

JAZZ IN CZECH CULTURE AFTER WORLD WAR ONE: CLASH OF WESTERN MODERNITY WITH CENTRAL EUROPEAN TRADITIONALISM

MILOŠ CALDA

Abstract

The paper deals with the reception of American culture in the interwar years, the time when the Czech cultural elites tried to abandon the traditional Central European patterns and reoriented themselves to embrace those of Western Europe and North America. The reorientation was accompanied by the discovery of exotic new genres like film and jazz. Perhaps surprisingly, the Western culture was enthusiastically received by the Left. The two prominent representatives of this direction were the left-leaning intellectual Emil František Burian and the Liberated Theatre (Osvobozené divadlo) with such individualities as the composer Jaroslav Ježek and its two main protagonists, playwrights and actors Jiří Voskovec and Jan Werich. The paper focuses on the first Czech book on jazz music, E. F. Burian's *Jazz* (1928), in which the author, apart from many misjudgements, constructed a novel model of culture hitherto unknown in Central Europe, the model that combined sports, social patterns, lifestyle, modernity, and left-wing politics. The difficulties with finding out what jazz really was are also treated as well as the factor of "technological reproducibility" (W. Benjamin). Lastly, the contribution of Vladimír Polívka, the leading informant of the Czech society about musical life in the United States in the interwar period, is assessed.

Keywords: jazz, American popular music, cultural reception, modernity, cultural Left, E. F. Burian, Jaroslav Ježek, Vladimír Polívka, age of technological reproducibility

Introduction

The paper examines the influx of American popular culture into Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of World War One. It was especially jazz

music and films that made great impact, providing common experience for the young generation. The enthusiastic reception of American popular culture was a part of a broader cultural reorientation, departing from the patterns and styles that had prevailed during the last decades of the Habsburg monarchy. The American cultural imports were embraced, above all, by the political left, exemplified by Emil František Burian and the artists associated with the *Osvobozené divadlo* theater. On the other hand, the more conservatively minded part of the Czech public was uncomfortable with the fact that jazz music was created by Negroes (as the Afro-Americans were labelled then). In the reception of jazz by the Czech conservative musical critics in the 1920s, there were also anti-Semitic overtones. On the other hand, many young Czech composers in the 1920s were as strongly inspired by jazz as Igor Stravinsky or Eric Satie a decade before.

Reorientation – from Central Europe to the West

In the post-WW1 period, the Czech society, now living in an independent state, strove for general political and cultural reorientation, for the so-called *odrakouštění* (de-Austrianization). With new self-confidence, it tried to get away from the traditional *Mitteleuropa* of Friedrich Naumann, from the Central European (above all Austrian and German) sphere of political and cultural influence, embracing cultures of the West (i.e. of the nations west of the Rhine and beyond), above all those of France and of the English-speaking countries, including the previously semi-exotic United States.

Modernization, new rhythms and dances, jazz

The process of Czechs' cultural reorientation coincided with the gradual modernization of lifestyle. The Great War, as World War One was called until the second such came, de-legitimized value systems, dominant cultural patterns and, to a varying extent, even political establishments in the warring countries. There are numerous examples of the war trauma in world literature (Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Henri Barbusse, Erich M. Remarque, etc.).

This process was accompanied with another major development, the onset of the “Age of Technological Reproducibility” (Walter Benjamin) which helped to spread cultural artefacts to unprecedented numbers of people.

The arrival of jazz to Czechoslovakia is just a fraction of the whole story of the generational transition to modernity, the transition that was by no means limited to Czechoslovakia. In the 1920s, most of the important European young and not-so-young composers wrote music that was greatly influenced by new rhythms and dances (above all by ragtime, the immediate predecessor of jazz).

