

**The Forbidden *Kate* and the *Prague Student*:  
Issues of nation and political context in social dances  
under Maria Theresa Habsburg**

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At first sight one would assume that dance is an absolutely apolitical cultural activity. Indeed, when we investigate the cases where a ban was imposed on it in the past, we find in most instances that this was for religious reasons. Nevertheless, in the 1740's, at the beginning of the rule of Queen Maria Theresa of Habsburg, a very hard persecution of one particular dance occurred in Bohemia, and it was for political, not religious reasons. This happened to be a dance to a Czech folk song *Kate has, Kate has...* (*Káča má, Káča má...*) as was recorded one hundred years later by the Czech poet Karel Jaromír Erben.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that this tune has survived until the present time can be seen as proof of the invincible cultural will of the Bohemian folk, because in the period mentioned, the 1740's, one had attributed to it such a strong political context that it had been strictly forbidden in the Lands of the Czech Crown, together with the dance which used to be danced to its tune: "*Here and there it often happened that, as soon as the young country men ordered the musicians to play the ancient song "Kate has, Kate has", they were liable for punishment. The soldier, the watchmen, the castle reeves and officials, all had to uphold this law, and that's why this old tune has completely died out and you cannot hear it anymore.*"<sup>2</sup> The author of these lines, Bohemian folk writer and magistrate F.J. Vavák, was born just at the very beginning of the Wars of the Austrian Succession, when Karl Albrecht Wittelsbach (Karl VII.)<sup>3</sup> strove for the Czech throne, with his claim supported by one part of the Bohemian nobility and folk.

Karl Albrecht had arrived in Prague in December 1741 and the coronation ceremony

began to be prepared. One part of Bohemia was in his hands while the other was under the administration of Maria Theresa Habsburg, who also claimed the Czech crown. There was general confusion and fighting, while Karl Albrecht proceeded deeper into the inland, supported by French troops which had invaded Prague in the autumn of 1742.

In those times there emerged a new version of text to the tune of the song *Kate has, Kate has* and the people started to sing the new words, the *Song about the Bavarian King* glorified the prosperity, which will come with the new King: instead of *Kate has, Kate has corselet with tips* they sung *Prague has, Prague has new Lord, King from Bavaria, Rejoice all Bohemians, Charles the Seventh will please you...* In 1855 ten stanzas of this new text were still known to the local historian F.A.Paroubek.

Beyond doubt these new stanzas were used as propaganda for the Bavarian Prince-elect, who promised his followers all kinds of privileges and benefits, including the promise to free them from personal servitude.

The Bavarian court had friendly contacts with the French court already from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and so with Karl Albrecht came also the French soldiers to support his claim against the Habsburgs. What makes our investigation even more interesting is the fact, that the melody of the 'forbidden' *Kate* evokes also the well-known and widely spread traditional French song "*Sur le pont d'Avignon/ on y danse, on y danse...*". Is it a coincidence or an influence? The 'original' is sometimes very difficult to distinguish from the 'influence',

especially when considering music and dance motifs. We could assume either that the French soldiers brought this tune back to France after returning from Bohemia, or that the French ‘imported’ this tune to Bohemia from France, but we couldn’t prove either of those two presumptions. It proves as difficult to find the roots of the dance tune *Sur le pont d’Avignon* in France as it does to find those of *Kate has, Kate has* in Bohemia. To make the situation even more interesting, the French song *Sur le pont d’Avignon*, together with a dance, appeared in Paris in the parody *Hipolyte et Aricie* of Charles Simon Favart on October 11 of the year 1742.<sup>4</sup>

When analyzing both these melodies, we find that they can be considered as quite identical only in the first part of the stanza. But even

here we can distinguish rhythmical differences – which can be, of course, the result of different use of accents on syllables in both languages. The first part of the Bohemian version of the melody (the oldest recorded version from 1864) is characterized by a four measure section, where the melody rises in the third measure and from the anapaestic rhythm of the previous two measures it changes into a double pyrrhic one, the closing measure being again anapaestic. The song starts, according to the accent of the Czech language on the first syllable, with the downbeat and the anapaestic rhythm is also very characteristic for the changing (or Polka) step, very much in use in Bohemian folk dances.

