

BELIEVING AND SINGING: TRANSLATING SONGS OF FAITH IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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The Hotel Krystal rises 15 stories above neighboring buildings and trees in Prague's 6th district, located on a small road named for Cuban writer and revolutionary José Martí, between the busy traffic of Evropská street and the woods that rise uphill from the Litovický creek towards the Hvězda summer palace and White Mountain (Bílá Hora). The hulking building has the architectural inelegance of a socialist-era apartment building, overlaid with a heavy touch of late Communist luxury. The neighborhood has changed since I first saw it, but the aula (conference room) in the hotel still seems the same on a visit in 2018, with rows of seats occupied with earnest worshipping Christians, which still surprises me, as a visitor to one of the most secular states in Europe.

I first visited the hotel – and the church congregation that uses its aula on Sunday mornings – as a student, spending the Spring 2000 semester in Prague. Friends from my hometown in the U.S. state of North Carolina had referred me to an American family living in Prague, and this family in turn invited me to their church, a congregation of the (Evangelical) Brethren Church (*Církev bratrská*)¹ denomination. By this time, I had seen quite a few Czech churches from the Renaissance, Gothic, and even Romanesque periods – and thus was a bit surprised to find myself searching through the dark wood paneling of the Hotel Krystal on a Sunday morning as the worship service started.

On finding the aula and making my way into what looked to me like a university lecture hall (which, in fact, it has been for Charles University for decades), I noticed that the congregation

1. Homepage: <<https://portal.cb.cz/Principles-of-the-Evangelical-Brethren-Church>> [accessed September 2, 2019].

was making use of some specialized parts of the meeting room, ones usually not part of an older church building. First, I saw that some members of the congregation were wearing headsets while listening to spoken parts of the service. My friends gave me a set of headphones and pointed out a booth in the far wall, where I could see a person who was providing simultaneous translation of the Czech language into English.

I was soon surrounded by another practice of translation, that which happened in the congregational singing of praise (*chvály*). I recognized songs like “Lord, I Lift Your Name on High” and “The Lord Is My Strength,” songs I had heard sung in English at U.S. churches, here joined with Czech lyrics. The translation had an overt textual aspect, as the lyrics were projected onto the meeting room’s large screen; with this prompting, I was able to sing along with other congregants and the “worship band” (usually electric piano, guitar, violin and sometimes recorder), joining in a transnational religious musical experience.

During my first months in Prague, I was beginning to explore another point of U.S.-Czech boundary-crossing, that of the thriving Czech bluegrass scene. One of the first groups that I saw on the Prague scene was Reliéf, four men who, in addition to standard bluegrass repertory, also specialized in gospel quartet singing, an American musical tradition that shares some practices and cultural space with bluegrass (Goff 2002; Rosenberg 2005: 231-249). During the 19 years since these first encounters, I have sought to document the Czech bluegrass scene, while at the same time participating in and trying to understand more about Czech churches, especially the ways that members of these bodies create music in worship settings.

Here I venture to speak about my personal experiences in Czech churches, using my (more extensive) work on bluegrass as a background. This essay starts with my participation in the congregation in Prague 6, draws on some historical and music material as well as recent fieldwork, and raises questions about how we use music and language to cross divides of culture and belief.

Singing at CBP6

The Czech Republic is often rated high for ambivalence about religion and for atheism. Yet, as there are still strong believers in the country, they, like bluegrassers, seem to be a fervent minority (WIN-Gallup International, 2012). The Brethren Church (Církev bratrská – CB) proves this point; an exception among faith groups in the country, this denomination has seen strong growth in the years since 1989. The Czech Statistical Office showed a dramatic increase in the group’s membership between 1991 and 2001, and then a steady increase of their numbers in the latest decade for which data was collected (through 2011). Local mainline denominations with much larger numbers saw significant loss in participation during this period.²

The CB congregation of Prague 6 (CBP6) is relatively young, founded in 1995 as a “church plant” from Prague 5’s CB congregation. The denomination itself has a longer story and historical connections to the United States. Organizers from the Boston Mission Board joined with Czech Brethren in the 1880s, a merger that created the Free Brethren Church, part of which differentiated itself as the Unity of the Brethren (*Jednota českobratrská*), and then became more inclusive (especially of Slovak and Polish members) in 1967 as the Brethren Church, or in Czech *Církev bratrská*.