These composers included Eric Satie, Francis Poulenc, Georges Auric (author of *Les feuilles mortes*), Igor Stravinsky, Darius Milhaud (whose *La Création du Monde* (1923) is strikingly similar melodically to George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* (January 1924)), Arthur Honegger, Paul Hindemith, Kurt Weill. In the Czech context, the jazz-influenced composers included Bohuslav Martinů, Erwin Schulhoff, and, above all, Jaroslav Ježek.¹

Robert Goffin, one of the first Belgian jazz musicians (and fans), remembers the epiphany he experienced in Brussels in 1919 when he heard the Creole jazz clarinetist and soprano saxophonist Sidney Bechet: “Something new was born for me that took its place next to the poems of Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars as well as to the drawings of Henri Rousseau and Chagall.”²

Ragtime found its way to Prague before World War One already. It was played in the Montmartre café in the Old Town’s Řetězová Street, where Irving Berlin’s immortal standard Alexander’s Ragtime Band was heard in 1912, only a year after its publication in New York. A female “Apache dancer”, whose artistic name “Emča Revoluce” suggested anarchist sympathies, performed to the tune.

Throughout the 1920s, the Czech public had little, if any contacts with the American jazz scene. The jazz the Czechs heard was filtered by the musicians from Paris, London, and Berlin. Perhaps the most important

¹ Due to space limitations, the present contribution will not deal with Ježek and the *Osvobozené divadlo*.

² Robert Goffin, *Jazz from Congo to Swing*, London 1946. Sidney Bechet traveled as far as the Soviet Union in 1926, reportedly giving guest performances in Kiiv, Odessa, and Kharkiv. <http://www.musicianguide.com/biographies/1608001422/Sidney-Bechet.html> Last access on November 25, 2007.

Czech jazz concert of the decade took place on December 19, 1928, when the English Jack Hylton Orchestra performed in Prague.

It was by no means immediately obvious what jazz really was. Even such American literary greats like Francis Scott Fitzgerald, the author of the *Stories of the Jazz Age*, seemed to believe that jazz was just the glitzy upper-middle-class popular music performed exclusively by whites, the music that we know from most of the recordings made by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. An understanding of the real jazz music was all the more difficult for the distant Czech public. However, jazz impressed even in its imported and “bowdlerized” form.

The Czech reception of jazz and the standards of information on this genre can be seen from the definition of jazz in *Masarykův slovník naučný* (1927). It should be noted that jazz was still confused then with popular dances.³

The leading and by no means traditionalist Czech musicological periodical *Listy hudební matice* brought an article in 1923 by the French poet and critic René Chalupt, in which its author rendered quite well the perception (or misperception) of jazz in post-WWI Europe.⁴ It is regrettable and telling at the same time that Chalupt did not give his readers a single name indicating what kind of music he had in mind. It is certain that some American commercial bands rising to fame and stardom in the 1920s were really “very

³ “JAZZ, in American Negro dialect a dance which had its predecessors in all dances based on rhythmic tension. Imported to Europe before the World War already, e.g. Cake Walk, Foxtrot, Shimmy, etc. This semi-barbaric and semi-exotic dance became an expression of postwar Europe. Its rhythm is syncopated, being regularly interrupted by piano or yelling tones of wind instruments.” [„JAZZ (džáz), v am. černošském dialektu tanec, který má své předchůdce ve všech tancích, rodících se z rytmického vzruchu. Do Evr. přivezen již před 1. svět. vál., na př. Cake Walk, Foxtrot, Shimmy, aj. Tento polobarbarský a poloexotický tanec se stal výrazovým uměním povál. Evr. Podstatou jeho rytmu je synkopický původ, průběh rytmu je pravidelně přerušován klavírem n. vřískavými tóny dechových nástrojů.“] *Masarykův slovník naučný*, Vol. III, p. 732, Praha 1927.

