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Singing in First Republic film operettas

The introduction of sound presented First Republic filmmakers with an entirely new way of approaching the industry, not only in terms of form, but especially in terms of publicity. The filmmaking scene of the 1930s began to interact with other artistic fields and individual industries, especially noteworthy is the synthesis of audio media, radio and theatre, which complemented each other and interconnected in film. Also thanks to this, many popular titles had a tie to subsequently independently distributed (theme) songs.

Worthy of mentioning at this point are films by Vlasta Burian such as *Imperial and Royal Field Marshal* (C. a k. polní maršálek, 1930), *You Don't Know Hadimrška* (To neznáte Hadimršku, 1931) or *The Undertaker* (Funebrák, 1932) or films by the Werich-Voskovec duo. In cinematography from the Protectorate era, this particular skill was then mastered in films starring Oldřich Nový, especially *Girl In Blue* (Dívka v modrém, 1939) and the song of the same name, *Kristian* (1940) with the song *Just For This Day Today* (*Jen pro ten dnešní den*) or *The Blue Star Hotel* (Hotel modrá hvězda, 1941) and *Sunflower* (Slunečnice, 1941). Burian and Nový benefited from the popularity of the films and, moreover, saw it as an opportunity to promote their theatres. In terms of concept, this discipline was perfected by Karel Hašler, for whom films served primarily a means of promoting songs.

Although these films contained some singing, we would not consider them to be musical films. At the same time, however, filmmakers were also making purely musical motion pictures. In them, singing was an integral part of the plot, serving as a key to the characters' success, as shown, for example, in *Pepina Rejholcová* (1932), which benefited from a then popular cartoon character from the press, or the Protectorate-era movie *Madla Sings to Europe* (Madla zpívá v Evropě, 1940), which was adapted

from a literary source. Another trend were movies that implemented multiple songs into the narrative itself, although the plot did not revolve around a musical setting. Typical examples of this movement are the comedy *Don't Say No, Girl!* (Děvčátko, neříkej ne!, 1932), one of the few to be made based on an original film theme, and the relationship comedy of errors *The Devil in Me* (Jsem děvče s čertem v těle, 1933), based on a French play.

However, the most striking trend were adaptations of domestic theatre operettas. This was a production cycle of ten titles, when in the period from 1933 till 1938 a supply of one to three film operettas a year met the demand of the public. Additionally, all of them were based on contemporary operettas whose premieres took place within a few months of the film premieres. The filmmakers found a functional model that made sense from a commercial point of view. A theatrical subject, a film adaptation, the possibilities of audio recordings – the main product could be the theme song, but above all it was about synergy. It was a period of experimentation and searching for what worked best for the audience. In several cases, the filmmakers also adapted foreign operettas, whether it was the melodrama *In the Little House below Emausy* (V tom domečku pod Emauzy, 1934) or the renowned *Polish Blood* (Polská krev, 1934).

While keeping in mind the contemporary context, we will try to show, with specific examples, how the filmmakers implemented songs into the story, how they connected them to the fictional world and what staging and stylistic solutions they chose. The aim is not to paint a comprehensive picture and map out all possible approaches, but to provide an illustrative foundation and summarize several phenomena to potentially further expand on how creators thought about songs in operetta films from a formal and narrative perspective.

Exploring the possibilities of the rural scenery

The first in a series of film operettas based on new theatre productions was *At St. Anthony's* (U svatého Antoníčka, 1933) by Svatopluk Innemann. This comedy with multiple side-plots draws on the typically local motifs of Moravian Slovakia. Innemann uses songs on three basic levels here. Folk songs add to the atmosphere of the setting, as we watch a group of locals in traditional folk costumes in the film, singing

local and folk songs in a pub or in a procession while drinking homemade slivovitz. The second approach is demonstrated in a scene involving a pair of young men locked in a barn, who use a singing number accompanied by accordion music to attract the attention of one of the girls. Here the filmmakers move away from diegetic music, because although one of the characters is playing an accordion, its sound is replaced by the more instrument-rich music of a non-diegetic orchestra, which is done to set up the gag. The song thereby draws attention to its fictional nature, as opposed to the folk songs, and distances itself from the presented storyline. Still, the singing numbers are anchored in the fictional world as a performative instrument, which is shot similarly like the rest of the film and follows the trends of the time by using longer, mostly static shots.

The third approach abandons this principle. There are several love duets in the film. The first one is when the composer Jaroslav rehearses on the piano and is later joined by Helena. Both have amorous feelings for each other. Thanks to the open window, the portrayed song can be heard by couples sitting in the adjacent garden, thus emphasizing the overall amorous atmosphere. The second duet, however, is different in character. After the pair have an argument, Helena, alone in the room, starts daydreaming and non-diegetic music starts playing and her singing suddenly captures her inner emotions. In the next scene, Jaroslav, who is in a different location, joins in. The duet then combines the feelings of two characters who are not interacting with each other on screen at that moment. It leaves its previously anchored function in the fictional world. This approach is closer to the concept of musicals and principles we associate with the genre today.