Fig. 1



The French version of the melody begins on the upbeat, which is in accord with the different use of accents in the French language. The anapest here changes to dactyl. I have to remark here that the written records of the song *Sur le pont d’Avignon* differ one from the other, while the ancient rhythmical structure defies the modern music system. Sometimes one finds the first eighth notes at the beginning (SS<sup>5</sup>) recorded already as a part of the first measure, sometimes they are written down as an upbeat. In that case we

would have an eight-bar period, which – contrary to the Bohemian version – is not composed of two four-bar periods. The metric rhythmical pattern of the French version would be SS / LSS / LSS / SSSS / SSSS / LSS / LSS / SSSS / L. The pattern of the Bohemian version is SSD / SSL / SSSS / SSL / SSL / SSL / SSSS / SSL. The second parts of the two tunes shown no similarity to each other, yet one cannot claim that it could not have been so in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.



Fig. 2

The fight for the Czech Crown ended in spring of the year 1743 and on May 12 of that year Maria Theresa Habsburg was proclaimed Queen of the Lands of the Czech Crown. After that, she started to suppress everything which might recall anything connected with the opposition against her claim. And so both the song *Kate has, Kate has (Prague has, Prague has)* and the dance connected to the tune were banned.

We are not able to reconstruct the original dance to the tune *Kate has, Kate has*, as Bohemian and Moravian folk dances started to be recorded only in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. We can use only the testimony of one lady called Kateřina Boušková (1.11.1810 – 29.12.1898) from the 1830's: "While singing this song one danced in the manner of *obkročák* in the circle (circling), forwards, backwards and in the circle." The folk dance *obkročák* was a Bohemian folk dance which is still danced in some regions of Bohemia and together with *polka* and *sousedská* belongs to the basic typical Bohemian dances, which were recorded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a couple dance, danced in double time, the couple turns a quarter or even a half turn around the axis with each step while progressing along the dancing space, in a similar manner as in the waltz.

The dance "do kola" (in the circle, circling) cannot be precisely defined, but we have testimonies that such dances were connected with the Bohemian way of dancing in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. For instance, in the October issue of the *Prague Post Newspaper (Pražské poštovské noviny)* from 1723 we can read how Marie Gabriela, Countess of Lažany, born Czernin, demonstrated the dancing skill of her four children in front of the Imperial Court in Prague, where the Empress Elisabeth (consort of Emperor Charles VI and mother of Maria Theresa Habsburg) "ordered afterwards that they dance *do kola* in the Bohemian way."<sup>6</sup>

"When the Frenchmen and the Bavarians were driven out from Bohemia, and Maria Theresa luckily gained her reign, this song

was bitterly banned, pursued by censorship, and it was forbidden to print it or sing it in the taverns under punishment of forced work in the spinning mill."<sup>7</sup>

Maria Theresa started her reign in the Lands of the Czech Crown with an iron hand and inflicted censorship also on the melody of the song *Kate has, Kate has* and on the dance which used to be performed to it as well, since all could evoke the rebellious and anti-Habsburg text of the *Song about the Bavarian King*.

It is interesting that, whereas the melody and both versions of the text have not been eradicated by the threats and the supervision of the Theresian inspectors, the form of the folk dance became extinct. The reason for this can be primarily seen in the fact that dances are kept in the cognizance of people mainly by their constant physical execution, which requires a public or at least semi-public space, and this was not possible without penalization.

After the year 1743, in the time of the Wars of the Austrian Succession, there had been a considerable migration of population. It is highly interesting that one can finally encounter this melody ten years after the end of this military conflict, right in the Bavarian territory at the university town of Altdorf by Nurnberg. Adam Wolfgang Winterschmid, a local dance master, edited there in 1758 descriptions of four fashionable social dances<sup>8</sup> and among them the dance called *The Prague Student*; the first double time part of the accompanying music is our 'forbidden' melody of the dance song *Kate has, Kate has* – and in complete accordance with the oldest recorded Bohemian version in Erben's collection of tunes from 1864. The only difference is the metric marking – C in Winterschmid's book. The four quarter notes per bar allows some melodic ornaments which is very typical for the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Below is the comparison of both music records.

Fig. 3 Tune of the dance *The Prague Student*, first part, from the book of Winterschmidt, 1758



Fig. 4 Tune of the dance song *Kate has, Kate has* (*Káča má, Káča má*, named *Šněrovačka* in Erben's collection, 1864)



The dance *The Prague Student*, recorded (in simplified Feuillet notation) and maybe also created by Adam Wolfgang Winterschmid, can serve as a very interesting and valuable proof of the influence of folk dance melodies, which could overstep the borders of countries and the spheres of power of their rulers.

