

BLUES LYRICS IN TEACHING MUSIC AND CZECH AT THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL

Aleš Sladký

Abstract

My study is entitled: “Blues lyrics in teaching music and Czech at the grammar school” and now I will outline its fundamental contents, the basic conclusions of my study and the methods used to help me reach these conclusions. The study is conceived as a comparison of five American and five Czech blues compositions, which are considered the most popular and basic works of the genre.

I did this by analyzing several available charts focused on foreign blues songs and then compiled my list of the five “most popular” American blues songs based on the number of occurrences and locations of the songs in specific charts. For Czech songs, this procedure was more difficult, because I could not find any survey, discussion or ranking that focused specifically on blues songs. So, I proceeded here more or less intuitively and I put together a list of five songs according to my own knowledge of songs, according to the popularity of songs on the youtube music portal and the popularity of the artists who presented the songs.

I analyzed the compositions mainly from the textual point of view; however, I did not forget the musical aspect. I was mainly looking for basic identical and different elements in the text area. I found several identical elements, not only in terms of themes, but also in the construction of texts and poetic turns. However, I also found certain textual differences in the Czech and foreign compositions. I will discuss these identical and different elements in more detail in the following text.

Keywords

Blues – blues text – comparison of texts – analysis of blues text – blues theme – text structure

Introduction

This paper is mainly devoted to a deeper understanding of the meaning of blues text. The conclusions of this research will serve as a basis for my dissertation, entitled: The Model blues lesson at a Czech grammar school with a focus on the application part of the lesson. The dissertation focuses on grasping the blues as an educational content and given that the text content is the primary component of the blues, it is understandable that it will have its place in my dissertation. I will first examine the text component here and in my dissertation in terms of content. However, what is most important for my research is its inclusion in the educational process and the possibility of grasping it in teaching. However, when analyzing the songs, I did not forget the musical component of the songs, which I will mention marginally in the study. This study is devoted to the first mentioned part because I consider this text the beginning of my research. This text is devoted just to text analysis.

I was led to this study not only by the focus of my dissertation, but above all by my own interest in blues music, both ours and abroad. Due to the relatively large and world-renowned

Czech blues music base, I decided to compare the original American standards with Czech blues songs. I was interested not only in the musical concept of foreign and Czech songs, but especially their lyrics. This eventually led me to a kind of concretization of the topic of my study. It was crucial for me whether the same themes, phrases, idioms or general lyrical techniques appear in foreign and Czech blues texts.

From the point of view of my dissertation, I was understandably looking for and finding innovative ways to deal with the topic of blues singing in music lessons at high school.

In the introduction to this work, I would also like to mention that I selected the songs according to few basic criteria. It is therefore not possible to look at them as the generally accepted most popular compositions of the genre in the mentioned geographical areas.

At the end of this section, I would also like to mention my basic hypothesis, which I set before starting the research itself. My hypothesis was that the text components will generally have the same melancholic tuning, but there will be different themes in the individual texts. However, the general idea and purpose of the text, which primarily leads to the communication of a certain suffering of life, will also remain the same in both geographical locations. The question therefore remained which life problems will be solved in specific countries.

Research methods used

Because this study arises mainly as a comparison, analysis and effort to understand the lyrical nature of Czech and American blues songs, it was necessary to use specific research methods that helped me in this work. I would like to explain these methods and the reason for their use immediately in this introductory chapter.

First of all, I would like to introduce scientific methods in general theory. I mostly focused on using these:

As the first method to be mentioned, I unequivocally chose **analysis**. One of the main driving forces that led to the creation of this work is the effort to compare American and Czech blues texts. However, this comparison would be completely impossible without a previous analysis of the texts. As I mentioned in the introduction and in the abstract, I analyzed a total of ten songs, which I evaluated according to my own criteria as among the most important in both countries. Each country was represented by five songs. In the chapter devoted directly to the example of the analysis of specific selected texts, this generally theoretical scientific method will be clearly visible.

Another logically related scientific method is **synthesis**. Synthesis has its place in this work especially in summarizing data and drawing general conclusions. In essence, it was an irreplaceable element in creating courts on the compositions, which was quite important in comparing them.

The third, but no less important, component is the **comparison** mentioned several times. The comparison could be considered as the basic building block of this whole study. By comparing individual elements, not only between the different languages, but also within one language or text, I was able to verify my original hypothesis, which I mentioned in the last paragraph of the introduction.