Innemann often plays with the diegetic and non-diegetic nature of music in the film. He often creates the impression that the music is non-diegetic, only to reveal later, by changing the frame, that it has been playing from a gramophone all along. The film's intimate climax, when the central love couple – painter Jan and village girl Vlasta – say their „I do's“, is then concluded by a powerful shot of a large number of maidens dressed in traditional folk costumes in the lower part of the picture, while the upper part of the picture is filled with a cloud-filled sky as the central song *My Dear Anthony* (Ty můj svatý Antoníčku) plays. The scene is rounded off by a lyrical image of the Slovácko Region and the motif of love. Although the use of songs in this film does not have a clear sequence and it changes based on individual segments,

they are all linked by the motif of companionship and sharing. The songs are a tool that brings the characters closer to each other.

Similar principles, are used in *On the Green Meadow* (Na tý louce zelený, 1936) by Karel Lamač (although much more sparingly), who gained experience with operettas in Austria, Germany and France, where he made, for example, an adaptation of *Mamzelle Nitouche* (1931), *The White Horse Inn* (Im weißen Rössl, 1935) or *Frasquita* (1934), which is entirely built around the intoxicating songs of a travelling gypsy girl who, following the Pygmalion narrative, eventually becomes an internationally acclaimed star. In comparison to foreign works, Lamač's domestic operetta films followed the cinema tradition of our small nation. *On The Green Meadow* draws from a rural setting, building on the contrast between urban modernisation and the peaceful ambience of the local village. In fact, not only the aforementioned *At St. Anthony's* builds on this element, but also other operettas of the time.

Lamač uses the first song, which is also off-screen, only once the characters travel by train to the countryside. In combination with scenic shots, the song brings the audience into the main and poeticized setting. The characters' first vocal number seemingly begins as a song from a gramophone, only to eventually blend into the next scene, in which associate professor Bulfínek, photographing Hanča, sings the song *Your Photo* (Tvé foto), in which he confesses his feelings for Hanča. The same song is then sung together by the central protagonists at the final celebratory banquet when the final segment of the film turns into an alternate reality. Lamač creates an explicitly illusory plane in which a photo of a girl is imprinted on a backdrop of the moon and ends with a shot of a multiple trees, each with printed photos hanging from them.

The grandly presented finale, which again is abundant with traditional folk costumes, is preceded by a performative dance sequence at a dance ball. The featured dancers wear exotically styled costumes, revealing the beauty of the human body in contrast to the other guests who are wearing traditional suits. This sequence does not develop the plot in any way and serves as a source of amusement. Similarly implemented is the singing performance of the marriage impostor Gustav, who sings the aria *When the Stars Shine* (Když hvězdy svítí). While in the original theatrical adaptation this aria is a love duet, in the film it serves as an end in itself, not integrated into the plot. It

completes the characterisation of Gustav, who can be charming on the surface while subversive and deceitful at the core. It also benefits from Oldřich Nový's rich operetta experience. It is also shot in an unusually dynamic way compared to the rest of the film, alternating between different angles, profiting from low-angle shots, and Lamač doesn't hesitate to cut in the middle of tracking shots. Instead of a love aria, we are later treated to the ironic *Venoušku, Venoušku*, in which Hanči, dancing with another man, provokes her suitor Bulfínek to be jealous. Bulfínek then laments this in a separate afterword to the song. In effect, this is an ironic variation of love duets.

Career continuity

In Lamač's filmography, operettas represented a natural continuity, just like in case of Vladimír Slavínský who made four Czech operettas in this period. With regards to the number of used songs, his work is the most robust, his films usually included around eight songs, often double the amount than in other titles. *Delightful Story* (*Rozkošný příběh*, 1936) begins with a scene in which the film's protagonist Helen watches a theatre performance accompanied by the wealthy Jára. A duet awakens passion in both of them and Jára takes advantage of the situation and holds Helena's hand. The music then continues in the following scene and provides background for the protagonists' dance. The observation suddenly becomes the central focus.

In comparison to the two preceding films, this title uses songs in a much more conservative manner. The performances take place on stage with the exception of the scenes in which the four main characters, entangled in a web of love affairs, sit at a table, play the guitar and exchange their opinions in the form of a song. The austere set design and long static shots contribute to the film's theatre style. Unlike the previous examples, the whole film is enclosed in the studio and doesn't cling to local specifics such as folk songs, village settings and costumes and gives a constricted impression. But the final sequence once again shifts to an illusory mode when after a catharsis in the form of the weddings of the four main characters, the protagonists walk and sing against the backdrop of double-exposed illustrations.

Similar is also *Miss Mother* (*Slečna matinka*, 1938) in which the singing is also bound to the stage, alternatively to an orchestra at a ball. The songs are used to add to the overall atmosphere and bear no meaning. They're fully integrated to the club setting

and they change their role only when the protagonist appears as the performances are crucial for her personal and professional journey. The film's closing sequence is again different from the film's stylisation. It depicts three singing couples riding a sled who eventually disappear. But it cannot be said that Slavínský's approach to operettas is unified.