Relics of the denomination’s history are few at CBP6, least of all, the very modern space in which the congregation still meets each Sunday. One area where history has been more evident at CBP6, especially during my early years of attendance there, was the singing of a hymn from the hymnal (*kancionál*) at the end of

2. “Obyvatelstvo podle náboženské víry v letech 2001 a 2011.” *Český statistický úřad* [online] 2014 [accessed September 1, 2019]. Available from: <<https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/nabozenska-vira-obyvatel-podle-vysledku-scitani-lidu-2011-61wegp46ff>>; “Náboženské vyznání obyvatelstva České republiky.” *Český statistický úřad* [online] 2004 [accessed September 1, 2019]. Available from: <https://www.czso.cz/csu/czso/nabozenske_vyznani_obyvatelstva_ceske_republiky_23_12_04>.

each service. The hymn was led by Marie Heczková, wife of then-pastor Daniel Heczko, who would accompany the singing on an electric keyboard, and the congregants would follow along with a text projected onto the screen that dominated the focal area of the aula.

This use of older repertory is notable because most of the other musical material was new, and much of it was of foreign origin; especially the majority of the songs sung in the earlier portions of the Sunday morning worship service. Before explaining more about translation, I'll note the mode of performance. The keyboard that was later used for hymns was often a part of a rotating cast of "praise groups" that would lead the singing of praise songs (*chvály*). The group would often include acoustic guitar, sometimes a bass, and sometimes percussion: hand drum (such as a djembe), other auxiliary percussion (sometimes one of the singers would use a tambourine), or – rarely – a whole drum set. Melodic lines were carried sometimes by a violin, recorder or flute. The members of these praise groups were often younger members of the congregation, and some of them were members or leaders of the youth group.

The members of the group stood below a large screen, on which the texts of the praise songs were projected, and all used music stands for their printed versions of song lyrics and musical notation. Searching materials for this project, I easily located considerable online archives of song-leading texts³. Reading through hundreds of PDF files – some with notation, some simply printed texts, I remembered songs that I sang many times with the members of CBP6. I include two here as representative of two of the main streams of material used in worship: songs composed by Czech authors (music and text), and those composed elsewhere, and then translated into the Czech language.

3. "Archiv materiálů ke stažení. Zpěvníky." *Církev bratrská* [online] [accessed September 1, 2019]. Available from: <<https://portal.cb.cz/archiv/Zpěvníky>>.

An example of the latter, “Tvoje jméno vyznávám” is attributed in the CB songbook to Rick Founds (music and text) with Czech translation credited to Karel Řežábek. Řežábek is pastor of the non-denominational Pilsen congregation the Christian Community of Pilsen (*Křesťanské společenství Plzeň*) and a noted producer of praise music in the Czech language⁴.

I was familiar with the English-language song mentioned above: “Lord I Lift Your Name On High,” having heard it in many contexts within my childhood attendance at evangelical Christian events in the United States. Originally performed by Founds in 1989, the song became an Evangelical anthem of sorts, with the licensing organization CCLI listing it as a top worship song: their U.K. usage charts put it at number 6 in 2008, and the U.S. charts show it remaining in play, at number 98 as of September 2019.⁵

Řežábek’s text shortens Found’s two verses (plus a chorus) into a single verse and chorus unit that is usually sung several times in congregational performance. The English text is controlled by copyright but is widely available in online Christian song lyric collections. I include here the Czech text (and my translation of it into English), showing that the translation remains close to the original in terms of meaning. The emphasis in the two versions’ first phrase, for instance, shows that Řežábek shaped his translation to fit the music of the original.

Czech text:

Tvoje jméno vyznávám, rád ti zpívám svoji chválu,
jsem tak vděčný, že Tě znám, jsem tak vděčný za Tvou spásu.
Přišel jsi k nám z nebes, ukázat směr,
dát v obět’ sám sebe, jak Bůh to chtěl.
Z kříže byls do hrobu dán, třetí den jsi z mrtvých vstal,
Tvoje jméno vyznávám!

4. Available from: <<http://www.KS-Plzen.Cz>>; <<http://svetchval.cz/2018/10/17/nedelni-playlist-karel-rezabek/>> [accessed September 1, 2019].

5. Available from: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20080117211653/http://www.ccli.co.uk/resources/top25.cfm>>; <<https://www.worshipfuel.com/ccli-top-100/>> [accessed September 1, 2019].

