

Zeitschrift: Colloquium Helveticum : cahiers suisses de littérature générale et comparée = Schweizer Hefte für allgemeine und vergleichende Literaturwissenschaft = quaderni svizzeri di letteratura generale e comparata

Herausgeber: Association suisse de littérature générale et comparée

Band: - (2019)

Heft: 48: Musik und Emotionen in der Literatur = Musique et émotions dans la littérature = Music and emotions in literature

Artikel: Czech folklore and manipulation of emotions in Milan Kundera's The Joke

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1006286>

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Corinne Fournier Kiss

Czech Folklore and Manipulation of Emotions in Milan Kundera's *The Joke*

Als Sohn des Pianisten und Musikwissenschaftlers Ludvík Kundera, einem Schüler von Leoš Janáček, hat Milan Kundera sowohl in seinen Essays als auch in seinen literarischen Fiktionen zahlreiche Seiten der Musik gewidmet, insbesondere der tschechischen. In seinem ersten Roman *Der Scherz* (*Žert*, 1968) ist die tschechische Volksmusik der Leitfaden des gesamten Werkes: Sie wird zum Gegenstand poetischer und sogar technischer Beschreibungen (mit Notenauszügen ausgestattet) durch die Protagonisten, sowie zum gemeinschaftsstiftenden Zeichen, das Emotionen kollektiv auszulösen vermag. Kundera zeigt aber auch die Gefahren der über die Musik erreichten Emotionalisierung, wenn sie im Kontext des kommunistischen Regimes als Mittel zur Manipulation des Volkes dient: anstatt Menschen zu einen, entwickelt die Musik ihre destruktive Kraft, die bis zur Ausgrenzung führen kann. Wie es der Schriftsteller in *Testaments trahis* ausdrückt, kann die Lyrik fester Bestandteil der totalitären Welt sein und somit Traumata verursachen.

Milan Kundera, music and *The Joke*

Music has always played a crucial role in Milan Kundera's life. Kundera was born in 1929 in Brno, Moravia, into a cultivated and art-loving family. His father, Ludvík, a former student of Leoš Janáček in Brno and Alfred Cortot in Paris, was a famous pianist and musicologist as well as a music teacher at the Brno Conservatory; later in his career he was one of the founders, and ultimately the head, of the *Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts* in Brno. Given his family background, it is hardly surprising that Milan Kundera received a sound education and training in music, including lessons on the piano and other instruments and a grounding in music theory and composition. In a later essay written in French and entitled *L'Art du roman* (1986), he stated that until the age of 25 he was much more interested in music than literature, and that his first work that he himself judged to be of any worth was a musical composition for four instruments – a composition whose division into seven parts served later as a model for the structure of many of his novels, most of which would themselves be divided into seven sections.¹

In spite of being initially drawn so strongly to music, and his evident musical talent, he chose not to follow in the footsteps of his father. At university he studied film, but eventually changed direction yet again, and turned to a

1 Milan Kundera. *L'Art du roman*. Paris: Gallimard, 1986. P. 111.

literary career. These shifts from one form of artistic expression to another are partly due, no doubt, to the normal development and changing interests of any undergraduate. Yet a careful review of his subsequent literary work, in which music often holds an important place, suggests more substantial grounds for his career choice – a career into which he would take many of his earlier musical impulses rather than leave them entirely behind (music very often plays the role of a nodal point for philosophical reflexions in both his essays and his novels); but a career where, very surprisingly, he also displays an ambiguous attitude towards music which even sometimes degenerates into hatred.²

As we will discuss, this ambiguity is already perceptible in Kundera's very first novel, *The Joke* [*Žert*], written in 1965, published in 1967 and banned in Czechoslovakia for political reasons in 1968, after the crushing of the Prague Spring. *The Joke* is certainly, of all his works, the one that is the most permeated by music, and more precisely by Czech folk music, which is the guiding thread of the whole work. Music is at once a substantive theme, the object of poetic and even technical description (replete with extracts of scores); being the only link that ties together all of the novel's main characters and thereby allows them to communicate with one another (even if each of these figures has a very different connection to music), it is also a diegetic device, the engine that moves the plot forward; and finally, music has a structural function, in the sense that a musical form serves as a model for the novel form.

Musical structure of *The Joke*: the rondo

The novel's seven parts are alternately narrated by four of the protagonists, each of whom tells the same story from a different perspective and with different degrees of knowledge. Kundera's metanarrative remark in his later novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* [*Knihy smíchu a zapomnění*,

2 Kundera's ambiguous and critical attitude towards music was highlighted, among others, by: Bertrand Vibert. "D'un humanisme anti-lyrique: la bêtise de la musique selon Milan Kundera". *Recherches & Travaux* [online], 78/2011. URL: <http://recherchestravaux.revues.org/451>. P. 97-116 ; Gianluca Ladda and Marcello Piras. "Musica in Milan Kundera". *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia* 38, No. 1 (2003): p. 119-137. However, these articles emphasize especially Kunderian representations of music as a stereotypical mass product, which no longer allows man to live in silence but on the contrary assaults him constantly in his daily life, in shops, waiting rooms, and even in the street (see Kundera's episodic comments in his novels *Immortality*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, etc.). In the contemporary world, music has become a real aural pollution that plays on the sentimentalism of the human being and encourages his need for "kitsch".

