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Folk music in the Czech music classroom

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Marek Sedláček & Judita Kučerová

Folk Music in the Czech Music Classroom

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of music sociological studies conducted at the Department of Music at Masaryk University from 2019 to 2021 as a part of university-specific research projects. The starting point was the premise that folk music, in particular folk songs, in addition to art, jazz and popular music, forms one of the main areas of the curriculum. With online questionnaires we investigated the attitudes of teachers to folk music and the extent to which folk music is used in music lessons at primary schools (students aged 6–11), secondary schools (students aged 11–14/15), grammar schools (students aged 15–18) and secondary pedagogical schools (15–18).¹ Our results show that teachers see great educational potential in folk music but the extent of its use in music education varies considerably.

Research Background

Folk song and instrumental music form an organic part of every national culture (Hostinský, 1906; Helfert, 1925; Helfert, 1930; Holý, 1979). Both aspects of the folk tradition have influenced the field of music education in Czechia. In the last decades of the nineteenth

¹ Music education in the Czech Republic is a part of general education. There are three different levels of music education depending on the type of school: a) general music education in regular primary and secondary schools; b) more intensive music education in specialised music primary and secondary schools; and c) music education for future professionals at conservatories, musical academies and universities.

century, the first textbooks and songbooks with Czech, Moravian and Silesian folk songs were produced (Bartoš, 1874; Bartoš & Janáček, 1890). At the beginning of the twentieth century, studies by musicologists and educators were published (Hostinský, 1906; Čáda, 1914; Helfert, 1925) pointing to the importance of national folk songs in the music classroom, especially with regard to the development of children's and young people's music skills and knowledge. During the twentieth century, folk music – and folk song in particular – became the basis for teaching musical concepts (Sedlák, Kolář & Herden, 1977).

For the creators of the music education curricula in the Czech Republic, the folk song repertoire represents an important methodical starting point. It includes folk music units (from simple melodies to richly developed folk song melodies) explicitly mentioned in connection with specific themes for music education activities (rhythm, intonation, musical forms, dance, etc.). At present, the writings of František Sedlák and several other researchers play a crucial role, and many have become university textbooks that have yet to be surpassed (Sedlák, 1979; Sedlák & Sieber, 1985; Váňová & Skopal, 2007). These authors proposed systematically developed techniques for incorporating the folk music repertoire – including performance – into children's musical education. Examples include singing, rhythm-work, rhythmic-movement, dance and instrumental activities based on folk music, and these can foster students' interpretive abilities, develop children's listening skills, improve their senses of rhythm, tonality and harmony, and significantly contribute to the development of their musical memory and creativity. By using folk songs, it is possible to develop musical thinking, aesthetic perception and evaluation of musical structures. The authors of music textbooks (e.g., Sedlák & Sieber, 1985) also consider songs' broader contexts, mentioning interdisciplinary relationships between music and non-musical areas such as literature, history, fine arts and geography. They also highlight the importance of cultivating in students an understanding of the contents and expression of folk songs, as well as the cultural and historical context of these songs.

An analysis of the methods and modes of engagement proposed in these music textbooks shows that folk songs are used most often on the interpretive level (for singing songs, playing instruments, moving to music or dancing). Listening to folk songs is the least common activity proposed. Sometimes the folk song repertoire is used for creative musical activities (from the simplest variations of musical folklore elements to setting folk lyrics to music, etc.).

According to the main curricular document for regular primary and secondary schools, the *Framework Educational Programme for Basic Education* (FEP BE), music education falls within the subject field of "Art and Culture" (Jeřábek & Tupý, 2007). It prescribes four musical activity components – vocal, instrumental, musical-movement and listening activities – which are described very briefly in general terms. No specific musical genres are suggested within the prescribed learning outcomes and procedures. However, another related document, the *Standards for Basic Education* – which is based on the FEP BE and

serves as a guideline for pedagogical practice – suggests more specific educational content to help realise learning outcomes. In the FEP BE, which is of an advisory nature, there is only one explicit recommendation to use folk songs; it is contained in the expected outcomes for the fifth year of primary school. The only other music-related references to the inclusion of folk traditions are in relation to dance (historical, modern ballroom and folk) in the second and ninth grades.