Author's translation of the Czech text:

I confess your name, I like to sing your praise
I am so grateful to know you, I am so grateful for Your salvation
You came to us from heaven, to show the direction
To sacrifice yourself as God wanted it.
From the cross, put into the grave, you rose from the dead on the third day
I confess your name!

The phrase “Tvoje jméno vyznávám” (emphasis underlined) fits with the poetic metrical rhythm of the original, “Lord, I Lift Your Name on High”, using the emphasis on the first syllable of the Czech words to emulate the prosody of emphasized single-syllable English words. The translation seems only to diverge from the original meaning when meter, rhyme, or emphasis dictate a practical substitution of words: a case of literal translation that provides a linguistic structure that provides a suitable spiritual message, and which fits the musical frame.

An original Czech song that I recall from singing at CBP6, “Všichni žízniví”, with music and text by Pavel Hrabě, shows how tension between fidelity and adaptation can be resolved through personal engagement. Here is the Czech text, with my translation into English following.

Czech text:

Všichni žízniví, pojd'te k vodám, i vy, kteří peněz nemáte,
pojd'te, kupujte a jezte, pravím, pojd'te, kupujte bez peněz.
Neboť tak Bůh miloval svět, že Syna svého za nás dal,
aby každý, kdo v Něj věří, nezahynul, ale měl život věčný!
Ježíš žije, volá k nám: „Pojd'te k vodám, žízniví!“
Voláme Tě: „Pane, přijď! Pane, přijď!“ voláme.

Author's translation of the Czech text:

All the thirsty, go to the waters, even you who don't have money
Come, buy and eat, come, buy without money
Because God so loved the world that He gave His Son for us
That everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life!
Jesus lives, he calls to us: “Come to the waters, thirsty!”
We call you: “Lord, come! Lord, come!” We call.

The song's text includes close paraphrases of key biblical verses Isaiah 55:1 and John 3:16, with an added couplet at the end that dramatizes the believer's relationship with and actions toward the Divine – and a reference to one of the concluding images of the Bible, that of the writer of the book of Revelations stating "Come, Lord Jesus" (Revelations 22:20, New International Version). Here, the main element that seems important to the author is the presentation of Biblical verses, especially those with a wide currency (these are well-known and often-quoted verses, at least in my experience within U.S. evangelical circles). Interestingly, though, the music of the song is more static during the first two phrases, those that recount these verses in a simple melodic motive that do not depart from the almost chant-like monotony in a low register of the singing voice. The final pair of lines, however, contain much more dramatic melodic movement, leaping to a higher pitch area. The dramatic element is one way that the song can powerfully draw a participant into the worship experience, voicing the words of the song and giving them illocutionary force, enacting the Christian's call to their Lord. The series of appoggiaturas that are part of this melodic section add tension and release, as well as a perlocutionary hint that the call is answered.

This is a meager sample of the richness of Czech worship music, of course, but it indicates some of the dynamics in church situations like that of CBP6. Church music composers/re-texters, musicians, and congregants assimilate foreign materials and recast them for use in Czech contexts. This is not a situation unique to the Czech lands, however. The Episcopal church hymnal that I use most weeks in Johnson City, Tennessee has texts translated into English from Latin, French, German, and many more languages. The very texts that are the center of Christian devotion are exemplars of translation. This background of translation is also normalized within the Czech bluegrass world, where faith sometimes plays a role as well.

Bluegrass and Gospel

One of the earliest Czech “gospel” bluegrass songs, it turns out, is not really a gospel song. “Lodní zvon zvoní” is a re-texting of “I Saw the Light”, the classic gospel number brought to audiences by country singer Hank Williams and recorded by the Czech group Greenhorns (later Zelenáči) in their eponymous 1971 release. The practice of re-texting foreign songs was common in that period, with songs from pop, country, jazz, and other genres “taken over” (*převzaté*) by Czech authors to use as a chassis for new lyrics. In his thesis, musician, educator, and longtime president of the Czech bluegrass music association Petr Brandejs discusses the reasons that Czech bluegrassers have chosen (or not chosen) to translate songs, and with more or less literality (2011). The replacement text in this case is by Jan Vyčítal, noted as the group’s leader on the sleeve-note of the album “Greenhorns ’71” on which the song appeared. In this version, the song still leads us to focus on an abject narrator. Unlike Williams’ narrator’s tent-revival testimony of salvation, the Czech character mourns departure on a sea journey, with a bottle (both as a container for alcohol and for a note from his beloved who stays ashore) mentioned in each verse and chorus.

