 8, 1990).

format. A certain degree of consternation was caused by this, because, even when it came to the great bands and singers, there were only a few songs played over and over.”<sup>24</sup> In this sense, peripheral genres began to disappear from the programme, leaving the former disc jockeys as mere presenters. Business pragmatism gradually displaced the traditional thinking about the higher functions of (“independent”, “unofficial”, “progressive”, etc.) rock music, rooted in Czech discourse since the 1960s, also for cultural-political reasons.

This process was supported by the consolidation of the advertising market, the competitive pressure of the growing number of private media, and finally by the first broad surveys of the media market, which for the first time revealed the structure and interests of the audience. One such survey that overcame the previous misconception that radio was listened to by “all people within the range of the transmitter” was the Mediaprojekt in 1994—allegedly the first of its kind in post-communist Europe.<sup>25</sup>

As was the case in the 1960s, the hit parades became the most popular programmes on the airwaves of the first private stations. They varied in form and content, but the most popular ones, following the Western model, already included presentations of current hits. Radio Faktor began broadcasting such a hit parade in 1992. An analysis of the show during the 1990s reveals several interesting facts: for example, the long-term dominance of British music, with music from the United States in the second place, while, at about the middle of the decade, also an increase in the influence of the German industry and its English-language production. Furthermore, it shows a waning interest in rock and at the same time the emergence of electronic dance music. Radio Faktor retained the predominance of foreign repertoire even in the second half of the 1990s, when surveys already indicated a sharp change in listeners’ demand, with their primary interest shifting back toward songs sung in Czech.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Correspondence with Karel Deniš, 7 October 2020. Archive of Petr Šrajfer.

<sup>25</sup> Vlastimil RŮŽIČKA, *Politika a média v konzumní společnosti* (Prague: Grada, 2011), 106. Radio listenership surveys on a larger or smaller scale began in the early 1990s. According to them, in the first half of 1992, Radio Faktor was among the most listened to Czech private stations. More comprehensive data were provided by a GfK survey in mid-1993, according to which Radio Faktor was the most listened to private station in the South Bohemia region with more than 150 thousand listeners (the most listened to private radio station at that time was Europe 2 with 587 thousand listeners). ŠRAJFER, “Private Czech Radio Broadcasting,” 363–364.

<sup>26</sup> ŠRAJFER, “Private Czech Radio Broadcasting,” 367–381.



## Conclusion

Many of the principles of popular music presentation in radio broadcasting before 1989 were naturally applied in the 1990s. Those principles were mainly carried by radio employees who had already been active on the popular music scene in the pre-revolutionary era, and who brought an emphasis on rock music and its ideology to the private radio space. However, by the mid-1990s, this was weakening under the influence of increasing commercial tendencies, which transformed the genre (originally with strong political connotations) into a commodity intended for entertainment. At the same time, the legacy of the rock generation was being diminished by new competing genres, led by electronic dance music.

There was also a reevaluation of meaning in other respects. For example, after 1989, the earlier unofficial dissemination of music was no longer automatically perceived positively as cultural enlightenment, but instead as a criminal act. Furthermore, radio journalists were losing their status as judges of the general taste, leaving the responsibility for the content of music broadcasts with the listeners.

Around the mid-1990s, there was a sharp increase in the number of new private stations, backed by the authority of the Broadcasting Council, which believed that this would expand the range of programming. However, the result was the opposite. Commercial ambitions based on surveys of listener tastes eventually led to the fact that all radio stations sounded basically the same.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Radek DIESTLER, "Pouští a pralesem IV: Na rádio(u) pěkně hrajou," *Rock & Pop* 11, no. 4 (2000): 64–65. Cf. Josef Vlček, "Formáty rozhlasových stanic," in: *Zpráva o stavu vysílání a činnosti Rady ČR pro rozhlasové a televizní vysílání za období 1.1.1998–31.12.1998*, 233–239, <http://archiv.rrtv.cz/zprava1998/>.

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### **Summary**

Through selected phenomena, the paper examines the role of popular music in the state-owned Czechoslovak Radio in the communist era and later in the first Czech private radio stations after 1989. Special attention is paid to the phenomenon of radio hit parades. These began to be broadcast in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s, and their founders were also significant in establishing the format in the context of the private media of the 1990s. The paper considers the development and changes in the role of popular music in radio broadcasting in a broader cultural and political context.

**Keywords:** popular music, radio, hit parades, communism, post-communism, Czechoslovakia, Czech Republic, culture politics.