The cultural environment of the European universities was used to a mix of national influences, so we can speculate that some young man, born in Central or South Bohemia, arrived from Prague to Altdorf to continue his studies there just as the political situation in Bohemia started to be very complicated after the year 1740. And along with this 'student from Prague' came also the tune from his homeland, and with it maybe also the dance, while both were prohibited in Bohemia. Winterschmidt's version of the first part of the dance (and second part of the song

*Kate has, Kate has*) shows a rustic origin as it contains clapping of hands and stamping.

The second part of Winterschmidt's dance *The Prague Student* should be performed to a triple time melody and contains whirling movement of a couple, not only around its own axis, but also in a forwards direction through a path between the line of men and women dancers. Winterschmidt writes in the instruction for this second part that one should make steps as in the dance *Teutsch*. From the contemporary dancer's point of view, this section resembles a waltz, the variants of which were born at those times, but here the couple do not circle around the space of the room. The waltzing movement in a straight line is far more difficult and also the couple should just simply hold both hands while making this circling movement, which

is also more difficult than the closed arm hold used in modern ballroom waltz.

I encountered this dance for the first time in the year 2008 at the ball of the Rothenfels Symposium, where the question of the similarity to the tune *Sur le pont d'Avignon* arose and also my colleague Eva Kröschlová responded that it reminded her of the tune of the old Bohemian song *Kate has, Kate has*. Nevertheless, the dance was taught with the Baroque step vocabulary, such as *pas de bourrées*, etc. Having researched the historical background of this dance melody, I think it is worth trying to implement for the first part of the dance *Prague Student* some steps from the Bohemian folk dances, which became very popular some years after in the salons of the whole of Europe – as did the changing step (known as the ‘Polka’ step: step R, slide L to R and change weight, step R). It makes the dance livelier and it fits to the rhythmic character of the tune perfectly.

Further, the dance contains the figure of ‘the arches’, when the active couple join hands (to form an arch) and run around the lines of men and women, the lady passing in between the lines and the gentleman outside. This figure is also highly interesting from the ‘dance archaeology’ point of view: it refers to a possible Bohemian origin; we can find it in the folk dance *Káča a kocour*, also called *Chytaná* (“Kate and the tom-cat” or “Catch me”) from the Beroun (Central Bohemia) and Domažlice (South-West Bohemia) region.<sup>9</sup>

The exploration of dance cultures of the past can result in discovering not only the very interesting heritage of movements, dance figures and rhythmic structures, but also special social and political connections. The dance historian feels like a detective when he comes across such connections and relations, and many times they appear where one would not expect them at all. Of course, questions lead not only to answers, but also to other questions. But this is the fun of ‘dance archaeology’!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Karel Jaromír ERBEN, *Prostonárodní české písně a říkadla z let 1862–1864*, Praha 1864, č.699

<sup>2</sup> František Jan VAVÁK: *Sbor písní mnohejch, jak starejch...Mns.* Quoted after: Jiří FIALA, *Dobové české slovesné reflexe slezských válek*, Olomouc 2001, s. 127

<sup>3</sup> Karl Albrecht Wittelsbach (1697-1745), during 1742-1745 as Charles VII., Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire

<sup>4</sup> Charles Simon FAVART, *Hipolyte et Aricie. Parodie nouvelle. Représentée pour le premiere fois par les Comediens Italiennes Ordinaires du Roy.* in: *Théâtre de M. Favart*, vol. 1, p. 10, Paris 1746

<sup>5</sup> “S” as abbreviation for short note, „L“ for long note.

<sup>6</sup> *Sobotní Pražské poštovské noviny* (Saturday Prague Post Newspaper), Num. 87, last quater of the year 1723, October 30

<sup>7</sup> see note 2

<sup>8</sup> Adam Wolfgang WINTERSCHMID, *Kurze und leichte Anweisung die COMPAGNIE-Tänze in die CHORÉGRAPHIE zusetzen, dergestalt, dass solche nicht mehr zu vergessen sind, welches sowohl Manns= als Frauens=Personen sehr nützlich und dientlich seyn wird...*, Altdorf 1758. Faksimile Freiburg 2008

<sup>9</sup> Jan SEIDEL and Josef ŠPIČÁK, *Zahrajte mi do kola! Tance českého lidu*, Praha (Prague) 1945, p.243. I thank Doc. Daniela Stavělová, Csc. for making me aware of this fact.