“Gospel” music is in a sense a translation and a transformation; it is both a form of sacred music that has a function outside of congregational worship (especially through recordings and radio), and sometimes has consisted of a joining of secular musicality with sacred texts. As with the translations of worship music that I considered above, these sorts of compromises contain an element of value that is retained, with changes made to “non-essential” elements, or, as already mentioned, for practical reasons. As I have found in many cases, Czechs decide that religious faith and action are non-essential, and thus are taken out of the musical experience. The idea of translation as the movement of a relic from one place to another, though, makes me think that the sacred effect / efficacy of something like a religious song remains, despite the changes. Elsewhere (Bidgood 2017) I have discussed the ways that, in their larger domestication of the music form, Czech participants in

bluegrass music-making have used the “gospel” elements to new ends, adapting and drawing different meanings from them.

Not every participant in the Czech scene, however, has divorced gospel music from its background in faith. Tomáš Ludvíček, a mandolinist and guitarist I met at a bluegrass jam in Prague in 2019, at first seemed to confirm the general framework of my ideas in discussing a project he had just completed, an album of spiritual and gospel songs recorded with his duet partner Tereza Bečičková as the band T’n’T⁶. When he explained to me the nature of the album project, though, I was surprised to learn that both members of this group do consider themselves Christian believers; I have in nearly two decades only met a few Czech bluegrassers who sing American gospel and bluegrass gospel within a framework of religious belief.

T’n’T sometimes perform for church groups, an audience who they describe as “knowing the most about the topics of these songs.”⁷ They perform in other venues as well:

“But we also often perform in churches when organizers (municipal employees, but not church promoters) use them for our concerts because they feel the connection of spiritual and gospel songs with the church works well. So these concerts are not only for believers; it is a mixed audience. These performances are great because the church atmosphere makes people more open to the things they feel up above. Sometimes we are asked to sing this music in open spaces like town squares during Christmas. Then we miss the helpful atmosphere of churches and the open minds of believers from church groups. We sing for audiences who are pleased by the rhythm and energy of the songs but not too concentrated on the content, although we talk about that. And we

6. *T’N’T - Tereza Bečičková a Tomáš Ludvíček* [online] [accessed September 1, 2019]. Available from: <<http://www.t-n-t.cz/>>.

7. Personal Communication with Tomáš Ludvíček (email, September 23, 2019).

have to try to find more secular words for introducing the songs in compar[ison] with church groups.”⁸

T’n’T’s reference to “things...up above” are, I suspect, things related to spirituality. Their reference might come from one of the spirituals, “Up Above My Head,” which they sing in Czech translation as “Nad mou hlavou zní.”⁹ As with the worship songs at CBP6, the correspondence between melody and text requires negotiation, as the duo explain:

“It is not easy to translate any English text (and to preserve its content) to Czech because in English you can make stresses (accents) as you need; not in Czech. There are also many more short words in English. It is not easy to protect the original content of those songs with the rhythm together. Especially the traditional spirituals – they arose in English and this language fits them best. So we did some songs with Czech lyrics too but we are more happy to sing them in English. We sang in Czech more or less as a favor to the Czech audience.”¹⁰

In making their translation of gospel material into Czech (both in linguistic and cultural terms), the group are helped by some peculiarities of history. T’n’T’s debut 2019 album is entitled “Going Home,” after the song that uses a melody from the 9th (“New World”) Symphony by Bohemia-born composer Antonín Dvořák. Interestingly, the directionality of the influence is often reversed, with even well-informed authors stating that Dvořák’s composition was drawing on an existing American folk melody (Snyder 1994: 199). As the duo put it, “Not everybody knows about this Czech trace in the gospel music or the connection of Czech

8. Ibid.

9. “Nad mou hlavou zní // T’N’T - Tereza Bečičková a Tomáš Ludvíček.” *YouTube* [online] [accessed September 1, 2019]. Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOr-a0c_ZBo>.

10. Personal Communication with Tomáš Ludvíček (email, September 23, 2019).

culture with spirituals”.¹¹ T’ n’T’s use of this song declares a (slight) Czech claim of contribution to some of the richness of American gospel music, and perhaps ownership of them, a right to sing them.

Alternative Functions

Apart from tourism, one of the principal ways that native English speakers engage with Czechs is as English teachers. Since it is one of the main transnational vernaculars that Czechs use to engage other people throughout Europe and the world, the English language has become an important part of Czech education and professional development. The English language is also a part of the transnational negotiations made by Czech Christians, and not only in music.

