

CHARLES IV

and music

Less than a year since the 600th anniversary of the execution of the Czech Christian reformer Jan Hus, we are now commemorating the 700th anniversary of the birth of Charles IV (14 May 1316 – 29 November 1378), King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor. To a certain degree, the two dates correspond to the beginning and the end of the “Luxembourg century”, which is generally deemed to have been one of the most significant phases in Czech history.

Centuries later, we can still marvel at Saint Vitus Cathedral, Karlštejn Castle, Charles Bridge, as well as the Bohemian Crown Jewels, to name but the best-known material artefacts linked with Charles IV. Yet there are also the institutions of a spiritual nature, such as Charles University or the Archbishopsrics in Prague. In many respects, we thus tend to perceive Charles IV as a founder of a number of things we consider matter-of-course constituents of the life in the Czech Republic. It would seem that we view the monarch more through the perspective of institutions, as well as majestic architectural and artistic monuments, than through the written testimonies and the work of historians.

Is it possible to complete the picture of Charles IV through the music of his era? Can we, however, come to know this music at all, and can we get an insight into his musical preferences and tastes? These are the questions we will strive to answer in the present article.

Dreams of Czech music during the reign of Charles IV

Such questions have been raised for a very long time. Not surprisingly, the noted sovereign has attracted attention since the very start of modern music historiography. Serving the national revival, the Czech music historiographers placed great store by two facts in particular: Charles spent his youth at the French court, and the longstanding secretary of his father, John of Luxembourg, or John of Bohemia, nicknamed the “foreign king” (1296–1346), was the poet and composer Guillaume de Machaut. At the time when the Central European peoples were stacking up their glorious pasts, this would perhaps have been a home run even greater than the “medieval” Manuscripts of Zelená Hora and of Dvůr Králové (eventually proved to be forgeries, “discovered” in the early 19th century)! Thus,



The Jan of Roudnice Breviary, King David plays a psaltery, after 1360



Karlštejn Castle, a window niche at the Chapel of the Holy Cross, the old men of the Apocalypse (from the left: a Latin gittern without strings, ala bohemica and psaltery), Mikuláš Wurmser, circa 1359

all the greater must have been the disappointment (one that has been regularly repeated) about the fact that nothing from the French musical culture of the Ars Nova epoch has been confirmed within Charles IV's court. We will attempt to view the past more soberly and from a different angle.

Somewhat surprisingly, the music of the era of Charles IV concerned the Baroque historiographers back in the 17th and 18th centuries. It would not be just to deny that the ecclesiastics of the re-Catholicisation period were sincere patriots. The prefaces to the Baroque hymn-books bear witness to their seeking ways of legalising and preserving the wealth of the Czech church song, which they had inherited from the Reformation era of the 15th and 16th centuries, setting its origin in the time of Charles IV. To a certain extent, they were right, but we will return to it later.

The personality of Charles IV

After his mother Eliška (Elizabeth), daughter of Václav (Wenceslas) II, Charles was the heir of the Přemyslid dynasty. After his father, he hailed from the House of Luxembourg. His grandfather, Henry VII, King of Germany and Holy Roman Emperor, had strengthened the relations with the French royal family by means of diplomacy and marriages. In 1323, he took the seven-year-old Charles to the French court, where the prince would spend seven years, until 1330. He had the opportunity to closely observe the manner in which a centre of a large kingdom worked, familiarise himself with the roles assigned to courtly ceremonies, decorum and the symbolical parlance, resulting from the sacralisation of royal government. There is no doubt that the prince adopted the rules – originally named Václav (Wenceslas), he chose the name Charles at his confirmation in Paris in honour of his uncle, Charles IV

of France. Later on, as the Holy Roman Emperor, he would regard himself as a distant successor to Charlemagne.

Charles was at the French court at the time when it possessed a permanent music ensemble. In all likelihood, he met the influential composer and poet Philippe de Vitry, a prominent creator of the isorhythmic motet of the early phase of the Ars Nova period. Machaut came up with his chansons later on, yet sung courtly poetry abounded in the milieu in different forms. It would seem that Charles did not feel the necessity to employ lyrical love poetry performers at his own court in Prague, as the one and only representative of the German Minnesang there, Heinrich von Mügeln, left for Vienna in 1360 and none of the few Czech secular songs dating from the pre-Hussite era deal with courtly love. Well, Charles certainly did not show an interest in this type of music comparable with that of Wenceslas II. To all appearances, instead of courtly love, Charles IV embraced the Marian cult, which he boldly promoted and supported. Devotion to the Mother of Christ, however, was quite common in the 14th century and it does not attest to his being the “Priests’ King”, as he was derisively referred to. After all, paintings and statues of beautiful Madonnas too come across as expressing sublimated love, with their equivalent in sacred lyrics at the time having been the numerous Marian songs. And as their predominant language was Latin, their composers and performers should be sought among the clergy. There are speculations that, together with Archbishop Arnošt (Ernest) of Pardubice, Charles IV initiated the collection *Laudes Mariae*, put together prior to the middle of the 14th century at the Carthusian Monastery in Prague’s Smíchov quarter by the poet Konrad von Hainburg.