The FEP BE also covers several cross-curricular topics “Language and Language Communication”, “Man and Society”, “Information and Communication Technologies”, “Art and Culture” and “Man and Health” (Jeřábek & Tupý, 2007). These cross-curricular themes permeate all spheres of education. While the use of folk culture offers significant potential for the teaching of these topics, folk culture in general – and folk music in particular – receives only a cursory mention.

One such example is multicultural education which “familiarises pupils with the diversity of various cultures and their traditions and values [...] helps pupils know their own cultural anchorage and to understand different cultures [...] develops a sense for justice, solidarity and tolerance, and guides pupils towards understanding and respecting the constantly increasing level of sociocultural diversity” (Jeřábek & Tupý, 2007, p. 102). By incorporating Czech folk music and folk songs into music lessons, together with fostering the understanding of the wider historical and cultural contexts of this music, students will not only develop musical knowledge, skills and abilities but also a greater awareness and appreciation of their own cultural identity. In addition, engaging with the folk music and culture of minority groups will enable students to learn about and understand these ethnic groups. Using this information, students will ultimately develop tolerance of and respect for different socio-cultural groups, become aware of and reflect on their own socio-cultural background; they will appreciate that cultural differences are an opportunity for spiritual enrichment for them and not a source of conflict. They can learn to better orient themselves in a pluralistic society.

According to the main curricular document the *Framework Educational Programme for Grammar Schools* from 2007, the subject of music education is again defined in the chapter “Art and Culture” (Jeřábek, Krčková & Slejšková, 2007). As in the FEP BE, the goals and contents of the curriculum here are expressed in general terms. Recommendations and suggestions for the use of folk culture and folk music are not explicitly addressed, neither within the music subject specifications nor in relation to cross-curricular subjects. As in the FEP BE, national cultural heritage, which also includes folk traditions, is described in cross-curricular subjects.

The Framework Educational Programme for Secondary Pedagogical Schools (schools that prepare future teachers for work in kindergartens) includes music education within the educational area of “Aesthetic Education” (Ministerstvo školství, mládeže a tělovýchovy České republiky, 2009). However, musical activities and education are not specified in this

area. Aesthetic education should contribute to the cultivation of humanity and aim to help students apply aesthetic criteria, recognise the importance of art in people's lives, obtain an overview of cultural events and so forth. The document states that, when creating school programmes, care should be taken to integrate aesthetic education into as many subject areas as possible.

Research Aim

The literature review showed that folk songs and instrumental music are an important part of Czech national culture and, despite changes in cultural and social life, still constitute an important basis in school music education. They permeate music education activities in primary and partly also secondary schools. In the process of transmitting the values of folk music and the songs of our ancestors to children and youth, the personality of the teacher plays an important role (Sedlák, Kolář & Herden, 1977; Kučerová, 2003; Kučerová, 2016). It depends not only on the professional and pedagogical education and knowledge of the teacher but, above all, on his or her approach to the given genre of music and his or her skill in motivating students' interest in this music – in this case folk music – which may not be among contemporary youths' musical preferences. Although this premise is still important in Czech music education (Sedláček, 1999), it should be noted that the extent to which folk music is used in the music classroom has changed over the last century and to some extent, reflects the cultural and historical development in society (Sirovátka, 1973; Frolec, 1989).

It was this premise that prompted Masaryk University to conduct nationwide music-educational research in 2019. The main goals of this study were to investigate, first, the extent to which folk music and folk songs are used in music lessons at primary and secondary schools; and, second, the ways in which this genre is incorporated into lessons. This was the first time that research into this topic was carried out on this scale in the Czech Republic (Kučerová et al., 2019); although previous research studies focused on young people's attitudes towards folk music, mostly in Moravian regions. This 2019 study was, in part, motivated by previous findings about shortcomings (inconsistency, disunity) in current school practice (Kučerová, 2003; Kučerová, 2016). These two previous studies indicated that in music lessons, young people – a priori – express negative attitudes towards folk music. They reject it and teachers are often clueless about how to work with folk songs at school, so they prefer to ignore folk music and replace it with popular music.