Minx (Uličnice, 1936), which just like the two previously described stars the energetic Věra Ferbasová and charming František Křištof-Veselý, is a clear contrast. The songs are rather ditties. A shop assistant sings about his shop, the closing sequence is dominated by a group of singing chimney sweeps. The songs are fitting for musicals and stay loyal to the original story. The film relies on dance numbers during various social occasions where the characters use song to express sympathies for one another. At the same time, the film doesn't end with a scene different from the whole stylisation, but, like many others, it does end with nuptials.

In addition to Slavínský, the most prolific operetta director was Miroslav Cikán with three titles adhering to local specifics and thematically close to films by Lamač and Innemann. *Lojzicka* (1936) makes very peculiar use of songs. They move the plot forward and are often sung by mailman Jirka. He opens the film with *When the Trumpet Plays Merrily* (Když trubka vesela zvolá) and introduces his joyful self. The same motif also closes the film. Other songs are crammed in a few minutes framed by a rehearsal in local pub. Jirka, as the bandmaster, sets the tempo and rehearses various songs. During the rehearsal, the regulars playing cards in the pub join in. A singing girl leaves the pub and the diegetic music turns into non-diegetic while the girl keeps singing as a suitor waits for her at the local well. They are later approached by Jirka and the band who play a love song, interrupting them. At one point, a song is used to set up a joke but after this scene opening the film's second act, there are no more musical numbers.

One scene depicts a traditional folk dance and highlights the aesthetics of folk costumes and dance rhythm. Although Cikán accumulated the songs into a single segment, he uses much more background music than his colleagues. It sets up the atmosphere, increases the suspense and is paradoxically more central to the plot than the songs. *On Holy Hill* (Na svatém kopečku, 1934) uses mainly folk songs which make up more than a half of the repertoire. They have a celebratory function and just

like in *At St. Anthony's*, they underscore and portray the local atmosphere in combination with folk costumes and dialects. They try to draw the captivate the audience during the intimate ending. *Bed of Roses* (Na růžích ustláno, 1934) on the other hand, heavily utilises exterior shots filmed near Blatná. It ends with a spectacular scene film in colour whose grandiosity it combines with melodies and shots stylised as theatre performances.

Army Twins (Armádní dvojčata, 1937) were made by Jiří Slavíček, who also edited the film, and Čeněk Šlégl. The film begins with a montage of a marching army whose front line plays brass instruments. The camera then focuses on the future Private Špaček who sits at his mother's kitchen, reads army news and sings *Let's Rejoice and be Merry* from Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*. His mother tells him to stop screeching and start working. In the next room, a girl called Jiřina plays the piano and sings a love song emphasising her delicateness. Another song is played by First Lieutenant Zdeněk to please and woo Jiřina. Playing the piano is their shared passion and brings them together. And that's more or less all. From the operetta original *We're Feeling Merry* (Nám je hej), the film utilises mainly the libretto and omits key songs including the central one. It adapts the original to a film comedy and doesn't implement any songs to the plot. They're bound to the piano. There isn't any musical ending and the film contains almost exclusively studio shots which is probably due to the production background of Nationalfilm, a company with significantly fewer projects than Elekta and Lucernafilm.

Tradition?

With regards to using songs in narration, first-republic operettas don't follow a clear trend. It was a period of experimenting and searching for a way to adapt songs from the original to the given format. Unlike the Hollywood method, which gradually included the camera into the dance, and Soviet the mix of propaganda and entertainment followed to a certain extent by Czechoslovak filmmakers in the 1950s, Czech operettas stemmed from the traditions and cultural context and rather logically followed the patterns to German and Austrian titles, albeit not fully. Austrian operettas often drew inspiration in opulent classical works from Austrian history and Viennese culture.

Due to the nature of cinematography in small countries, local specifics play a very important role in Czech film operettas, that's why the text focuses on them so much.

The most frequently used elements were celebrations, mainly weddings, folk songs, character playing various instruments and the fact that the songs often had a performative nature. The explored period can be viewed as loose group of creative discharges where everyone approached songs in their own way and their presence was far more important from the industry point of view than from the aesthetic one. But that doesn't mean that this group doesn't include inspiring examples. Slavínský regularly changed his approach in his films, *Lamač*, thanks to his experience from abroad, explored using songs at various levels of a film in order to progressively make use of the new genre and adapt it to national character.

Operettas returned to domestic audiovisual industry in the period of Normalisation, but only in the form of Television shows which don't share anything with the poetics of the silver screen. The 1960s saw the emergence of many musical revues and Ladislav Rychman came with a series of distinct titles. After the Velvet Revolution, musicals found their new home in theatres where they attract large crowds to this day but only scarcely appear in cinemas. There is no tradition we could follow. Due to the decreasing popularity of operettas, the most prolific period of musical subgenres has become a time capsule which no filmmakers will open. But it's fascinating to observe rather loose creative methods of using the new means of expression in the beginnings of sound film.

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