The Krumlov Miscellanea, King David plays a psaltery, early 15th century

Let us, however, return to Charles's youth. In 1331, his father sent him to northern Italy, where until 1333 he served as viceroy. The luxury and the high standard of living at the local courts were in stark contrast to their political irrelevance. Charles would continue to maintain contacts with Italy in the years to come.

Upon returning to Bohemia in 1333, he must have experienced a culture shock, yet he decided not to follow in his father's footsteps and duly plunged into the systematic building up of Prague and the Kingdom of Bohemia, converting them into a dignified centre of his future realm, with some of his plans having been implemented during his father's lifetime, as Margrave of Moravia. In 1344, the Prague Episcopate was upgraded to Archbishopric and the reconstruction of Saint Vitus Cathedral commenced. In 1346, Charles was elected the King of the Romans. Following his father's death (on 26 August 1346 in the Battle of Grécy), on 2 September 1347 he was crowned King of Bohemia. In 1348, he founded Prague's New Town and University. In 1349, he was crowned Roman (German) King in Aachen and, finally, in 1355, he was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in Rome.

The Czech historian František Kavka has summed up Charles's personality as follows: "The majority of the contemporary observers were impressed by the sharp intellect and an even chilly realism, which made it possible for Charles to duly recognise the limits of his potentialities. Noticeable too was his faculty for comprehending human nature, which also manifested itself in his almost unerring selection of advisers and assistants." Unlike many of the aristocrats of the time, he was literate and capable of expressing himself in writing, while his diplomatic skills were further advanced by his being fluent in five languages.

Charles IV and music - the facts

Specific documents of his relationship to music are scarce, with just three of them particularly worthy of mention. The incorporation of the ancient hymn *Hospodine, pomiluj ny* (Lord Have Mercy Upon Us), in addition to the commonplace *Te Deum*, into Charles's coronation order, might have reflected some older local customs. One of his literary works - *Morality* - contains an interpretation of the passage from the First Book of Moses on Tubal-cain, who as "the first smith forging iron, invented and perceived joy at music; just as a pious man in the state of mercy arrives through mortification of the body at an understanding of eternal melodies and at delight of the celestials perfect in nature." The passage was comprehended by everyone who studied the speculative music theory at the faculty of free arts. Music was discovered (besides Biblical characters, by Orpheus and Pythagoras, for instance) and the tonal system was created on the basis of numerical ratios equal to those of the microcosm of the human body and soul, as well as the microcosm of the entire universe, whose eternal melody or music of the spheres could not, however, be heard by the mortals. Charles would take an active part in the evening services (matins) on Christmas Day, presenting the Seventh Lesson himself, with the crown on his head and holding an unsheathed sword. We do not know whether he was singing or reading, yet we do know that the Christmas matins ranked among the most solemn divine services and that the first three Lessons were sung at the Prague Cathedral by selected vocalists in three voices. Buglers and pipers too were employed at the court, with their main task being to deliver signal and utility music, of which we have no particular knowledge, yet they might have performed other types of productions (that, however, has not been proven to have taken place at Charles's court). One (dubious) testimony in this respect may be given in connection with Guillaume de Machaut. Now and then, the artist would visit Prague, accompanying John of Luxembourg, to whom he dedicated a multitude of celebratory poems but never actually indicated that the monarch had an



*The Velislav Bible, women playing
an ala bohemica, zither, vielle
and psaltery, before the middle
of the 14th century*

affinity to music. In 1364, Machaut came to Prague again, this time as a member of the suite of Peter I of Cyprus (Pierre I de Lusignan). The king maintained in Nicosia a French court, at which, as the preserved repertoire reveals, music performances were given in the Ars Nova style. At the time, Peter I of Cyprus was travelling around Europe, seeking among its rulers allies who would support his plan for a Crusade in the Holy Land. Machaut described the welcoming of Peter in Prague in the poem *Prise d'Alexandrie*, in which he wrote, probably with hyperbole, that more than 20,000 people had cheered him outside the city gates, and that the music performance held in his honour at the Castle encompassed some 35 instruments, all of which he named and even divided, as was the custom at the time, into the loud and the soft. When deciphering their names, they also include instruments we know from period images - we can then only hope that Machaut did not make it all up and his account is based on truth. To date, the researchers have tended not to take the description seriously, yet, on the other hand, there are preserved contemporary paintings featuring the welcoming of royal visitors, on which good-sized, and motley, according to today's standards, groups of musicians are part of the procession. Amidst the tumult of the crowd, the range of their productions might have been minimal, with nobody objecting to the blending of all kinds of sounds. The composer Charles Ives, who a century ago experimented with the dissonance of concurrently passing brass bands, would certainly have been pleased by his medieval predecessors.