In 2019, the research hypotheses verified in the evaluation and interpretation of research results were based on knowledge from music-pedagogical and ethnomusicological literature, stimuli from family, the local or educational environment, and experience gained from teaching practice. The hypotheses underpinning this research project focused on the attitudes of teachers towards the music and folklore repertoire, the extent and ways

of using folk songs in teaching and, especially, the influences that may affect individual aspects of local cultural traditions (the degree of vitality of the folk tradition in the given region and the type of the teachers' musical activity in their free time):

- (1) Teachers of music education are aware of the importance of Czech folk music and folklore heritage for the development of their students, cultural and social life and pedagogical activities.
- (2) How teachers approach folk music and engage with it in music classes is influenced by the type of musical activities they do in their free time.
- (3) Teachers' attitudes towards, and approaches to, teaching folk music are impacted by the richness and depth of their birthplace's traditional culture or the culture of the school's locality.

Research Methods and Techniques

The research, which investigated the attitudes of teachers to folk music and the extent to which folk music is used in music lessons at primary, grammar and secondary pedagogical schools, was conducted via online questionnaires distributed to respondents by e-mail.

The electronic questionnaire was created on the Google Forms platform, with which our department had good experience from previous research. The questionnaire consisted of eleven questions: seven closed (dichotomous, multiple-choice questions, rating scales) and four open ones. In closed questions, respondents indicated which musical genres and types of musical activities they used in their teaching, and also their own activities and interests in the field of folk music in their leisure time (singing folk songs, listening to folk music, occasions on which they deal with folk music and to what extent). Open questions focused on working with textbooks and songbooks, teachers' experience with folklore material, possibilities for its integration into lessons, interdisciplinary overlaps, the importance of the use of folk music in school teaching, and teachers' experience with presenting this type of music to today's children and recommendations for how to do so. The questionnaire also gathered data about the respondents themselves (e.g., their age, teacher qualifications, length of teaching experience, place of work, musical activities in their leisure time), which were used when organising, analysing and interpreting the data. The questionnaire was e-mailed to music teachers at 5,948 primary schools, grammar schools and secondary pedagogical schools in the Czech Republic. A total of 579 teachers responded to it.

The empirical findings were analysed using comparative and synthetic-analytical methods. For statistical purposes, the relative frequency of individual phenomena were recorded and, where possible, the interrelationships between them.

During the analysis, the data were evaluated both for all teachers and for different groups of teachers; for example, the type of school in which they taught or their teaching qualifications. Teachers were divided into five groups: (1) primary school teachers, (2) teachers of the Czech language and music education (at secondary schools, secondary pedagogical schools and grammar schools), (3) teachers of foreign languages and music education (at secondary schools, secondary pedagogical schools and grammar schools), (4) teachers not qualified for music education (all types of schools), and (5) teachers who are graduates from conservatories and music academies.

When interpreting the acquired data, we also categorised the teachers based on certain factors, such as the cultural environment of the locality in which the school is located and the teacher's birthplace, type of professional qualification and musical leisure-time activities. These data were mainly used to search for stimuli and influences that could be reflected in how these teachers approach folk music and its pedagogical application.

The Outcomes of the Research

To ascertain how frequently teachers used folk music in the classroom, they were asked to rank in order how often they used a variety of genres within their teaching. As evident from Fig. 1, folk music appears in second place behind modern popular music. There were not large differences across the five categories of teachers. Classical music was in third place, and jazz music received the least amount of curricular time.