1979], according to which the latter would be a novel “in the form of variations” [*Celá tato kniha je román ve formě variací*], applies even more aptly to *The Joke* [*Žert*]. Or, to borrow another musical term common in literary criticism since Bakhtin, we could speak here of a “polyphonic” novel, in the sense that several voices deal with the same events and the same themes, each giving a different interpretation according to the personality and idiosyncrasies of the person to whom they belong. Still, unlike the Bakhtinian polyphony, where the voices are of equal power and significance, in *The Joke*, one of the narrators, Ludvik, has a more important voice than the others and thereby plays the role of lead narrator. Let us explore the architecture of the novel more closely. One may set out its structure as follows:

<i>Part one</i>	Ludvik	A1
<i>Part two</i>	Helena	B1
<i>Part three</i>	Ludvik	A2
<i>Part four</i>	Jaroslav	C1
<i>Part five</i>	Ludvik	A3
<i>Part six</i>	Kostka	D1
<i>Part seven</i>	Ludvik / Helena / Jaroslav	A4/B2/C2

The diagram corresponds to a given musical form: besides being a “logogene” novel (that is, in the terminology of Frédéric Sounac, a novel that speaks about music), *The Joke* may also be seen as a “meloform” novel (in other words, a novel that is structured like a piece of music).³ Indeed, the narratological structure of the novel A1/B1/A2/C1/A3/D1/A4B2C2 imitates the musical structure of the rondo, which is characterized by the alternation of couplets (often of different length and tone) and refrain: the narrators Helena (B), Jaroslav (C) and Kostka (D) can be viewed as the different couplets of the rondo-form of the novel, whereas Ludvik (A), the principal narrator, who looms up again after every presentation of a new protagonist-couplet and reunites them all at the end of the novel-rondo, assumes the role of the refrain.

Based on the circularity of the form, the rondo originally was based as well on the circularity of the performance: it was danced round in a circle. If, in the text of the novel, the rondo as a musical form is not explicitly mentioned, but at most suggested, it remains the case that the motif of the “round” dance plays a crucial role in understanding the folk music whose presence haunts and informs so much of the novel. Round dances – rondos – and folk songs seem to go hand in hand, as this quotation, describing young people singing

³ For the distinction between “logogène”, “mélodène” and “mélodorme”, see Frédéric Sounac. *Modèle musical et composition romanesque*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014.

folk music, shows: “Young people stopped dancing the tango and boogie-woogie. They grabbed one another’s shoulders and danced circle dances”⁴.

The rondo form may also help us to understand metaphorically the relationship between the protagonists: it helps to visualize their evolution from characters who turn their backs upon one another, into characters who finally stand in a circle in relation to each other. At the beginning, they look outwards, blind to each other’s needs and motives: Helena fails to see that Ludvik’s love for her is contrived, not real; Ludvik is unable to recognize Lucie, the woman he loved so much many years earlier; Ludvik avoids his old friends Jaroslav and Pavel. Yet, despite the inability of these figures to connect with one another, what nonetheless will in the end allow them to join hands in a figuratively round dance and to look again into the circle and face each other is the Moravian folk festival of the *The Ride of the Kings* [*Jízda králů*], which takes place in Ludvik’s native village every Pentecost and draws all of these individuals to the same place, because they are all, in their own way, lovers of folklore and folk music. This event becomes for the characters an occasion for remembrance and reflection about the twenty years that have elapsed since the “liberation” of Czechoslovakia by the Russians at the end of the Second World War. The festival throws light, in particular, on the specific role music and folklore played in their lives in the form of orchestras and of song and dance ensembles that were so popular in Communist times. For most of our novel’s characters, folk music overturned their destiny, and not always in beneficial ways, as we will show.

Helena and the sensual perception of folk music – pure emotions

The character who has the most simple and unmediated relationship with folk music is Helena. At the time of the story, she is a middle-aged journalist who is asked to write a feature on *The Ride of the Kings*. This assignment delights her because folk music, in her experience, was always related to authenticity, youth, happiness, warmth and love; or, put another way, to something with which she could find a genuine and positive emotional connection.

As an essentially sensual individual, Helena’s narrative is more descriptive than analytical, and it must of course be borne in mind that all of these positive emotions take place in the context of Communism. For her, the Russians are those who introduced the idea of being an “optimist”, by way of

⁴ Milan Kundera. *The Joke*. Transl. Michael Henry Heim. London: Faber and Faber, 1992. P. 141. Original Czech version: Milan Kundera. *Žert*. Brno: Atlantis, 1991. P. 144: “Mládež přestávala tančit tanga a boogie-woogie a o svých veselících a slavnostech se chytala kolem ramenou a tančila v kruhu chorovody.”

ceremonies, rituals, and celebrations in which pride of place was given to folk music, which speaks to everybody, because it is rooted in the specific history and customs of the Czech people, and is thereby able more than any other music to bind people together in a strong and happy community.

Helena got to know Pavel Zemanek, her future husband, during her university years through an ensemble started by the Communists, the "Fucik Song and Dance Ensemble": there they "sang Soviet songs and [their] own socialist-construction songs and of course folk songs", and she "fell so in love with Moravian folk songs [that] they became the leitmotiv of [her] existence"⁵. She tells us she first fell in love with Pavel on the occasion of the festivities that took place on an anniversary of the Liberation, because he was able to raise more emotions with his songs than anybody else. She describes how when Togliatti, one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party, wanted to say a few words in the Old Town Square where thousands of people were gathered, Pavel welcomed him by singing an Italian revolutionary song, "Avanti popolo" (which was also in the Ensemble's repertory at the time), and in so doing caused a large part of the crowd to sing along with him:

That was Pavel all over, he was never satisfied with reaching the mind alone, he had to get at the emotions, wasn't it wonderful. I thought [...], I wanted more than anything for Togliatti to be moved the way I was, so I joined in with Pavel as loud as I could, and others joined us and others and others, until finally the whole ensemble was singing, but the shouting was terribly loud and we were no more than a handful [...], but we fought a desperate fight, for the whole first stanza we thought we wouldn't make it and our singing would go unheard, but then a miracle occurred, little by little more voices broke into song [...]. And finally that song, or at least the last few bars, flew up to the rostrum, and we gazed eagerly at the face of the graying Italian, and we were happy when we thought we saw him respond to the song with a wave of the hand and I was certain, even though I was too far away to tell, I was certain I saw tears in his eyes. And in the midst of all the enthusiasm and emotion, I don't know how it happened, I suddenly seized Pavel's hand, and he seized mine.⁶

5 *The Joke* (as note 3). P. 16. *Žert* (as note 3). P. 22: "Zpívali jsme sovětské písně, naše budovatelské písně a ovšem lidové písně, ty jsme zpívali nejraději, moravské písně jsem si tehdy tak zamilovala, že jsem se cítila, já, Plzeňáčka, Moravankou, staly se leitmotivem mého života."