Naturally, Charles IV had ample opportunities to hear music in the advanced French and Italian environments. That which he may have encountered when he was young has been pondered above. At the end of 1377, he decided to pay a visit with his son Wenceslas IV to King Charles V and other relatives in France, as well as in Luxembourg. The journey is quite well

documented in the chronicle records. The texts and the pictures show that the feasts and banquets were always accompanied by music. Every course was launched by a performance on "loud" instruments, i.e. trumpets, and, possibly, shawms and bagpipes. After one of the dinners, those present listened to music played on "soft" instruments, perhaps lutes, harps and strings. The nobility were transferred between the palaces in Paris on a special recreational ship on the Seine, with the cruise being sweetened (according to a late account) by court singers and musicians performing *virelais, chansons et autres bergerettes*.

Music in Bohemia before and after Charles IV

The situation pertaining to music in the Kingdom of Bohemia prior to Charles's accession to the throne is rather difficult to describe. Notwithstanding its rises and declines during the reign of the last members of the Přemyslid dynasty, it would seem that liturgical music performances were well secured at Saint Vitus Cathedral and at the Convent of Saint George at Prague Castle, which, according to the preserved documents, also pursued a remarkable tradition of staging Easter Passions. The Zbraslav Chronicle states that under John of Luxembourg Prague experienced a change in the universal demeanour, including the fashion of dress, as well as an increase in the popularity of singing in the manner of Neidhart von Reuenthal, with the name of the famed German minnesinger having become synonymous with satire (even Master Jan Hus still used the verb "to neidhart", in the sense of "spoofing"). "Singing in broken voices in fourths and fifths, which was once only done by proficient musicians, is today applied by laymen and Pharisees, in dances and everywhere on town squares." Translated into the present-day language, the sentence means: Artful rhythmic singing in long and short notes,



The Krumlov Miscellanea, King Artaxerxes's banquet, shawm and trumpet players by the royal table, early 15th century

and polyphony in fourths and fifths, was at one time (circa 1300) only mastered by trained vocalists (clerics, without exception), whereas nowadays every layman and hypocrite is able to do so.

The existence of some forms of polyphony within the self-contained monastic milieu circa 1300 has been confirmed – it concerned the earliest types of organum, as well as its later type, which in the 13th century spread from Notre Dame school in Paris, and perhaps even the very first multi-text motets. The “broken voices” could already have referred to the motet, yet they might also have related to the conductus, vocal compositions for one or more voices, which, however, have only been documented in records dating from the late-14th and the early-15th centuries. And this very style of music is perhaps the easiest to imagine as having been performed on “town squares”. After all, even melodies of some popular late-14th-century sacred songs were employed in pamphlets and the popular Hussite-era hymns (*Imber nunc celitus – Ó svolánie konstanské – Ó svolánie pikhartské / O synod of Constance – O synod of Pikhart*). The era following Charles IV's accession to the throne was characterised by a number of innovations that resulted in the transformation of society. The clergy, whose numbers were considerably growing, went on to create their own musical-poetic forms, not all of which were of a purely liturgical nature, frequently straddling non-liturgical church singing and a kind of sacred entertainment beyond the church grounds. When building up a centralised state, Charles IV could merely rely on the ecclesiastics and the clerical administration, since no one else was able to provide him with executive staff and a written agenda. The degree of sacralisation of life in the more populous cities was probably commensurate to the size and social position of the local clerical communities, with a bold Marian cult having been part of the contemporary trend. Approximately at that time, the custom of serving

the daily morning Marian mass – *matura* – expanded. Even in the 16th century, it was a divine service at which literary brotherhoods would gather to sing together, with the famous *Rorate Masses* having been nothing but the *matura* during Advent. By an irony of fate, an emphasis on outward manifestations of piety began to be placed at the time of the onset of the profound crisis of the Catholic Church, which, however, only culminated in Bohemia under the reign of Wenceslas IV and ultimately ended in the Hussite movement. Immediately upon his having been appointed Archbishop of Prague, Arnošt of Pardubice (1297–1364) embarked upon reorganising the clergy linked with Saint Vitus Cathedral. A relatively high number of persons (the estimates exceed 100!) were assigned with singing, participating in the prayers marking the hours of each day and the regular masses. Depending on their position and tasks, they were divided into several independent groups: the cathedral's canons or their deputies (vicars), choristers, psalm readers, or *boni infantes* (boys who helped during the divine services, singing, reading and reciting psalms). New liturgical hymn-books, some of which have been preserved, were drawn up for their needs. With their repertoire being traditional, based on the customs practised at Saint Vitus Cathedral back in the Přemyslid era, they were to serve as the model of choral singing for the whole diocese of Prague. Indirectly connected with the cathedral was a Christmas matins repertoire of polyphonic songs, characterised by a unique updating of the old-fashioned organum technique.