⁴ „The only new musical element that the present-day light music brings and that we do not owe to some composers of this special genre resulted from general craze for entertainment that would disperse boredom from other pastimes. I have j a z z – b a n d in mind, at first with devilish fascination as a kind of mixed drink but soon showing with its comical din monotonousness and gray taste that is no longer able to cover up the tastelessness of this beverage. These seemingly wild American sounds are very tame in reality and display musical poverty bordering on misery.“ [„Jediný nový hudební element, jež dnešní lehká hudba přináší, a za nějž některým komponistům tohoto zvláštního směru nijak nejsme zavázáni, přiveden byl všeobecným blázněním po zábavě, která by rozptýlila nudu z ostatních vyražení. Mním j a z z – b a n d, zprvu ďábelsky fascinující jako některý druh cocktailu, brzy však prozrazující svým komickým hlomozem jednotvárnost a fádni příchutí, která není

tame in reality” and displayed “musical poverty”. However, as it is testified by some recordings by e.g. Louis Armstrong and Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton made at the time of Chalupt’s writing, the quality of at least a part of jazz of the early 1920s was far better than suggested by the French author.

Even the American musicians were rather ambiguous about jazz music and its origin. The modernist composer Marion Bauer tried to define jazz, in a rather impressionistic manner, in her article for *La revue musicale*.⁵ There is no doubt that her exposition of what she understood as jazz was much finer and less prejudiced than that of Chalupt’s. She was able to discern in jazz the unique combination of “barbarism” and complexity as well as the special way of handling instruments by Negro musicians.

s to déle maskovati nechutnosti tohoto nápoje. Tyto zdánlivě divoké americké zvuky jsou ve skutečnosti nadměru krotké a projevují hudební chudobu, hraničící až na bídu...“] René Chalupt, „The Light Muse“, [Lehká musa], transl. from French by dr. Josef Vymětal, reprinted from „Chesterien“ review). *Listy hudební matice* (LHM) 1923, No. 5 February 20, 1923), p. 112.

⁵ “[Jazz-band] is the only original manifestation of contemporary American music, whose origin is to be found among the underclass of San Francisco /sic/: ‘jazz’ is the ‘ragtime’ of yesterday, of ‘cake-walk’ and ‘coon songs’ of the day before yesterday. It is something that is always based on the negro song, characteristic, both in its secular or spiritual form, for its syncopation and usually for its pentatonic scale, ie a scale without the fourth and seventh tone. The terms ‘jazz’ and ‘ragtime’ are used today in America as synonyms; however, ‘jazz’ is a kind of instrumentation while ‘ragtime’ is rather a syncopated and entrancing rhythm... ‘Jazz-band’ is an orchestra consisting of string and wind instruments able to glissandos as well as the percussion instruments. Only the Negroes can play the real ‘jazz’ with glissandos as they should be, with the required sordino effects of the brass instruments, with the use of the winds at extremes of pitch, with the original use of the percussion instruments, with all the characteristics of barbaric and, at the same time, complex music which resists musical notation. Many of them play just by ear only, having no knowledge of notation and improvising the music with very complex rhythms.” [„Jazz-band“... je jediný původní projev dnešní americké hudby, zjev, jehož vznik nutno hledat v prostředí lidové spodiny San Franciska; „jazz“ je včerejší „ragtime“, předvčerejší „cake-walk“ a „coon songs“, a vždycky je to něco, co má podkladem černošskou píseň, jejímž charakteristickým znakem, ať už jde o melodii světskou či duchovní, jsou synkopy a obyčejně i pětitéonová stupnice t.j. škála bez 4. a 7. stupně. Dnes se užívá v Americe slov „jazz“ a „ragtime“ jako synonym, ačkoli „jazz“ značí spíš způsob instrumentace, kdežto „ragtime“ znamená strhující synkopovaný rytmus... „Jazz-band“ je orchestr složený z nástrojů smyčcových i dechových schopných glissanda, a z nástrojů bicích. Jedině černoši dokážou pravý „jazz“ s glissandy, jak se patří, s náležitým přidušením plechů, s vytěžením dechových nástrojů v krajních polohách, s originálním přednesem na bicích nástrojích, s celým tím rázem hudby barsbarské i složité, která se žádnými značkami nedá zaznamenat. Mnozí hráli také hrají jen podle sluchu; neznají not a improvizují hudbu velmi komplikovaných rytmů.“] Marion Bauer in „La revue musicale“, *Listy Hudební matice* Vol. 8, pp. 316–317 (May 26, 1924). It should be noted here that the text as reprinted in *Listy Hudební matice* lacks cohesion; it is impossible to say what part was written by Marion Bauer and what was added, as „hidden explanation“, to serve the Czech reader by the *Listy* editors. This ambiguousness applies especially to the erroneous localization of the origin of jazz to San Francisco.