With my family, I had been attending the English Speaking United Methodist Church (ESUMC) in the fall of 2018 for a few months before I first spoke with František, one of the “regulars” I had noticed among the small congregation. After that first friendly meeting, we talked with regularity after the service, although we never got so familiar with each other that I ever learned his last name. While we spoke about many things over the months we saw each other (where we lived, my work, his hobby of salsa dancing, etc.), after each service František invariably would pull out a small notebook or his smartphone, asking me about a detail of language used in the sermon, or in a song. I was used to this kind of linguistic consultation, as I had been doing it for years with my Czech bluegrassers colleagues, correcting their original English song lyrics, or the texts on the English versions of their webpages, liner notes, etc.

The ESUMC, where our family attended through the 2018-19 school year, proved to have more specific connections to us than language. The pastor who led the congregation through the end of 2018 went on to serve a church in Johnson City, Tennessee, and the new minister who replaced him came to ESUMC from the

11. Personal Communication with Tomáš Ludvíček (email, September 23, 2019).

nearby city of Bristol, Virginia. The Holston Conference of the United Methodist Church, an administrative unit that includes our current U.S. hometown of Johnson City, has taken up the Czech Republic as a focus area for evangelistic mission work, and for most of two decades has invested time and resources into the country, sending money, volunteers, and specialists to work on short- and long-term projects.

While the Methodist relationship has thus brought many elements of Northeast Tennessee to the Czech Republic, and vice versa, ESUMC is a very cosmopolitan and diverse group. The congregants came from numerous countries, with English the main common factor – sometimes even more than religion, as I found out in one conversation with František. I asked him, after a service in Spring 2019, how he came to be a Christian. I was curious, since unlike the American South where I grew up, it is not culturally common (and sometimes not socially acceptable) to be a practicing Christian, especially as part of a Protestant or evangelical group. I was surprised when František replied that he wasn't a believer at all. He simply liked the group, had gotten close to the former pastor, and kept coming to services as a part of the community.

While I was surprised at first to learn that a non-believing Czech chose to hang out in a church environment, the opportunities for learning did make sense. After all, I had gotten a lot of practice singing Czech songs with the CBP6 congregation, getting habituated – during worship singing – to the lengthening of vowels and the accent put on initial syllables. The texts projected on the screen helped me to connect these oral/musical versions of the language with written ones, a process similar to the one that František has enjoyed at ESUMC. Both of us benefited from the use of overhead projection that has been the standard for evangelical worship music-making since the 1970s, when the rise of the contemporary “worship music” phenomenon included this emerging technology as a way of presenting new material not present in existing hymnals or songbooks. Reagan Wen argues that this technology disrupted the “legal and economic structure that

traditional hymnal publishing had been built upon” (Wen 316). In the transnational context of Czech churches, this technology also disrupts the lines between the liturgical work of worship and of learning; it gives congregational music-making pedagogical value and helps people like František and myself accrue linguistic cultural capital within a non-commercial atmosphere in which fellowship enables “generalized reciprocity” through both strong and weak social ties (DeWitt 2009: 22). That the church worship music experience affords participants more than merely the chance to worship with other congregants does not nullify the spirituality involved, however.

While I cannot speak for František, I can state that the Methodist church leaders who are engaging Czechs through evangelism and church plants (like ESUMC) are eager to engage with people like him. One of the most commonly-discussed outreach activities for Methodists (and other evangelical groups) in the Czech Republic are English camps, in which the religious nature of the event is not hidden; however, the pedagogical goals (free or low-cost instruction in the English language) are certainly highlighted. Evangelism depends on the sorts of weak social (or spiritual) ties that František shows to ESUMC and the faith that most (if not all) of its congregants share. As with T’n’T, music can be a way to deal with difference, and for actors like the Methodist Church, a way to reach across divides of (dis)belief.

Conclusion – Comparison / Contrast

Tomáš Dvořák, with whom I discussed the efficacy of gospel music in interviews in 2008 (see Bidgood 2017: 99-118), mentioned in a conversation that took place during the spring of 2019 that while repairing a friend’s guitar, he noticed some lyric sheets folded up inside the case. Curious upon seeing that they were religious songs written in the Czech language, he looked them over. He told me that it was odd for him to see these sorts of strongly-worded theological declarations and sentiments expressed in the Czech language. He is accustomed, from at least

two decades of experience singing bluegrass gospel material, to religious language expressed in English-language songs; however, that was not the odd part. He said that they were too earnest, hinting that Czechs would be more indirect in saying something. His observation brings up the question of a “national character” or cultural tendencies. Is there a “Czech” way to eat or drink, or sing globalized folk-spectrum worship music?