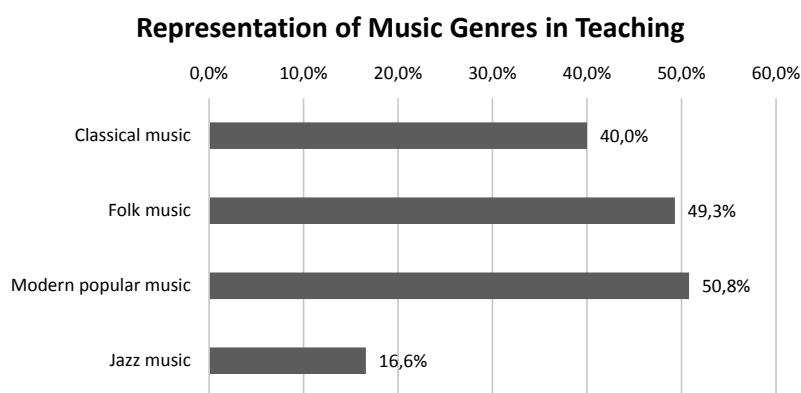


Fig. 1: Representation of music genres in teaching

The findings show that the most common way of engaging with folk music in the music classroom is in the form of practical music-making – through both singing and playing instruments. Listening activities related to folk music were much less popular. These patterns were similar across all groups of teachers – regardless of the vitality of the local tradition in the given region, the type of musical activity of the teachers in their leisure time or their teaching qualifications.

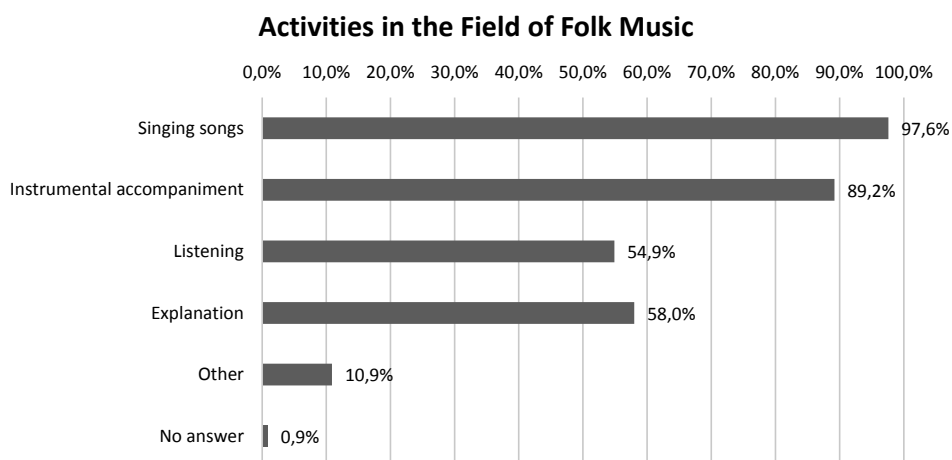


Fig. 2: Activities in the field of folk music

Singing was considered to be the most effective method for incorporating folk songs in lessons by all respondents, regardless of their teaching qualifications (Fig. 2 and Tab. 1).

The research team was interested in the wider application of folklore material. Teachers' recommendations for engaging with folk music in the classroom involved a stable range of activities.

		Primary school	Czech language – music education	Uncertified for music education	Foreign languages – music education	Conservatory / Academy of Music
Teachers' recommendations	Singing	32.8 %	22 %	31 %	31 %	29 %
	Content of song (working with lyrics)	21.5 %	15 %	12.6 %	13.9 %	26 %
	Activity concept of work with a folk song	17.4 %	9.7 %	11.5 %	15.6 %	19.4 %
	Experience form (folklore concerts, competitions, projects, etc.)	11.8 %	16.6 %	23 %	13 %	9.7 %
	Modernisation (multimedia technologies pop music arrangement, etc.)	-	6.9 %	2.3 %	3.9 %	-
Impact	Influence of family, kindergarten	13.9 %	18.6 %	20.7 %	13.9 %	22.6 %
	Teacher as a role model	15.9 %	4 %	8 %	6.5 %	6.5 %

Tab. 1: Teachers' recommendations for engaging with folk music and factors that affect the use of folk music in the classroom – according to the type of their teaching qualification

Most teachers in all categories thought that it is necessary to sing folk songs as often as possible; many of them stated that it was most appropriate to do this activity at primary school. One-third of teachers teaching younger children (32.8%) emphasised the importance of this activity. In addition, primary school teachers reported that their students liked to sing folk songs. Furthermore, teachers recommended focusing more on the content of the songs, their meanings and working with the lyrics of folk songs (e.g., rhythmical arrangement, dramatisation, creative activities with lyrics, comparing them with modern songs, etc.). This was mentioned most often by respondents who graduated from a conservatory or music academy. Encouraging children through cultural experiences – for example, visiting a traditional folk music festival, participating in a competition or engaging in project work – was recommended most often by non-certified teachers (23%). On the other hand, such activities were least often mentioned by music teachers who graduated from a conservatory or music academy (9.7%). Teachers of the Czech language and music education also mentioned the importance of making folk music accessible in the media

and public cultural programmes for young people, using the influence of famous singers, popularising folk music and so forth.