In 1926, *Listy Hudební matice* brought another text on jazz music, a translation of an article by the French musical critic Raymond Petit “Contemporary American music” [Dnešní americká hudba].⁶ Petit’s assessment of *Rhapsody in Blue* by George Gershwin was in essence positive, especially as regards the “colours” of the music and the piano score, neglecting, perhaps, the wonderful melodic inventiveness Gershwin showed in his masterpiece. Petit states that the music of American composers adds a new and very beneficial note to the immense concert of contemporary music.

The first Czech book on jazz by Emil František Burian

Emil František Burian (1904–1959) was a man of many talents: a poet, a singer, a lyricist, an actor, a musician, a composer, a playwright, a theatre organizer as well as a director. He became one of the artists associated with the group of left-wing vanguard writers and intellectuals called *Devětsil* (1920–1930). Burian also collaborated with the *Osvobozené divadlo* theatre (Liberated Theatre) during its early years. In 1923, as a nineteen-year-old, he joined – fatefully as it was to turn out – the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

In 1928, the Aventinum Publishers released his *Jazz*, one of the first books devoted to this type of music. From the perspective of our knowledge of what jazz is, Burian’s book is full of misunderstandings. Its author was very much impressed by what we now consider to have been

⁶ “George Gershwin wrote blues and foxtrot tunes that are now danced to all over the world. With Irving Berlin, he ranks among the most popular composers of the genre. For one of the most outstanding jazz orchestras, the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, he wrote a piano composition *Rhapsody in Blue*, a very interesting and brilliantly colourful work, in which the jazz orchestra – saxophones, percussion instruments etc. – are exquisitely wed with the piano technique, reminding us of Liszt. The rhapsody would have certainly benefited from more concentration as it lack the proper connection of themes, although the genre admits a certain looseness.” [Jiří Gerschwin /sic!/ napsal přímo blues a fox-trotty, jež se tančí po celém světě. Je to skladatel spolu s Irvingem Berlinem v tom oboru nejpoblárnější; vytvořil však pro jeden z nejznamenitějších jazzových orchestrů amerických, totiž pro orchestr Pavla Whitemana, skladbu klavírní, nazvanou „Rhapsody in blue“, což jest dílo nadmíru zajímavé, oslnivého koloritu, kde orchestr jazzový: saxofony, bicí nástroje atd. snoubí se znamenitě s technikou klavírní, upomínající na Liszta. Než tato rhapsodie by jistě získala, kdyby byla soustředěnější; není tu totiž náležitě souvislosti themat, i když máme na mysli jistou volnost, již připouští tento genre.] *Listy Hudební matice*, Vol. 10, 1926, p. 69.

commercial popular music of the time, e.g. by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, which he knew from records only.

As a good left-wing nonconformist, Burian denounced the existing “bourgeois” culture as *vymrskaná* (an emotional Czech word for “exhausted” or “depleted”) (p. 40). The 1920s were a decade combining several trends, or isms: escapism from the existing patterns of both high and popular culture, a new embrace of “barbarism” and the continuation of pre-war exoticism (remember Picasso’s African-style masks).

At the same time, new forms of art and communication based on mechanical devices strengthened or appeared for the first time, especially the film (remaining silent until 1927), the gramophone record and the radio. All the three made possible a broader dissemination of cultural artefacts.

