CHAPTER 11

“By Means of Singing to the Heart, by Means of Heart to the Homeland”

Choral Societies and the Nationalist Mobilization of Czechs in the Nineteenth Century

Karel Šima, Tomáš Kavka, and Hana Zimmerhaklová

Czech historiography has paid considerable attention to the role of nationalist societies—including choral societies—in the context of Czech nationalist mobilization in the nineteenth century. However, existing research has focused on three levels of analysis that have introduced two barriers to recognition of the activities of choral societies as the principal factor in the process of nation-building. Firstly, a number of studies have examined the origins and composition of particular societies and their functions in local contexts. These valuable works present a rich collection of facts, but they have not examined this phenomenon in the context of nationalism. Secondly, disciplinary research based in musicology has made important discoveries concerning repertoires in the context of the history of musical genres. However, this approach ignores the socio-economic and cultural context in a broader sense. A third approach recognizes the role of choral societies in the process of nation-building as a part of the widening of the social background of the process. Typically this interpretation places choral activities only in the third phase of nation-building, as a mass movement at the time when most members of society were already involved in the nationalist project.

These lines of research have raised barriers to a better understanding of the phenomenon in two ways: they either disregard the broader context of the success of choral societies, or they treat their success as a side-effect of a larger socio-economic process and neglect the symbolic and performative importance of their actual activities. An integrated and comparative analysis should consider not only evidence of the size, composition, funding, and social background of the societies, but bring these aspects together to explain their

1 See for example Kopalová (2005) and Řeřichová (2005).
2 The most comprehensive book on the history of Czech musical culture is the monograph by Kotek (1994).
3 See for example Ledvinka and Pešek (2000).
mutual dynamics in relation to the process of national identification and the performative generation of national identity.

In this paper we argue that the social and economic background and the performative and musical context of the Czech choral movement were shaped by its role in the framework of national mobilization. In the 1860s this role involved bottom-up funding strategies, participation of the intelligentsia, an explicitly patriotic repertoire, and occupation of public space. In later decades this central role declined gradually, which for choral societies meant a diversification of their social status and financial background, transformation of the repertoire towards more thematic variety, and a retreat from nation-wide performative situations to more closed and traditional musical and cultural contexts.

**Choral Societies: Initial Conditions and Expansion**

Choral societies emerged in the Czech lands as voluntary associations in civil society after the revolutionary year of 1848. This initial situation was defined in law by the first wave of constitutionality in the Habsburg monarchy. Societies could be established thanks to the provisional associational law of 1849, followed in 1852 by the imperial patent for associations and statutes. There were two traditional types of choral activities in Czech lands: church choirs and military choirs in the Austrian army. The newly established choral societies could build on this foundation. The first registered civil choral association was called Svatořtul, founded in the town of Žďár nad Sázavou in 1849; and in that same year the German Akademischer Männergesangverein was established in Prague. The numbers of such societies increased slowly during the era of so-called Bach absolutism (1850–59), with a majority of societies established in smaller towns (for example, in Chrudim or Jaroměř in 1856). The choral movement expanded significantly after the October Diploma adopted in 1860 by Emperor Franz Joseph, who promised to initiate constitutional reform. Many new associations were registered at this time, which had possibly existed earlier unofficially. Most likely they originated in the unorganized singing of men within the activities of popular educational organizations (in Czech Beseda) or in readers’ clubs, probably because of the complicated process of obtaining permission from the Austrian authorities until the end of the 1850s. Starting in 1860—following the abandonment of the absolutist regime—these voluntary societies...