6 *The Joke*. P. 16-17. *Žert*. P. 22-23: "To byl celý on, nestačilo mu nikdy útočit jen na rozum, chtěl zasahovat lidské city, zdálo mi se, že je to nádherné [...], toužila jsem, aby byl Togliatti dojat, tak jako já jsem byla už předem dojata, přidala jsem se proto ze všech sil k Pavlovým ústům a přidávali se další a další, přidal se postupně celý náš soubor, ale křik náměstí byl strašlivě silný a nás byla hrstka [...], to byl zoufalý zápas, po celou první sloku jsme mysli, že podlehneme, že náš zpěv nikdo ani nezaslechne, ale pak se stal zázrak, postupně se k nám přidávaly další a další

Whatever the leader of the Italian Communist Party may have felt, it is clear that Pavel's sense of drama and lyricism through his music at that moment won him both the love of the emotional Helena and the enthusiasm of the larger crowd around them.

If Helena in her youth found love with Pavel through music, she does so again when, many years later, she first meets Ludvik. She tells us that her initial attraction to him arose from the fact that in the past he used to play folk music: "The thing that excited me most was he was from Moravia, he'd even played in a cimbalom band, I couldn't believe my ears, it was like hearing the leitmotiv of my life again, seeing my youth return from the shadows, my heart and soul went out to him"⁷. In the same vein, each stage in her developing love towards Ludvik is accompanied by folk songs: during their first romantic walk, and after their first kiss, she cannot help "humming the opening two bars of [her] favorite song, *Oh brightly shines the sun on our garden*". Sensing that Ludvik recognizes it, she "began to sing it out loud, without shame", which is clearly her way of expressing her happy feeling of being young again, as when she sang in the Prague square with Pavel: she "felt years, cares, sorrows, thousands of gray scales peeling off [her]"⁸.

These emotions, awakened or reflected by folk songs, evidence themselves as well through Helena's manner of speaking about music: not only does she use terms conveying positive emotions ("wonderful", "miracle", "eagerly", "happy", "enthusiasm", "excited"), but does so without constraint, pouring out an uncontrollable flow of feelings that surge within her, as much and as fast as she can, adding one utterance after another without stopping. She thus expresses her emotions not only at the level of their content, but also by stylistic means. Her thoughts on music in general stand out by the scarcity of pauses, the length of sentences separated only by the staccato of commas instead of the breaks of full stops and a tendency to run on as though without end (see for example the prior quotation beginning with "that was Pavel

hlasy [...]. Nakonec ta píseň, alespoň několik jejích posledních taktů, doletěl až k tribuně a my jsme se dychtivě dívali na tvář prošedivělého Itala a byli šťastni, když se nám zdálo, že reaguje pohybem ruky na píseň, a já jsem si dokonce byla jista, i když jsem to nemohla z té dálky vidět, že vidím v jeho očích slzy. A v tom nadšení a dojetí, nevím ani jak, chytla jsem najednou Pavla za ruku a Pavel opětoval můj stisk."

7 *The Joke*. P. 23; *Žert*. P. 28: "Nejvíc jsem ustrnula, že je z jižní Moravy, že hrával dokonce v cimbalové kapele, nemohla jsem věřit svým uším, uslyšela jsem leitmotiv svého života, viděla jsem z dálky přicházet své mládí a cítila jsem, jak Ludvíkovi propadám."

8 *The Joke*. P. 24; *Žert*. P. 29: "Já jsem najednou tichounce zanotovala první dva takty své nejmilejší písně *Ej, svítlo slunečko nad našú zabrádkú...*, a když jsem vytušila, že mi rozumí, rozezpívala jsem se hlasitě, nestyděla jsem se, cítila jsem, jak ze mne padají léta, starosti, zármutky, tisíce šedivých šupin."

all over..."). Such volubility clearly captures her exuberance and joy at these moments. In contrast, her comments on other, more prosaic, and certainly less musical, topics are generally built upon the principle of a more controlled, almost dampened and restrained style that conveys contrary feelings such as sadness or discouragement.

Jaroslav and the erudite perception of folk music – cognitive emotions

Unlike Helena's primarily emotional and instinctive response to folk music, the approach of Jaroslav, Ludvik's best childhood friend who had remained in their Moravian native village, is grounded far more in intellectual and nationalistic terms. Having studied both violin and music theory in Brno, Jaroslav is at once a musician, a theoretician, an historian, and a connoisseur of music. This passion for folk music dated back to the Second World War, as a way "to prove to ourselves we'd existed before and still did exist" at a moment when the fascists tried "to make us believe we had no right to exist, we were nothing but Czech-speaking Germans"⁹. He came to feel that his patriotic duty was to fight this cultural marginalization and to prove that the Czechs had created and retained a vital and vibrant culture that was uniquely their own. Jaroslav's interests, studies and background, he believed, gave him the means to realize his goals.