Emil František Burian’s *Jazz* was in one respect a specialist musicological analysis of what he knew of jazz, ie its “sweet” form as it was known from the recordings of technically perfect orchestras of Paul Whiteman or Jack Hylton, which were, however, mere white derivatives of real jazz.⁷ However, Burian’s book was also a cultural and political manifesto. Burian was a card-carrying and enthusiastic communist, and the slogan *épatez le bourgeois* was very high on his agenda. He attacked the traditional Czech cultural establishment, Vienna waltzes, romantic classical music, Paris lasciviousness, etc., writing off the dominant high culture.⁸ His rejection of traditional art was combined with Marinetti-like adoration of modern technology representing the to him the direct opposite of traditional sentimentality.⁹

⁷ The word „real“ is used here in the sense of Milton „Mezz“ Mezzrow’s autobiographical book (co-authored with Bernard Wolfe) *Really the Blues* (1946), the title of which was borrowed from the eponymic Sidney Bechet’s recording made in 1938.

⁸ “The dramatic wordiness has become redundant in our century. We need neither Shakespeare nor Beethoven... A single smile of Lilian Gish, a single saxophone solo, weighs more than all the ‘Rings’, ‘Dreams’ and ‘Master Builders’.” [Dramatická rozvláčenost je zbytečná tomuto století. Nepotřebujeme Shakespeara ani Beethovena... Jediný úsměv Liliány Gishové, jediná saxofonová pasáž vyváží všechny „Ringy“, „Sny“ a „Stavitele“]. Burian, *Jazz*, p. 58. Lilian Gish (1893–1993), a major but somewhat forgotten Hollywood star, appeared between 1912 and 1987 in 85 silent and 41 post-silent movies, died 6 months before turning 100. Some of these films were adaptations of major novels like William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, etc.

⁹ “Electric vibrations have replaced the smell of violets and the shine of the romantically imbecile Moon. Nightingales jug at the fusty gate of demolished ideas of traditional eclectics, who are destined to sink slowly.” [...elektrické chvění proudí tam, kde voněly fialky a svítil romanticky přiblblý měsíček. Slavíci tlukou již jen na ztuchlá vrata zbořených idejí tradičních eklektiků, jimž je shůry dáno pozvolna skomírat.] Burian, *Jazz*, p. 9.

On the other hand, Burian highly appreciated Bedřich Smetana's music as well as commercial products of Tin Pan Alley (the hub of America's music business then) or Josephine Baker, who represented for Burian a quintessence of black beauty free of any lasciviousness (he adored her so much that he included a nude photo of hers in the book).¹⁰

A special chapter (No. XII) was devoted to "Film character of jazz" [Jazzová filmovost]. It was just a coincidence that at the time of Burian's writing, the first "talkie" was launched in the United States, *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson.

In his *Jazz*, Burian constructed a novel model of culture hitherto unknown to Central Europe that included sports, social patterns, lifestyle, general embrace of modernity, and left-wing politics. He was very much impressed by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra in 1928; however, several years later he knew better. In his article "O jazzu"¹¹ he admitted, only five years after the publication of his seminal book, that he had "given punches in all directions" there, just trying to cause a stir. In the meantime, he had become much more critical of commercial jazz-inspired music and had discovered the real greats of jazz, above all Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.

Vladimír Polívka's Musical America

In the 1920s, *Listy Hudební matice* had their correspondent in the United States, Vladimír Polívka (1896–1948). Polívka, pianist, composer, teacher and writer, studied composition (with K. Stecker and Vítězslav Novák) and piano (with J. Procházka) at the Prague School of Music. As a member of the Czech Trio, he visited the United States. From 1923 till 1930 he taught at the

¹⁰ Burian wrote on Josephine Baker (1906-1975): „We are going to meet Josephine Baker, an ideally beautiful dancer, not because of the exoticism of the movement of her fingers, because of her long neck or her velvet belly. Her naked beauty is really worth of the censorship imposed by white priests or prophets of sensuous chastity. We are thoroughly satisfied with her as she gives the naked bodies of our beauties, especially those of Vienna and Folies Bergère, a gloriole of vulgarity. Compared to her, the renowned female dancers are nothing but forty to sixty kilograms of meat...” [„jdeme vstříc Josephině Bakerové, ideálně krásné tanečnici a opět to není exotičnost pohybů jejích prstů a štíhlého krku nebo sametového břicha. Její nahá krása je opravdu hodna zákazu bělošských kněží a proroků smyslné cudnosti. Jsme s ní dokonale spokojeni, neboť dává nahým tělům našich krásek, speciálně vídeňských a z Folies Bergère gloriolu sprostoty. Vyhlášené tanečnice jsou proti ní 40 až 60 kg masa a nic víc...]” Burian, *Jazz*, p. 38.