Another scientific method, which introduced a certain economy into the work process, was an **analogy**. This method made my job easier as I didn't have to search heuristically in other texts. The possibility of using this method also suggests that the lyrics of individual

songs are created similarly and similar composing and poetic techniques are used in them. This is already evident, for example, from the very musical essence of most of the studied compositions. I chose the Czech examples by focusing on songs based on a characteristic twelve-stroke scheme. In this case, due to the unique properties of the individual harmonic procedures, the development of the text component is largely determined. The responsible nature of the recitation of blues texts also contributes to this fact. This is especially evident in English texts. I will return to this topic in more detail in the chapter devoted to the analysis and comparison of the texts.

From interpretive and specifically hermeneutic scientific methods, I would like to mention **understanding the text**. Here it goes without saying that this is an understanding of the text in terms of various hidden meanings. In the chapter devoted to the textual analysis, it will then be clear why this method is so essential for this work. Especially English blues texts in particular consist, apparently due to a certain expected textual economy, almost exclusively of various poetic figures and transferred meanings. In essence, the austere text of the tract will offer its true essence only to the initiated listener and the uninitiated listener can understand the text as well, albeit on a much more superficial level.

Analysis and comparison of selected blues compositions

Criteria for selecting individual songs

Right from the beginning of this section, it is necessary to specify and repeat the above facts. The purpose of this analysis was to compare five English written and five Czech written blues texts. I wanted to select texts for this study that are representative of selected areas in this genre. So, I tried to make a list of the five “most popular” songs from both countries. To select them, I chose mentioned criteria and selection methods.

First, I focused on songs written in English. I found several charts and hit parades, from which I selected the songs that appeared in them most often and at the same time were at the top of the charts. A list of the charts is attached in the bibliography of this work. After this analysis, I came to my own list of five typical and popular American blues songs. These are the songs “*I’d Rather Go Blind*” (1967) by Etta James, “*Crossroad*” (1954) by Robert Johnson, “*Born Under a Bad Sign*” (1967) by Albert King, “*Hoochie Coochie Man*” (1954) by Muddy Waters and “*The Thrill is Gone*” (1951) by BB King. Most of the songs on the list are among the real standards of blues music and are often considered the basis of the repertoire of blues guitarists and singers.

As far as Czech written texts are concerned, as I mentioned above, the selection procedure was somewhat more complicated. Although blues music has a relatively unusually large base in the Czech Republic and Czech blues musicians are also sought after among foreign bluesmen, the existence of any chart, article or discussion on the ranking of the best blues songs is unfortunately almost zero. I managed to find a compilation of Czech blues songs within one channel on youtube, but unfortunately this list also included songs that obviously were not blues. So, I decided to choose songs according to several criteria. First I took into account the popularity of the composer of the song, lyricist or musical ensemble within the selected genre, then I also, with the involvement of my own experience from selected authors, who in my opinion should be represented in the list, selected the most suitable songs.

I judged the suitability of songs not only according to their popularity, but also to their suitability for the given genre. So I made a list of these five songs. These include “Blues starý ženský” (“Blues of an old woman”) (1991) by Petr Kalandra, “Stříhali dohola malého chlapečka” (“They cut a little boy together”) (1976) by Josef Kainar, “S nebem to mám dobrý” (“I have a good time with heaven”) (1990) by Vladimír Mišík, “Krásný ztráty” (“Beautiful losses”) (2013) by Michal Prokop and “Blues nádražní ulice” („Blues Station Street“) (1985) by Jan Spálený. All of these names in the Czech Republic are inextricably linked to this genre and these songs are also included in the repertoire of a large number of Czech blues players.

Analysis of the selected texts

In this chapter I analyze one English and one Czech blues text for example. I decided to proceed by selecting essential verses from the texts, which I will analyze in more depth. At the end of the chapter, I will summarize what conclusions I came to when analysing all ten texts, what are the differences between them, and which elements are common to the texts.

Both chosen lyrics have these common aspects. Both songs have typical blues harmonic formulas. The Muddy Waters song have four additional bars at the beginning of every single formula. Both songs are very typical for the blues scene of chosen countries and was used as movie soundtracks. “Blues of an old woman” is a much younger song, but it is a typical blues song by the very popular Czech blues lyricist Josef Škvorecký (1924–2012).