It is in fact the case that folk music in Central Europe, since its revival during the nationalist movements at the beginning of the early 19th century, was understood as an important identifier of a community, and was supposed to encapsulate the "genius" (in Herder's meaning) of the people and the nation that produced it. In the particular case of the Czechs, folk music was of even greater importance, since it was recognized as a principal repository of the Czech language, which had elsewhere been endangered because replaced by German. That is why, Jaroslav observes, early 19th-century Czech poetry did indeed bear many parallels to both earlier and contemporaneous folk songs, and why folk music was chosen as a medium of resistance against cultural, linguistic, and political Austro-Hungarian domination. Jaroslav, for his part, perceiving "in folk art the sap that kept Czech culture from drying up", abandoned all other kinds of music, including jazz, which had nothing to do with Czech identity, and directed all his efforts to promote Czech folk songs and revitalize earlier folk rituals. As a result, for example, "the Ride

⁹ *The Joke*. P. 128-129. *Žert*. P. 130: "Chtěli nám dokázat, že nemáme právo existovat, že jsme jen slovansky mluvící Němci. Musili jsme se ujistit, že jsme existovali a existujeme."

turned into a demonstration” because it appears as “a deputation from the depths of history”¹⁰.

Jaroslav therefore undertakes a “pilgrimage to the sources”, *ad fontes*, as he terms it, leading him to focus upon the history of Czech music and to study the historical differences between Bohemian and Moravian folk music. Whereas folk music from Bohemia was believed to have many roots in the Baroque period, the musical language of Moravian folk music remained, by contrast, untouched and unspoiled by Western European music: “Baroque music”, Jaroslav tells us, “was written in major and minor keys. Our songs are sung in modes that court orchestras never dreamed of!”¹¹. He observes that Moravian songs are unimaginably ambiguous, both in tonality (they can begin in minor, end in major, and hesitate among different keys) and in rhythm, impossible to be written down under the current system of musical notation. Here, we see Jaroslav as the sophisticated interpreter of the folk genre: “The structure of our oldest folk songs is indeed analogous to that of ancient Greek music. The Lydian, Phrygian and Dorian tetrachords. The concept of the descending scale, whose final tone is the highest and not the lowest [...]. So our oldest songs belong to the same era of musical thought as the songs sung in Ancient Greece. They preserve classical Antiquity for us.”¹² The irregular structure of Moravian folk tunes and their modal tonality demonstrate their antique origin, but point as well to their vocal origins, whereas Bohemian folk melodies, with their diatonic harmonies, are more instrumental in character.

Since Kundera frequently refers to the Czech composer Janáček in his essays, and since Janáček is the Moravian musician Kundera most admired, one cannot help but infer that Kundera had Janáček as a model when he drew some features of Jaroslav’s portrait; it is perhaps no accident that both names begin with the same syllable, “Ja”. Although Jaroslav is depicted as an unknown fiddler content to improvise folk songs, whereas Janáček left an enduring mark on Czech and European music, these two figures, one real and one fictional,

10 For the whole of this passage, see the third chapter of Part 4. *The Joke*. P. 128-129. *Žert*. P. 129-131 (in the Czech version, this chapter is longer and more detailed on that question).

11 See the fourth chapter of Part 4, which is entirely dedicated to authentic musicological considerations and analysis of Moravian folk music. *The Joke*. P. 130-134. *Žert*. P. 132-136.

12 *The Joke*. P. 134. *Žert*. P. 136: “Hudbní struktura našich nejstarších lidových písní je opravdu shodná s hudební strukturou antické hudby. Lydický, frygiský a dórský tetrachord. Sestupné chápání stupnice, které považuje za základní tón horní tón, nikoli spodní [...]. Naše nejstarší písně patří tedy do stejné epochy hudebního myšlení jako písně zpívané ve starém Řecku. Dochovává se nám v nich čas antiky!”

nonetheless share a worldview that was strongly influenced by folklore and folk music. Both considered folk music as containing and expressing the whole being of ordinary people; as a means by which to preserve Czech language and culture in as pure a state as possible; and as a place where their nationalistic sentiments could best find an outlet for expression. To quote Janáček: "In folk songs we find the whole person, body, soul, environment, everything, everything. Whoever grows up with folk song, grows up into a whole person. Folk song binds the people [...] in one spirit, in one happiness, in one goodness"¹³. This conviction drove Janáček to study, compose and arrange Moravian folk songs throughout his career, and he incorporated the folk musician's techniques into his idiom. This would explain the particular expressiveness of his music, the result, according to Kundera in his essay *Testaments Betrayed* [*Les Testaments trahis*, written in 1993 in French], not of an exacerbated continuation of Romantic sentimentalism, which seems moreover to have exhausted all new possibilities of developing, but on the contrary of an effort to escape it by finding a way to other sources of inspiration.¹⁴ If every note can be defined as expression and emotion in his work, it is not because it follows the model of the "hypertrophied sonority" of Romanticism, but because it imitates the "intonation of the spoken language" and expresses shifting human psychological states. Thanks to his examination of folk music, Janáček is able to break with the emotional unity of Romanticism and to introduce an original semantics, where different and conflicting emotions not only rapidly alternate melodically (horizontal neighborhood) but coexist as well in the polyphony of the same musical fragment (vertical neighborhood), creating thus a dramatic space truer, he believed, to authentic life.¹⁵

Similar observations can be made about Jaroslav, who himself refers to Janáček in his musicological exposé on the value of folk music mentioned above. The emotion Jaroslav derives from folk music results at once from the wonder of the connoisseur towards the antique origins of that music, and

13 Leoš Janáček. *Vzpomínky, dokumenty, korespondence a studie*. Praha: Supraphon, 1986. P. 9-19: "V národní písni je celý člověk, tělo, duše, okolí, vše, vše. Kdo roste z národní písně, roste do celého člověka. To národní píseň váže národ, váže národy, všechno lidstvo v jednoho ducha, v jedno štěstí, v jedno blaho. Jestli já rostu, tak rostu jen z národní písně, z té mluvy lidské a mám důvěru, že vyrostu."

14 Milan Kundera. *Les Testaments trahis*. Paris: Gallimard, 1993. P. 164 and 223: "Pour Janáček, seule la note qui est expression, qui est émotion, a le droit d'exister", but "l'expressionnisme janacékien n'est pas une prolongation exacerbée du sentimentalisme romantique. C'est au contraire l'une des possibilités historiques pour sortir du romantisme."