¹¹ „O Jazzu“, *Dancing, Společenská revue*, 1933, No. 6/7, p. 67.

United Artists Conservatory of Music in Chicago. In 1946 he became a regular member of the Czech Academy of Arts and Sciences.¹²

Some of Polívka's articles in *Listy Hudební matice* and in the daily papers were included in the posthumously published book *Hudební Amerika* [Musical America] (1949).¹³ The book brings a lot of significant information on the economic aspects of jazz. Polívka states that in 1925–1930 the United States spent 100 million dollars annually on the productions of syncopated music, with New York City, the largest consumer of this music, spending 50 million dollars per annum. About 23 thousand men and several thousand women played the saxophone or other jazz instruments there in more than 3,000 orchestras specialising in jazz. Paul Whiteman, the „King of Jazz“, paid good instrumentalists 30,000 dollars a year and his musicians earned between 200 and 500 dollars a week.¹⁴ Polívka was (wrongly) convinced that improvisation was on its way out. In his 1949 text he still saw jazz as a form of dance music.¹⁵ Polívka also devoted a special chapter to the role of mechanical reproduction in American music life. The chapter includes indispensable information on the role of music in silent movie performances, on interwar radio broadcasting in the United States, and on early radio prizes awarded to serious music composers.

Conclusion

The post-WWI cultural reorientation consisted of several major components: embrace of modernity, modernization of lifestyle, onset of the age of technological reproducibility (*Zeitalter der technischen*

¹² Biographical information on Polívka is based on „Polívka Vladimír“ in *Československý hudební slovník osob a institucí*, sv. II, Státní hudební vydavatelství Praha 1965, pp. 338–340, and „Polívka Vladimír“ in *Österreichisches biographisches Lexikon 1815–1950*, Bd. VIII, Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie d. Wissenschaften, Wien 1983, p. 180–181.

¹³ Vladimír Polívka, *Hudební Amerika, Za svobodu*, Praha 1949. The copies of the book were, in all probability, withheld from distribution then but not destroyed. Some copies appeared in Prague's used bookstores in the second half of the 1960s, together with formerly banned books by Karel Čapek, Edvard Valenta, and other authors.

¹⁴ Polívka, *Hudební Amerika*, pp. 109–110. In 1925, various models of the Ford T car were priced from 290 to 660 dollars U.S.

¹⁵ It is not known, however, when Polívka's 1949 posthumous text was really written. By 1949, some important suites had been written by Duke Ellington that can hardly be termed „dance music“. Polívka was a keen observer of the American music scene; it is testified to by the fact that he included in the book the photo of the young Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990).

Reproduzierbarkeit, the term coined by Walter Benjamin), the birth of the cultural left. In the special Czech case, it also involved the turning away from the Central European culture to those of the West. The reception of jazz by the Czech public was far from unambiguous. The authors writing about the subject confused jazz with dance music, an error not avoided by their colleagues even in the United States as well by serious novelists. The most important early Czech texts about jazz were written by Emil František Burian, an enthusiastic left-wing nonconformist. The admiration of jazz shown by the cultural left continued until after World War Two. It was only then, and especially after 1948, that jazz became a symbol of “American way of life” for the pro-western part of society and “music of spiritual poverty” for pro-Soviet and Soviet followers of the doctrine of socialist realism.¹⁶

¹⁶ See e.g. Viktor Markovič Gorodinskij, *Hudba duševní bídy*, Orbis, Praha 1952.