We also considered significant factors affecting students' openness and receptivity to engaging with and listening to folk music, as well as the regularity with which folk music is incorporated into the classroom. One such factor, mainly highlighted by teachers who graduated from music academies and conservatories (22.6%), is the importance of a student's family background and early childhood influences. A second important factor – highlighted principally by primary school teachers (15.8%) – is the role of the teacher, particularly with regard to his or her attitude towards folk music and familiarity with it. Interestingly, only four percent of teachers of the Czech language and music education considered this an important factor.

Teachers' attitudes towards traditional folk culture and their interest in folk songs or traditions are an important starting point for the pedagogical application of these phenomena in teaching. Answers to the question *'Do you think that folk songs are a suitable part of current music education?'* were generally positive; 94.8% of teachers expressed the opinion that including folk culture in music education is important. Only 2.9% of respondents believe that folk songs are outdated, uninteresting or inappropriate for students.

The research results showed evidence of a strong correlation between teachers' use of folk music in the classroom and their musical activities in their free time. It was found that 42% of teachers were active musicians, 24% engaged in choral singing (as singers or choirmasters) and 23.8% play instruments (in folk music ensembles, orchestras, rock or pop bands, etc.). In the classroom, 97.6% of teachers-choirmasters had students sing folk songs and 61% of teachers-instrumentalists in folk ensembles preferred a high proportion of folk songs in teaching.

An analysis of the data comparing the use of modern popular songs and folk songs in the classroom revealed that while more than one-third of teachers (36.6%) engaged students primarily in popular music, only 20.4% of teachers focused predominantly on using folk songs in lessons (Fig. 3). This finding is not surprising given the interest of today's young people in popular music. However, it is interesting to note that a greater number of teachers (41.3%) strived for a balance between both genres.

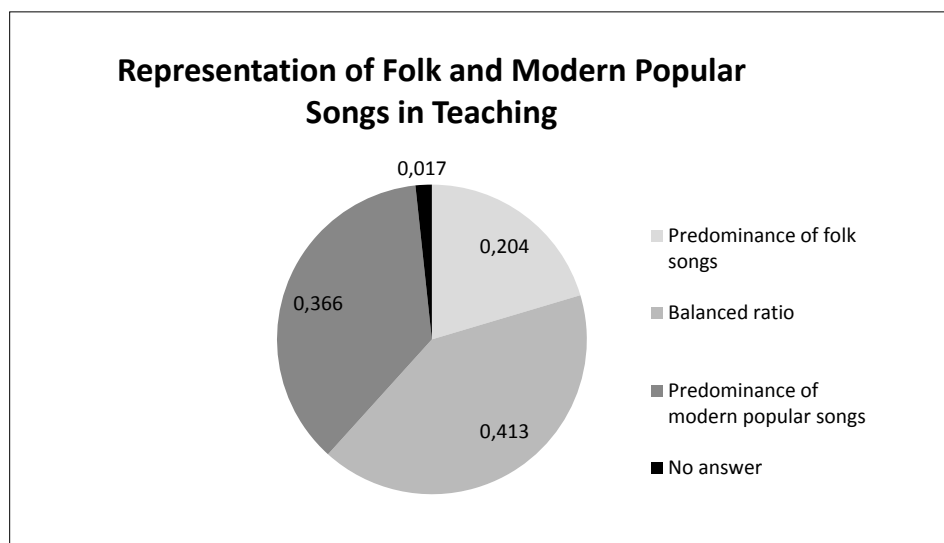


Fig. 3: Representation of folk and modern popular songs in teaching

Discussion

This survey confirmed two of our three hypotheses: first, teachers of music education are aware of the importance of Czech folk music and folklore heritage for the development of their students' cultural and social life, and their pedagogical activities; they are convinced of its cultural values and educational potential. Second, how teachers approach folk music and engage with it in music classes is influenced by their musical activities in their leisure time.