15 For this interpretation of Janáček, see *Les Testaments trahis*, *passim*, but in particular Part 7 entitled "Le mal-aimé de la famille".

from a patriotic gratitude towards its capacity to imitate and preserve Czech language and intonations, and by extension some specifics of Czech culture. No wonder, then, that Jaroslav welcomes very warmly after the Second World War the Communists' support of folk music, which he perceives as an acknowledgement of the value and beauty of this music and as a justification of his national pride:

No one had ever done so much for folk art as the Communist Government [...]. Folk music, fiddle and cimbalom, resounded daily from the radio. Moravian folk songs inundated the universities, May Day celebrations, youth festivities, and dances. Jazz not only disappeared from the face of our country but became a symbol of Western capitalism and its decadence [...]. The Communist Party went all out to create a new way of life. It based its effort on Stalin's famous definition of the new art: socialist content in national form. And national form in music, dance, and poetry could come from nowhere but folk art.¹⁶

Jaroslav, of course, fails to see that in fact the government under which he was living was not at all focused on the values and principles of the prior century, and that the folk music which he so fervently cherished because it amounted to traditions perceived as pure and authentic, now played merely the role of a fascinating symbol of the new ideology. It does not occur to him that Communism never concerned itself about the national components and scientific value of Moravian folk music other than to the extent to which it served as a propaganda device to bind the Czechs more fully to the larger Socialist order directed from Moscow. Likewise, Jaroslav could not understand why the Communists, over time, withdrew their support once such folk traditions no longer served their purposes.

Lastly, Jaroslav, ironically naïve and provincial despite his erudition, cannot see that after the broader revelations of Stalin's crimes in 1956, the confidence of the people in Communism cracked, which in turn led to their embrace of Western culture to a greater degree than before, with its accompanying seductions of the prohibited and the illicit. We see this in the example of Jaroslav's son, Vladimir, in his embrace of American songs and

16 *The Joke*. P. 142. *Žert*. P. 143-144: "Nikdo nikdy neudělal pro naše lidové umění tolik jako komunistická vláda [...]. Lidová hudba, housle a cimbál ozývaly se dennodenně z rozhlasu. Moravské a slovenské lidové písně zaplavily vysoké školy, První máje, mládežnické veselice a estrády. Džez nejenomže zmizel úplně z povrchu naší vlasti, ale stal se symbolem západního kapitalismu a jeho úpadku [...]. Komunistická strana usilovala o to, vytvořit nový sloh života. Opírala se o slavnou Stalinovu definici nového umění: socialistický obsah v národní formě. Tu národní formu nemohlo propůjčit naší hudbě, tanci, poezii nic než právě lidové umění."

his initial rejection of the role of honor in *The Ride of the Kings*, and for those other young people in the more sophisticated capital city of Prague for whom jazz – once discarded for more local and authentic folk ensembles and songs – had now become emotionally much more powerful than folk music.

Ludvik and the ideological perception of folk music – rejection of emotions

If Helena and Jaroslav retain throughout their lives a more or less consistent perspective on folk music, Ludvik distinguishes himself by the dynamism of his personality: his relationship to folk music changes according to circumstances and his life experience.

According to Jaroslav's narrative, Ludvik, after the advent of Communism in Czechoslovakia in 1948, initially supports the new Socialist ideology, and subscribes in particular to its conception that art has a key role to play in the construction of the new social order under the rubric of Socialist Realism. Let us recall that "Socialist Realism" had been defined in 1934 at the First Congress of Soviet Writers as the representation of life not conceived as a dead thing nor as an objective reality, but as a "reality in its revolutionary development"¹⁷, that is, the reality of an imagined future liberated from class conflict. If literature was already a matter of State policy in 1934 in the Soviet Union, music would nevertheless be spared until 1948, the date of the Congress of the Composers' Unions, before it, too, fell within the purview of centralized state control. Therefore, when Andrei Zhdanov, the Communist Party official from Moscow responsible for Soviet cultural policy, launched the diktat of Socialist Realism in Czechoslovakia in 1948, it applied to all spheres of artistic endeavor. Since folk art came within the category of music firmly supported by the new regime, Ludvik, as a convinced Communist, became an enthusiastic partisan of folk music as well and would have claimed "that folk music had miraculous powers. It could engender the dominant musical style of an entire period."¹⁸

It is striking how many common points there are between Ludvik's insistence to his country friends that they cherish the heritage of folk art¹⁹, and Zhdanov's speech at the 1948 Congress about music. Zhdanov speaks of

17 Andrei Zhdanov. *On Literature, Music and Philosophy*. Transl. by Eleanor Fox, Stella Jackson and Harold Feldt. Chapter 1: "Speech at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934". URL: https://www.marxists.org/subject/art/lit_crit/zhdanov/lit-music-philosophy.htm [last accessed 23/01/2019].

18 *The Joke*. P. 138. *Žert*. P. 140: "Lidová hudba má zázračnou moc. Z ní může vyrůst obecný hudební sloh epochy."

19 See Chapter 6 of Part 4.

“contemporary Western bourgeois music” as “a music of decadence”, and advocates the development of Soviet music which would be based on the following statement of Glinka about the relationship between the people and the artists: “The people create the music – we, the artists, merely arrange.”²⁰ Ludvik, for his part, speaks of “a new age” where “we needed to purge the everyday musical culture of hit-tune clichés, clichéd tunes, of the kitsch that the bourgeois had used to force-feed the people”, and where “we needed to replace them with an original and genuine art of the people”²¹. Both resort to similar oxymoronic formulas: “internationalism grows where national culture flourishes”, declares Zhdanov²²; “socialist content in national form” claims Jaroslav, repeating Ludvik’s teachings in quoting Stalin.

