

## On the Fate of the Collection of Bohemian Musical Prints and Manuscripts in the Sabbateni Collection New York

*In this brief historical excursion into Czech historical libraries from the 16th to the 20th centuries, regular CMQ contributor Petr Daněk, from the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava, introduces an exciting and disturbing new discovery of Bohemical materials kept in New York.*

In 2001, Professor Stanley Boorman, a specialist on musical prints of the early modern period, visited Prague. During our meeting at the musicology department of Charles University, he alerted me to the fact that held in a private collection in New York is a collection of musical prints and manuscripts of Bohemian origins. At the time, he knew nothing of their source, but he did pass on to me an inventory accompanied by several photographs. I was astounded by the breadth and contents of this collection. It included thirteen printed books that contained thirty-one volumes or manuscripts of vocal polyphony of unambiguously Bohemian origin. This extensive collection had not, until then, been mentioned in the musicological literature, either as a whole or in its individual items. It was also remarkable that none of the volumes in the collection complemented established Czech sources (e.g. containing the individual voices of pieces known from elsewhere). Another contributing factor to this collection's exceptional character is the fact that the manuscripts includes compositions unknown to Czech (and therefore international) musicology, including pieces by unknown composers with Czech or Bohemian names. In other words, unique finds.

I was certain from the beginning that this was another of the illegal or semi-legal exports of old prints from Bohemia that took place (and unfortunately still take place) continually after the 1948 Communist takeover.

Professor Boorman also informed me that the collection was acquired by a private American collector in the early 1990s through a Swiss antiquarian.

Since then, the collection has become part of the New York University Library, where it was christened **The Sabbateni Collection of Renaissance Music Manuscripts**, part of the Fales Library and Special Collections. Several researchers have worked on the collection, but to my knowledge, no complex treatment of it has yet been published. A considerable amount of attention was garnered internationally by valuable fragments of a medieval Hebrew manuscript that was used to rebind some of the volumes. The ex libris and bindings revealed that a majority of the collection came from the library of Czech lawyer, Václav Kristián of Greifenfels, also known as Sabbatena, who amassed it at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries. When Stanley Boorman shared the news of the existence of this collection, it represented a collection of sources entirely unknown to Czech musicology, bibliography, and cultural historiography. Given how unprocessed a number of historical libraries are and considering their unsettled fortunes, particularly during World War II and Communist rule, this was not hard to comprehend.

During my studies of musical prints published and surviving in Bohemia, I was always trying to discover where the entire Sabbatena collection comes from and how it got to the United States. For a long time, I could find no relevant information, even though I harboured

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*A tenor volume dated 1603, designating its owner with the initials W. K. Z. G. (a medieval Hebrew manuscript was used for the binding)*

in the Sabbatani Collection; to give up on rectifying the lamentable situation described above. Primarily, we must strive to acquire a high-quality copy of the entire collection and transport it to Czechia. It is a truly remarkable collection whose manuscript portion can only be processed and assessed by a musicologist with intimate knowledge of other Czech manuscript sources. Additionally, we must also supply proof that will unambiguously confirm the origins of the collection and the manner in which it was stolen and taken abroad. The next step is then to demand the return of the Sabbatani Collection to its rightful owner, through the official channels of the Ministries of Culture and Foreign Affairs. This will not be an easy path, but I cannot imagine that a prestigious American library could knowingly own and use stolen books.

This troubled history of the loss of an exceptionally valuable book collection is, unfortunately, not an isolated incident. Personally, I follow most closely musical prints of the 16th and 17th centuries, but the disappearances also concern other fields. And I am constantly discovering books lost from Czech collections only to appear a few years

later at auctions, antiquarians' catalogues, or on the website of their new owners, who honestly believe they were acquired legally. Most often, these exceptionally valuable documents of our culture are lost from ecclesiastical libraries. This reflects the reality that the Catholic church in particular lacks the professional and technical standards (and often the interest) to secure their historical libraries, which are generally still located in the unsuitable spaces provided by presbyteries and monasteries. The Sabbatani Collection is exceptional in its scale. However, I am waiting impatiently for the smaller but no less significant collection of late-16th-century musical prints from the collection of the monastery in Broumov to come to a similar end. It was last seen sometime around 1992 or '93. Since then, it has been impossible to locate.

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