It was not unequivocally confirmed or refuted that teachers' attitudes and approaches towards teaching folk music are affected by the depth and richness of their birthplace's traditional culture or the culture of the school's locality.

Although most teachers consider folk songs to be a suitable part of music education, school practice often does not reflect this idea – folk music is frequently replaced by pop music, as previous research has noted (Kučerová, 2016).

At a time when young people are predominantly interested in modern popular music, an individual teacher's motivation to include folk music and the pedagogical methods used are crucial. The precondition of successful implementation of this task is primarily the teacher's approach to the topic and the connection of the educational goal with the needs of students.

However, folk culture and music can be applied more broadly within the educational sphere; not only to serve music education goals but also to help children and adolescents

better understand human behaviour and basic human values. The results of this research show that the most common means of incorporating folk songs in lessons focus on performance, but the broader cultural and educational potential of folk music is left untapped (e.g., a ceremonial song may be sung in class, but its cultural context is not explained). It can be difficult to motivate students, especially in regions where folk culture and folklore traditions are not strong or where there is an absence of native folk traditions. In these cases, teachers lack ideas, not only about how to evoke an emotional attachment to the song, but also about how to present folklore materials in the music classroom.

We are convinced that it is necessary to use integrative methods for working with folk music. One way to motivate young people's interest in folk culture is to find connections between folk traditions and other areas of human endeavour, such as music, literature, history, art, drama and dance education, as well as in subjects focused on cultural history, geography, philosophy, ethics, and so forth. The wide scope of the spiritual value of folk culture is made possible by the syncretism of individual expressions. However, this educational strategy (teaching in context), which is also recommended by the official educational documents for primary and secondary schools in the Czech Republic, presupposes that teachers have well-thought-out pedagogical procedures arising from their professional and methodological expertise and knowledge and continued interest in education. Students need to learn to discern the musical and non-musical contents of songs: with the sensitive and expert guidance of the teacher, they can be enabled to learn to perceive the aesthetic, ethical and philosophical values of folk songs and their significance in the history of their own nation. This method of education contributes to a more comprehensive view of folk music – as an expression of national cultural heritage – and it also helps to consolidate cultural identity within the nation and within cultural and social coexistence on a global scale.

School music education should introduce students to diverse genres and styles to help them orient themselves in the various musical cultural offerings of our time. Although the research findings show a relatively good balance between the teaching of folk music and modern popular music, respondents' answers to open questions indicate students lack interest in folk music and therefore some teachers replace it with modern popular music. Findings from pedagogical practice, past research and the current survey point to the relatively frequent predominance of modern popular songs in teaching over folk songs, especially among older students (aged 13–16). This phenomenon was described by some teachers as an unfavourable starting point for their own effective application of folk music (Kučerová et al., 2019, p. 122).

We share the same view and are convinced that folk music needs to be strengthened in school education. In addition to the fact that the folk song is an excellent tool for demonstrating basic musical structures, melody, harmony, form and so forth, Czech classical music of the nineteenth century – the period of Romanticism (Smetana, Dvořák,

Fibich) and the Neo-folklorism of the twentieth century (Janáček, Martinů) – builds on folk culture and the characteristics of folk music. It is about maintaining a national musical identity, so that this music would not sound foreign to Czech listeners in the future. In the context of globalisation, it can potentially be a general problem for every nation if it does not sufficiently maintain and develop its own traditional culture.

Connecting folk music with various manifestations of musical culture in different nations is a good prerequisite for learning about musical expression as a part of global cultural heritage. Music teachers must primarily pursue musical goals but, by teaching about the cultural, historical, aesthetic and ethical aspects of music, they can contribute to developing young people's cultural awareness. In conclusion, we can paraphrase the theme of this book *Music is what young people do*. The teacher should be a qualified music guide and objective advisor who helps children and youth learn about different cultural values.

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