Zhdanov’s and Ludvik’s theories about the emotional power of music are also similar: they are based on the idea that folk music gives a sense of social cohesion, on both the level of its creation and its reception. According to Zhdanov, the new music, which enabled the disclosure of “the wealth of the inner world of our people”, is “capable of striking [not] only one answering note, or only a few strings”, but of bringing into resonance many strings of the human soul, and is thus the only one able to truly move: it opposes itself to the music of bourgeois composers that represents “a rejection of the classical heritage under the banner of innovation, a rejection of the idea of the popular origin of music, and of service to the people, in order to gratify the individualistic emotions”, as well as to a formalistic “inexpressive” music that “ignores the normal human emotions and jars the mind and nervous system”²³. As to Ludvik, he explains that in Romanticism “Poets create in order to express themselves, to say what it is that makes them unique”, whereas “in the folk song, one does not stand out from others but joins with them [...] Every song has many creators.”²⁴ Zhdanov, speaking rather from the point of view of the collective impact and responsiveness to folk music, and Ludvik from one of collective expression and creativity, contrast both the individualistic sentiments of the Romantics and the bourgeois with the collective artistic emotions of Socialism.

20 Andrei Zhdanov. On Literature (as note 17). Chapter 3: “On Music: Concluding Speech at a Conference of Soviet Music Workers, 1948”.

21 *The Joke*. P. 138. *Žert*. P. 140: “Přišla nová doba [...]. Musíme vytlačit z obecné hudební kultury všedního dne odrhovačky a šlágry, bezduché kýče, kterými měšťáci krmili lid. Na jejich místo musí nastoupit skutečné, původní umění lidu.”

22 Andrei Zhdanov. On Literature (as note 17). Chapter 3.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *The Joke*. P. 140. *Žert*. P. 142: “Básník tvoří, aby vyjádřil sebe sama, svou jedinečnost a svou odlišnost. Lidovou písní se člověk neodlišoval, nýbrž spojoval s ostatními [...]. Každá píseň měla mnoho tvůrců.”

Interestingly, if Ludvik is perceived by Jaroslav as a staunch Communist and a pompous theoretician using grandiose words, the image Ludvik has of himself appears in quite a different light. Let us examine one key passage where Ludvik speaks about that time – here in a slightly modified version because the English translation does not convey all the connotations present in the Czech original and to which we would like to draw attention:

At that time it was very *fashionable* to sing folk songs, and to do so not like schoolchildren but in a rough voice with arm thrust upwards, that is, *pretending* to be a genuine man of the people²⁵, whose mother had brought him into the world under a cimbalon during a village dance. Being the only genuine Moravian in the Natural Sciences Division had won me certain privileges: on every special occasion, at meetings, celebrations, on the First of May, I was always asked to take up my clarinet and, with two or three other amateurs from among my fellow students *to imitate* a Moravian band.²⁶ So we had marched in the May Day parade for the past two years, and Zemanek, who was good-looking and liked to *show off*²⁷ – *put on a borrowed* folk costume and joined us, dancing, waving his arms in the air, and singing. Though he was born and bred in Prague and had never set foot in Moravia, he enjoyed *playing the village swain*, and I couldn't help liking him. I was glad that the music of my small homeland, from time immemorial a paradise of folk art, was so popular, so loved.²⁸ [emphasis added]

The language of this passage conveys thus two different semantic fields. The first is the one of imitation and fake: it was “fashionable” “pretending to be a genuine man of the people”; Ludvik, as the “only genuine Moravian”, was

25 The English translation says: “in the guise of a man of the people”.

26 The English translation says: “join two or three other amateurs from among my fellow students in a makeshift Moravian band”.

27 The English translation says: “liked to be the center of attention”.

28 *The Joke*. P. 40 (slightly modified version). *Žert*. P. 44: “Byla to v té době velká móda zpívat lidové písně a zpívat je ne školácky, ale z rukou nad hlavou a trochu surovým hlasem a tvářit se přitom jako opravdu *lidový* člověk, kterého matka porodila při nějaké tancovačce pod cimbálem. Já jsem byl na přírodovědecké fakultě vlastně jediný skutečný Moravský Slovák, což mi přinášelo jakási privilegia; při každé slavnostní příležitosti, ať při některých schůzích, oslavách nebo při Prvním máji, vybízeli mne soudruzi, abych vytáhl klarinet a imitoval s dvěma třemi amatéry, kteří se našli mezi kolegy, slováckou kapelu. Takto šli jsme po dva roky v májovém průvodu a Zemánek, protože to byl hezký kluk a rád se předváděl, šel z námi, oblečen do vypůjčeného lidového kroje, tančil v pochodu, vzpažoval ruku do výše a zpíval. Tento rodilý Pražák, který na Slovácku nikdy nebyl, hrál si zálibně na lidového šuhaje a já jsem se na něho díval s přátelstvím, protože jsem byl šťasten, že hudba mého domova, který byl odedávna eldorádem lidového umění, je tak oblíbena a milována.”

often asked with other students “to imitate a Moravian band”; Zemanek “liked to show off”, put on “a borrowed costume” and “enjoyed playing the village swain”. The vocabulary Ludvik uses to describe the Communist celebrations suggest that he is not fooled, that he is in some way entirely conscious that the Czech traditions and Moravian popular roots they try to capture are not authentic, but merely imitative, and that the whole thing is a travesty. This semantic field, nevertheless, is drowned in another semantic field, one of pleasure and entertainment, which clearly outweighs the first one. The traits of discipline and intolerance which Jaroslav remembers in his friend have completely vanished in Ludvik’s own perception of himself; instead, Ludvik presents himself as a casual person who “is glad” to take part in these ceremonies because, even if they are inauthentic, they are grounded in friendship and memories of his native village, where folk art still played an important role. The two fields therefore do not contradict each other, but rather combine to give an image of studied staging and behaviors that seem to be merely part of innocent play, devoid of any subversive element and do not lead to dire consequences. It is, really, just a joke.