Analysis of the English text

For my analysis of English-written blues, I decided to use the lyrics of the well-known song “Hoochie Coochie Man” by Muddy Waters, who is one of the great popularisers and founders of the electrified form of blues. Already in the first verse we get to the phrase “*I got a black cat bone*”. This verse relates to the original spiritual black traditions. The bone of a black cat was used in paranormal and magical ceremonies in the hoodoo tradition. This bone was supposed to provide a number of positive effects, such as invisibility, happiness, protection from evil magic or rebirth after death, and sometimes even success in romance. In the second verse, the phrase “*I got a mojo too*” appears, which is again closely related to the voodoo tradition. It is a kind of bag for magic and spells. This term is also slang used to denote libido or morphine. The third verse contains the phrase “*I got a Johnny Concheroo*”. Upon closer examination, I discovered that John the Conqueror, sometimes also known as John the African, was an African prince, specifically the son of the King of the Congo. Legend has it that he flew on a giant crow, but was eventually sold as a slave to America.

The next four verses read: “*I’m gonna mess with you, I’m gonna make you girls, Lead me by my hand, Then the world’ll know.*” This part of the text corresponds very closely to the well-known and very common blues theme of sex. I met this theme quite often in these five selected songs. Sometimes this topic is hidden and is only hinted at but mostly, as in this case, it is said very straightforwardly. In the last part of this verse, a theme appears directly from the title of the song “*The hoochie coochie man*”. Hoochie coochie man is a universal term used to describe some sexually provocative dances that are very similar in nature to the belly dances known since the second half of the nineteenth century. In American, specifically

in African-American culture, and especially in the blues, the term *hootchie cootchie* is used to describe the genitals of a drunk woman.

In terms of structure, not only from the example of the second verse of the song, but from the whole text, a completely clear stylistic arrangement of the song is also evident. Within the last four bars, a very similar text component is always used, which is almost identical in each of the three blocks, except for minor deviations. We could consider it a refrain of a song. It is always a kind of confirmation of the text that, despite the whole textual development of the verse, this idea still applies. Furthermore, it is also possible to notice the repetition of sentence structures in verses that could be described as an anaphora: *“I got a black cat bone, I got a mojo too, I got John the Conqueror”* from the second verse and from the third verse: *“On the seventh hour, On the seventh day, On the seventh month, the seventh doctor say”*. This poetic figure leads to the urgency and emphasis of the idea being communicated.

These described phenomena were very common in the examined English texts, both in terms of themes and stylistic editing of the text. Furthermore, as I have already mentioned above, all the given texts usually focus either on a kind of textual economy and on hidden meanings, or, on the contrary, they do not mince words in terms of textual economy.

Analysis of the Czech text

Right at the beginning of the chapter dealing with the Czech blues text, some basic information must be mentioned. Petr Kalandra, a famous Czech blues singer and guitarist, once said that Czech blues has three main themes. The first theme is that the hero of the blues story has no money, the second theme is that he does not have a wife, and the third theme is he has a wife and he cannot get rid of her. After analyzing the five Czech blues texts mentioned above and listening to many other Czech compositions of this genre, I can generally say that this definition is largely valid. However, I would definitely add a fourth last point, and that is alcohol. The vast majority of Czech lyrics, not only in blues, deal with alcohol very eagerly.

As a representative for the analysis of the Czech blues text, I chose the blues song “Blues of an old woman” by Petr Kalandra. This song closely corresponds to his above-mentioned quote. It is also interesting that this song became the central melody for the film *Tank Battalion*, based on the novel of the same name by Josef Škvorecký.

The song deals with a man’s desire for a relationship with a woman who rejects his affection. The text begins with a poetic comparison: *“love is like money, one has power and the other does not have enough”*. Then the text continues in the second verse with further comparisons. In the verses: *“A woman is like a diplomat, she is deception and a lie”* and *“We take your heart, money and half a life – and then go”*, the hero’s unhappy love situation is clearly visible. The woman’s sense of futility and un-reachability is also recorded in the verse *“You go a thousand miles and you only have an hour.”* The penultimate verse indicates a certain reconciliation with the cruel situation. This verse sounds

“It is in vain, in vain, in vain – all your troubles are in vain
It is vain, vain, vain, God, – all your trouble
And only time will help you, because it changes and changes everything.”