Another sanctuary at Prague Castle was the All Saints Church, whose canonry only hired masters of Charles University for the post of canon. Its Book of Graduals contains arrangements of chants of the mass for two voices, and affords one of the possible insights into the musical world of the Prague University, at which the speculative music theory was primarily studied. The fact that music intervals can be expressed by numerical ratios turned music into a mathematic discipline, which was taught at the faculty of free arts. Somewhat overshadowed by it were the lessons on practical theory – the majority of the students were preparing themselves for careers as priests, perhaps all of them sang at the university chapel, and masters, as mentioned above, at the All Saints Church. The instructional texts preserved pertain to plainchant and the most modern polyphony alike. The oldest testimony to the French notation of the *Ars Nova* epoch in Central Europe is a tractate written for Charles University students circa 1369, followed up by several other texts, which even provide examples of specific compositions. Some of them are of French or Italian provenance, while others are more likely local imitations, with approximately half of the pieces being identifiable and traceable. The prevailing forms among them are isorhythmic motets and chansons. That which whole generations of researchers were seeking, and failed to find, at the court of Charles IV has been discovered at the university.

The Velislav Bible, tuning of a psalter harp, glockenspiel and psalter, before the middle of the 14th century



Musical creation

The losses of 14th-century music scores are simply colossal. Some of the works, particularly the majority of those for multiple voices, are only known from later sources, and hence we are now merely reconstructing them, trying to figure out the time of their origin and what they originally looked like. It is completely impossible to distinguish between the music hailing from the era of Charles IV and that which was written during the reign of his son, Wenceslas IV, up to the Hussite period. Nonetheless, we can approximately define the genres that were characteristic of the Kingdom of Bohemia.

Numerous new pieces were composed for the plainsong repertoire. They differed from the traditional chant by rhymed texts, by giving preference to certain keys, as well as by placing relatively high requirements on the singers, and they were interspersed with rhythmically recited vocal insertions.

A true treasure dating from the era is the Latin sacred lyrical music, encompassing two types of compositions – the *cantio* (a strophic song) and the *leich*, or *lai* (a more elaborate form of song) – which were cultivated among the clerics, initially perhaps serving for spiritual intellectual entertainment, yet subsequently being part of the masses. Hundreds of the songs are yet to be published. In the pre-Hussite era, they were translated into Czech, and in the Reformation period they became the major source of melodies for Czech, as well as, in part, German, Protestant hymns. A number of these melodies have been sung in churches for 600 or more years.

At the time, sacred lyrical music – including that to Czech texts – was earmarked for the ecclesiastic elite, and if it did become popular on a mass scale, it only occurred in the 15th and 16th centuries. We should single out the music intended to be sung beyond actual divine services. The old hymn *Hospodine, pomiluj ny*

(Lord Have Mercy Upon Us) has been mentioned above, with a similar function having been pursued by the chorale *Svatý Václave* (Saint Wenceslas) in the 12th and 13th centuries. More songs of this ilk appeared during the 14th century, to which the Church responded by issuing repeated decrees, reducing the number of approved hymns to four – in addition to the two specified above, they included *Buoh všemohúcí* (God Almighty) and *Jezu Kriste, štedrý kněže* (Jesus Christ, Bountiful Prince), both of them related to the expansion of the reformist evangelistic movement, which had reacted to the crisis of the Catholic Church. The former occurred in connection with the preaching of Konrad Waldhauser, whom Charles IV summoned to Prague in 1363. Following his sermons, the congregation would sing the song *Christ ist erstanden*, the German equivalent of *Buoh všemohúcí*, hence in the linguistically mixed milieu people could sing in their own tongue. The latter was highly popular during Master Jan Hus's tenure at the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague.

When it comes to polyphony, in addition to the aforementioned genres, greatly developed was the form of multi-text motet. Also preserved has been a smaller amount of lovely “rondels”, variations on the French chansons. When we once more return to Machaut, these rondels, or “rondelets”, were far from attaining the refinement of his compositions, but we should bear in mind that they are simply incomparable. The further from Paris, the more different were Machaut's chansons (and markedly more similar to the small rondels) to the form in which we today know them from the editions based on manuscripts, whose making the composer himself supervised.

The article has been written in collaboration with the Musica Rudolphina research centre, www.bibemus.org/musicarudolphina. First published in Harmonie magazine, edited for CMQ.