We soon see though that jokes are not as innocent as they look and that the Communist regime has little sense of humor in matters of its doctrine and legitimacy.²⁹ After having written, ostensibly as a joke, a postcard to his girlfriend containing the sentence “Optimism is the opium of the people”, Ludvik is expelled from the Party, dismissed from his university, and after a short stay in his native village, sent to work in the mines of Ostrava, all without any means of defending himself. It appears that the person most responsible for imposing this punishment is none other than the Party Chairman of the students, Pavel Zemanek, the self-described great lover of Moravian folk songs. From this time, Ludvik comes to associate folklore and folk music with his own reversal of fortune and, as a result, begins to hate what he once embraced. For example, when during his stay in his home village he reluctantly takes part in Jaroslav’s wedding, a wedding that is supposed to follow exactly the old and folkloric popular customs, he feels uncomfortable and sees everywhere what he views as a lack of authenticity: “The sorrow that kept me from joining the drunken wedding party had sensitized me to the chloroform seeping into the clear waters of these folk rituals.” And the Czech text,

29 Burt Feintuch shows very well how the traditional link between folklore and joke, a “joke” at the same time understood as a “formal model” and an “affective metaphor”, has been broken, or at least inverted in its communist version: “In the world portrayed by *The Joke*, jokes are not funny and joking speech acts are untenable in informal interactions [...]. Thus the genre’s form is recognizable, but its affect is inverted. No one laughs.” When one makes jokes in this world, “things [always] turn out differently from what one might expect”. See Burt Feintuch. “The Joke, Folk Culture, and Milan Kundera’s *The Joke*”. *Western Folklore* 46, No. 1 (1987): p. 21-35.

a little bit longer and with a certain number of polemical connotations that have been erased (with Kundera's agreement) in the translations, continues here with a significant sentence missing in the English translations: "and at the bottom of this apparent spontaneity, I saw the speck of the fake"³⁰. Here, his perception of the folk wedding ceremony as comedy and imitation is no longer for him an innocent entertainment, but instead something almost criminal, that fills him with "disgust, disgust, disgust..."

It is in this state of anger and contempt for all that lies behind a false mask of beauty and tradition that Ludvik is brought to work in the mines as punishment for his "joke". To express what has happened to him, he uses a musical metaphor: "When music plays, we hear the melody, forgetting that it is only one of the modes of time; when the orchestra falls silent, we hear time; time itself. I was living in a pause."³¹ A "pause" is now beginning for him: a pause in his revolt, a pause in his feelings, and a pause in his relationship with music as well. In these difficult years of hard labor and effective imprisonment, when the state-sanctioned process of blunting his sensibility is doing its ruthless work, music completely disappears from Ludvik's life.

After his return from the mines to "normal" life, Ludvik's behavior is marked by irony, skepticism and cynicism towards all forms of easy sentimentality, and he is particularly distrustful of those emotions which were being manipulated by the regime's popularization of a supposedly national heritage. Everywhere he can, Ludvik unmasks the pretense and hypocrisy of the period. He does so when invited by Jaroslav to listen to a rehearsal of his ensemble, where not only old traditional songs are played, but also those composed in folk art melodies yet with new lyrics on socialist themes such as those about the poor, the peasants, and the tortured under German occupation. To Ludvik, these contemporary works are unnatural and false: propaganda, pseudo-folk music, and pseudo-Moravian songs. Put another way, he denounces them as being mere agit-prop³² or even "*recipés* of agit-prop", as the Czech version says.³³

Ludvik is the only character in the novel to see that the Communists harnessed the emotional power of folk music to increase their level of internal control over the population. The community created by music used in this

30 *The Joke*. P. 47. *Žert*. P. 51: "Smutek, který mi bránil ztotožnit se s opilým svačebním veselím, umožnil mi, že jsem ucítil v pramenitosti těch lidových obřadů pach chloroformu." And this additional sentence: "a na dně té zdánlivé spontánnosti jsem uviděl smítko falše".

31 *The Joke*. P. 53. *Žert*. P. 57: "Když hraje hudba, slyšíme melodii, zapomínajíce, že je to jen jedna z podob času; když orchestr zmlkne, slyšíme čas; čas sam. Žil jsem v pauze."

32 Acronym of *отдел агитации и пропаганды* (Department for Agitation and Propaganda).

33 *The Joke*. P. 155. *Žert*. P. 157.

way is a fictive one: it is bound by an emotion carefully guided by political and ideological imperatives, an emotion that does not endeavor to bring people to care about one another, but on the contrary, is one device among many allowing people to denounce each other. Ludvik thereby highlights the pernicious path that leads from a pure aesthetical (musical) emotion to its political hijacking. Here, Ludvik is clearly the mouthpiece of Kundera. The author observed in *Les Testaments trahis* that:

Après 1948, pendant les années de la révolution communiste dans mon pays natal, j'ai compris le rôle éminent que joue l'aveuglement lyrique au temps de la Terreur qui, pour moi, était l'époque où "le poète régnait avec le bourreau" (*La vie est ailleurs*) [...]. Lyrisme, lyrisation, discours lyrique, enthousiasme lyrique font partie intégrante de ce qu'on appelle le monde totalitaire; ce monde, ce n'est pas le goulag, c'est le goulag dont les murs extérieurs sont tapissés de vert et devant lesquels on danse. Plus que la Terreur, la lyrisation de la Terreur fut pour moi un traumatisme. À jamais, j'ai été vacciné contre les tentations lyriques.³⁴

Similarly, in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, he mentions how the day after the execution by the Communists of Závěš Kalandra, a Surrealist writer accused of betrayal, young Czech people in a holiday mood were encouraged to sing and dance circle dances [*kolo*], and round dances [*krub*], in other words *rondos* throughout Prague as a way of masking the darker emotions invoked by Kalandra's death.³⁵