One notable historical thread that I have left out of this discussion is that of Spirituál Kvintet, a longstanding Czech folk group known for their performance of gospel material and other sorts of religious music since the 1960s. There is some bluegrass-related cross-over to this venerable group, as the current bassist and a supporting guitarist and singer are also (at least partly) bluegrassers, members of the band Reliéf (with Tomáš Dvořák). This group’s existence, even through the decades of Czech state socialism and totalitarianism (and the repression during this era of many expressions of religious belief) testifies to Czech acceptance, if not eagerness, for a spiritual dimension to music, one that is not present in more longstanding musical-spiritual practices. T’n’T members Tomáš and Tereza confirm the importance of Kvintet, and of Czech affinities for the message of gospel music:

“I think Spirituál Kvintet did so much work making this music popular with their mixture of American folk songs containing also spirituals. But the Czech audience also like[s] the message, when we are talking about it during concerts. It is not easy for Czech people, who are not understanding English, to know what spirituals and gospel songs are about. We are helping with it by introducing the song content in Czech. They also feel the message from our interpretation and they like our real true emotions like hope, gratefulness, love, mercy of God.”¹²

12. Personal Communication with Tomáš Ludvíček (email, September 23, 2019).

T'n'T are interpreters of the music, not only in the sense of their work as performers, but in their work to cross boundaries of language and faith. This group also serves as a reminder that spirituality is still more popular and prevalent than religious devotion that involves allegiance to a church/denomination, as statistics on religious engagement show clearly. T'n'T, despite the fervor of their singing and their devotion to the gospel they perform, say that “we are Christian believers, but we are not active in any churches...[w]e are singing about our relationship to God in spirituals and gospel songs and this is our church”.¹³

There is much room for further research in both the areas of Czech worship music and the use of religious material within the Czech bluegrass-related communities of music-making that I have studied. One area that could be outlined in more detail is the grey zone between sacred and secular. Kris Truelsen, in his study of the early country music hit “The Great Speckled Bird”, suggested the idea that a song could be almost-gospel, and almost not, coining the term “non-secular” music to make this distinction in contrast to songs that have a more distinctly religious tone (Truelsen 2014). Indeed, many of the situations and expressions that I describe here (language learning, singing by Czechs with a range of religious commitments, etc.) could be described as somewhat “non-secular”.

Another area is the role of sacred (and non-secular) music in Czech folk scenes. I refer here not to folklore, but rather to the “Czech folk spectrum” described by British linguist Tom Dickins (2017) – a range of elements that includes country, bluegrass, global folk and singer-songwriter material, adapted from foreign (largely American) sources, but also invented and imagined by Czechs. The musical elements of worship that I have heard at CBP6 are similar to the music I am familiar with from Czech folk performers. This idea of a spectrum is an intriguing one and

13. Personal Communication with Tomáš Ludvíček (email, September 23, 2019).

makes me wonder if it might be applied to the division that we might imagine between “sacred” and “secular,” or believer / non-believer. This is an idea that I have formulated through my earlier work on Czech bluegrass, articulating it with clumsy terms like “in-betweenness”. The idea of a spectrum gives the idea of the “in-between” more flexibility, with more room for considering paradoxes. On the Czech folk spectrum, paradoxically, the personal artistry of folk songwriters is revered, and the interpreters (emulators) of foreign styles (country, bluegrass) are celebrated. My fieldwork (and personal engagement with Czech Christians) continues to push on paradoxes like this one. As with the experience of singing songs on Sunday mornings at CBP6 and ESUMC, I find that the foreign, the other, the not-me (especially of a language, but perhaps also of spirituality) can become more approachable through musical action and experience.

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Summary

The Czech Republic is one of the least religious countries in Europe, and yet — with my ears open both as an ethnomusicologist and as a Christian believer — I have found thriving communities of faith-music practice, especially the singing of gospel and worship songs. Some of the people with whom I have shared religion-related music making experience are believers, others are not. This essay presents some examples from sacred and secular settings, discussing the motivations of participants, and the role of the forces of globalization (especially of Anglo-American cultural elements) in Czech religious singing.

Key words: Belief; performance, worship; bluegrass; music; language.