From this text, as well as from the analyzed English text, it is clear that it is a similar structure, which is inserted into a twelve-stroke blues form. As in Muddy Waters' text, the structure of the first and second verses is similar here using anaphora. Repeating the words at the beginning of the first two verses then emphasizes the urgency of speaking.

The last verse of the text follows the idea of the fourth verse. It is mentioned here that time will eventually turn the mentioned woman into an old woman who will no longer have "guys". However, the hero of the text sings in the last two verses: "*But in the meantime you will die with love or get drunk and rot in a cold grave, you will rot in a cold grave.*" The gloomy and vain essence of this text is a general feature of most blues texts.

Common and different features in Czech and English blues texts

Common features

There are many common features of both blues language forms. I decided to start with the structural features. As mentioned in the introduction to the text, I tried to choose in both language groups mainly texts accompanied by a typical twelve-stroke blues structure. The structure of the texts is quite similar in both language forms in this case. There is a significant inspiration of Czech artists by original English blues lyrics. The verses are usually always divided into three verses. The first two verses have the same sentence structure and usually begin with the same words, the so-called anaphora. They discuss some difficulties that bother the singer. The repetition of this speech gives an urgent impression. The third verse then brings some resolution or solution. See the verse in the previous chapter.

Another common feature is the use of very detailed and accurate descriptions of characters or things, for example: *I got John the Conqueror, a lame teacher on the forehead, Vincka witty, testifying to pimples under soap....*

The last identical feature is the themes of the texts in a certain direction. Most of them deal with some misery and feeling that takes hold of a person in this situation. It is basically a desire to sing out your pain as a song. This is closely related to the same way of expression. Singing is always very exalted, felt and very often with a hoarse admixture. The Hoochie Coochie man song is one of the few optimistic blues songs, but I choose it because of above-mentioned reasons of a typical lyrical structure.

Different features

The first different feature between the two language forms of blues that I have been able to find is that in English blues texts very often have hidden meanings appearing in the terms used. See the analysis of the English text above. The five examined Czech text are almost straightforward. It's a very frequent phenomenon, however there are exceptions too. We can find them for example in the song "They cut a little boy together" by Josef Kainar.

I also consider the themes of blues lyrics to be a different feature. The demon of alcohol and its effect on humans, whether positive or negative, appear in many Czech blues texts. In the analyzed English texts, in contrast to Czech texts, the motive of sex almost always appears.

Some Czech texts are also in some cases structurally more complex and do not maintain a three-verse structure. However, as mentioned above, in some texts this feature is identical.

This results very closely related with the found study about blues lyrics. This study shows the blues lyrics as a coexistence of contrasts. The blues text writers describe this condition as a coexistence of sadness and joy and this joy comes from the suffering according to these writers. There are many contrast principles in the blues, but this contrast is important for this study. Winborn, M. (2011) describes this concept “feeling blue” as a combination of feelings, but the most important feeling is spontaneity and ferocity.

Conclusion

My basic hypothesis, which I set out in the introduction to the text, was confirmed. Most of the examined blues lyrics deal with certain difficulties of life, of which the singer wants to sing about with the help of a song.

The musical component of twelve-stroke blues is used relatively identically in both countries. In Czech songs, I listened to several variations of the basic harmonic structure. However, the voice is the same in both languages studied.

The themes of the blues lyrics coincided in some respects, but I found quite obvious differences in the concentration of certain themes. There were more hidden meanings in English texts, while Czech blues texts more often deviated from the standard three-verse structure. In a large part of the texts, however, this structure was preserved on the Czech side.

The listening shows considerable inspiration from the original American blues songs among Czech performers, however, to a certain extent there are tendencies of the originality in the processing and arrangements of Czech blues songs.

The Czech blues scene is still very diverse and has a long tradition. This is certainly because the guitar form of blues is easy to grasp even for music beginners. Thanks to the indefinite tone and the need to know only the basic pentatonic scales, even beginners can very easily try elementary improvisation.

Resources

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About author

Aleš Sladký has been a PhD student at the University of West Bohemia in Pilsen at the Department of Music Education and Culture of the Faculty of Education since 2019. His dissertation focuses on the genre of blues as part of the music education curriculum in secondary schools, thus thematically building on his bachelor's and master's thesis. Currently working as an electric guitar teacher and lecturer, he has a lot of experience in leading a blues band. For two years he has also been preparing blues workshops.

✉ Svets@seznam.cz