All these considerations on emotions and Communism provide a possible explanation for the issue raised at the start of this discussion: namely, why Kundera took up a literary career instead of following in the musical footsteps of his father. As he wrote in another essay called *The Curtain* [*Le Rideau*, 2005], invoking Hegel, music is the most lyrical of all the arts because it is able to capture the most secret movements of the human soul that cannot find proper expression in words.³⁶ Yet if for Hegel this notion was a positive quality, Kundera flees from lyricism since he understood that feelings and emotions can be placed in the service of ignoble political ends, and so he flees from music as well. The only exceptions Kundera makes to these pronouncements is for certain modern composers who, like Varèse and Xenakis, create sound-worlds that speak of a life freed of aggressive and burdensome human subjectivity, and evoke the inhuman beauty of a world without men.³⁷ But these are just exceptions in music, whereas in "the art of

34 Kundera, *Testaments* (as note 13). P. 191.

35 Milan Kundera. *Knihy smíchu a zapomnění*. Toronto: Sixty-eight, 1981. P. 73-74: "Taky jsem tančil kolo", "Tehdy jsem si uvědomil magický význam kruhu."

36 Milan Kundera. *Le Rideau. Œuvres II*, Paris: Gallimard, 2011. P. 1003.

37 Milan Kundera, *Testaments* (as note 14). P. 71.

the novel", he can more easily adopt a position of non-identification with politics, religion, ideology, morality – a position where he can look at the world with a lucid and disenchanted gaze.³⁸

Folk music, manipulated sentimentalism and the return of true aesthetic emotions

Nevertheless, *The Joke* is not as dark a vision as may appear to be the case with respect to emotions and music. It rebounds and finishes in a completely unexpected way. Ludvik, the novel's most dispassionate character, the one who best controls his emotions because of the hard experience which prompted his critical stance on lyricism and Communism, catches himself being moved by *The Ride of the Kings*. He suddenly notices that he feels a deep aesthetic emotion as he watches it pass:

To my astonishment, the initial mistrust with which I watched the straggly departure of the Ride soon vanished, and all at once I was completely enthralled by the colorful cavalcade [...]. I wanted to stand there, to close my eyes and just listen: I realized that there, in the middle of a Moravian village, I was hearing verse, verse in the primeval meaning of the word [...]. It was a music sublime and *polyphonic* [emphasis in the text]: each of the heralds declaimed in a monotone, on the same note throughout, but each on a different pitch, so that the voices combined unwittingly into a chord. Moreover [...] each started his call at a different moment, at a different house, so that the voices came to the ear from here and there.³⁹

We can here observe again the impact of Janáček's conception of music as a dramatic space made up of a polyphony of emotions. As a result of perceiving the rich emotional content of folk music and the deep aesthetic emotion awakened in him that follows, at the book's end, Ludvik makes a true declaration of love to this world of folklore, with its folk costumes, folk songs and cimbalom bands, which he recognizes as being his "home" [*domov*].

38 *Ibid.* P. 191.

39 *The Joke*. P. 263. *Žert*. P. 259-260: "A tak počáteční nedůvěra, s níž jsem pozoroval zmateně se rozjíždějící Jízdu králů, k mému údivu ze mnie opadala a já jsem byl pojednou zcela zahleděn na barevný jízdni houf pomalu se šinoucí domek od domku [...]. Chtělo se mi zůstat stát, zavřít oči a jenom poslouchat: uvědomoval jsem si, že právě tady, uprostřed slovácké vesnice, slyším *verše*, verše v prapůvodním smyslu toho slova [...]. Byla to nádherná a *mnohohlasá* hudba: každý z vyvolávačů volal své verše monotónně na jednom tóně, ale každý na jiném, takže se hlasy spojovaly bezděčně v akord; přitom každý začal své vyvolávání jindy, každý u jiného domku, takže se hlasy ozývaly z různých stran a v nestejnou chvíli."

How could this sudden turnaround occur? Ludvik simply realizes that folklore in itself is “innocent”; what for Ludvik made it disgusting and contemptible was the misuse, as he saw it, of these customs and songs from a simpler time. And yet the Ride, contrary to what it was at the beginning of the Communist era, and even if it was, at the time of the novel’s telling, still officially said to be an integral part of Communist education, had in practice been abandoned by the regime. Abandoned by pomposity and publicity, by political propaganda, by the force-feeding of social utopias. Since this festival had ceased to be effective for the purposes to which the Communists had previously used it, it regained in the eyes of Ludvik a legitimacy and authenticity, as well as spontaneity and creativity.

In this realization that something is stirring in himself, Ludvik senses at the same time that the lines that were cut between himself and others he once loved are in the process of being reconnected: he feels a surge of affection for Jaroslav, whom he had refused to recognize a few hours earlier precisely because he was a folklore expert; and Lucie, the only woman he had really loved but never understood because of the blunted sensibility of his youth, in the end appears to him as a comforting image. Folk music which appeared throughout the whole book as a false bond between the characters, appears at the very end as a means of recognition, understanding and reconnection between them.

Consequently, what is condemned in *The Joke* is not music, nor folk music in particular, as the source of emotions, but a music directed by ideology which produces sentimental unison and falsified emotions, presents lyricism as an irrefutable truth and elevates it to the rank of a Socialist value *par excellence*. Only the cleansing of such ideological contamination from these older folk traditions can restore to this music and folklore free aesthetic emotions from which they are able once again to draw sustenance.⁴⁰

40 We should mention that a contemporary Polish film dedicated to the 1950s in communist Poland, *The Cold War* [*Zimna Wojna*, 2018] by Paweł Pawlikowski, deals with precisely the same issue of hijacking folk music for ideological purposes.