

Teaching to play the bagpipes in Slovakia in past and present

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ABSTRACT

Bagpipe culture used to exist throughout the whole Slovakia, covering instrument-making, music repertoire, playing style and ornamentation, dance, special verbal expressions and folk customs related to bagpipes or performed to the accompaniment of bagpipe. Communities had their bagpipers to perform at local events. Skills, which used to be transmitted within families and communities, are now being spread mainly in the folklore ensembles through formal and non-formal training. The paper compares the situation in the bagpipe teaching in Slovakia in past and present and points out the remarkable role of the children folk ensemble as an ideal “incubator” for upbringing of young bagpipers and dissemination of bagpipe culture.

1. Introduction - Bagpipe culture in Slovakia

Bagpipe culture in Slovakia is in a situation which is very different from that in “bagpipe-superpowers”, such as Scotland or Spain, where there exist a sophisticated system of formal bagpipe music education, and the number of musicians playing this instrument counts up to tenths of thousands. The Bagpipe culture in Slovakia is represented by subtle remains of the authentic folk culture that has been living in this area for many hundreds of years and started to disappear in the second half of the 19th century. Nevertheless, these remains still live in a small number of areas and in spite of the fact, that the number of bagpipers in Slovakia is less than one hundred; it represents a valuable cultural element [1].

In the year he 2015 the Bagpipe culture in Slovakia was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity UNESCO. According to the nomination file „the Bagpipe culture consists of a wide range of expressions and knowledge associated with bagpipes and their use, including music repertoire, style and ornamentation, songs, dances, instrument-making, folk customs and traditions and special verbal expressions. The bagpipe tradition exists throughout Slovakia, with regional differences concerning technical

details, tuning, ornaments and know-how, and corresponding songs and dance repertoire. The main bearers and practitioners of the element are bagpipe makers and players, as well as other musicians, singers and dancers performing in groups with bagpipe players. Many of the attributes of bagpipe culture are hallmarks of traditional folk culture in Slovakia with links to the natural environment, such as construction methods (use of goat skin) or the aesthetic forms of instruments (other domains of local folk art), local and individual styles of interpretation of songs and repertoire. Bagpipe culture is transmitted from generation to generation within the family and community and via formal and non-formal education. A community is proud to have a bagpipe player and when a bagpiper attends a community social event, the music generates a sense of identity shared among all members of the community.” [2]

II. Social conditions for playing the bagpipes in Slovakia in the past

By speaking about “the past” we mean mostly the situation in the 19th century. However there are a few regions, where the bagpipe culture was fully functional even before the Second World War and several authentic bagpipers lived until late eighties of the 20th century [3].

Functionality and popularity of the bagpipe music in the past

In the past the bagpipe culture was live, functional, and ubiquitous in rural areas in Slovakia. It was in vogue, it was popular, actual, and “modern” and requested by the audience.

Lyrics - actuality of texts

The texts described situations familiar to all, activities and objects well known from everyday life; their language was up-to-date and natural.

Opportunities for listening to bagpipe music

Children listened to the bagpipe music literally from their birth.



Fig.1: A bagpiper playing to a child (foto K. Plicka, first third of the 20th century)

It was played often and on various occasions (dances, meetings, weddings and baptism, playing for fun and relaxation during seasonal works, during Carnival, during long winter evenings, during Christmas). The bagpipes were sometimes also used for military purposes (recruiting new soldiers, entertainment in free time etc.).

Playing occasions for bagpipers

There were lots of natural playing opportunities for bagpipers (when pasturing animals, at village dances, in the pub, at various meetings, weddings, during Carnival (Fašiangy), on winter evenings, during Christmas, etc.).



*Fig.2: The bagpipe band of Jozef Zboroň playing to the dancers from Oravská Polhora
(foto T. Szabó, field research 1977)*

Existence of "consumers" of the bagpipe music

The community in villages knew the bagpipe music and the repertoire. The “consumers” of this music can be divided into two groups: active – singers and dancers, and passive – listeners. The bagpipe music used to be played not only to dancing and singing, but there were also special tunes “for listening”.



*Fig.3: Jozef Rajnoha from Malá Lehota is playing to his friends “for listening”
(foto T. Szabó, field research around 1979)*

Motivation to learn playing bagpipes

Bagpipe music was, with few exceptions, the music of young man and adults. Playing the bagpipes as well as dancing and singing to bagpipes was perceived by the children as an entrance to the world of adults and thus the child felt to be behaving as one of his his older role models. Bagpipers were reputable members of the community. Children had a strong motivation to start playing the bagpipes.

III. Social conditions for playing bagpipes in Slovakia today

By speaking about traditional folklore in this study we mean the status of the Slovak folk culture on the boundary between 19th and 20th centuries. The situation in all areas of culture in general, and of course the perception and meaning of the concept of folklore, changes continuously; therefore the term “traditional folklore” can be ambiguous.

Lack of functionality

The bagpipe music is nowadays known already only in very few localities. Middle and young generation practically generally does not know the bagpipe music at all. The bagpipe music does not seem to fulfill traditional functions in the cultural or social life of communities any more.

Lack of popularity

The popularity of the bagpipe music cannot be compared with that of other types of music and instruments. It is not fashionable. It is not up-to-date, nor desired by wide audience (as opposed for example to harmonica or synthesizer music).

The obsolescence and non-topicality of texts

The texts of bagpipe songs are not referring to the topics of the day, or places people would still know. They describe situations, activities and objects that have already disappeared from everyday life, their language is archaic and the younger generation does not understand a lot of outdated words. For them the texts are not topical, not contemporary, and not actual and therefore not subject to their interest.

Texts in local dialects incomprehensible

The fact that the texts of the bagpipe songs are often in local dialects limits the readability and usability of these songs outside of their dialect region (this is especially important in the case of Goral texts). Gorals are ethnic group with a specific language similar to Polish.

Lack of listening opportunities

Children generally do not come in contact with bagpipe music at all. The only rare exception are so called “educational concerts”, which are normally focused on classical music, but in some cases folk musicians are invited to show traditional folk instruments and traditional way of playing.



Fig.4: Bagpiper Jozef Luščon and singer Margita Kuráková present the traditional singing with bagpipes to the school children and teach them bagpipe songs from their village. (Oravská Polhora 2010, archive of I. Matis)

Lack of playing opportunities

The traditional playing opportunities do not exist any more. The live Slovak music is being replaced by new, recorded, mostly foreign music... Dance music has lost its national and local specificities.

Lack of consumers of bagpipe music

There is no traditional audience any more, which would know the music repertoire and there are no traditional singers, dancers, nor are any potential

listeners who would like to listen to bagpipes (at least not more than a minute or two).

Lack of motivation to learn playing bagpipe

The bagpipers do not constitute role models (idols) that children would like to imitate. The bagpipe music is not music of older teenagers and adults any more, - better to say, it is not known. Bagpipe playing does not produce any significant social or economic credit. Children in Slovakia have nowadays practically no motivation to play the bagpipes.

IV. Some aspects of traditional method of learning to play the bagpipes in Slovakia

Children's role playing – “I am a bagpiper”

One of the natural ways of how to start getting acquainted with bagpipe playing was Children's role playing – “I am a bagpiper”. It is a game when a child imitates bagpipe playing using (non-functional) toy bagpipes or simply objects resembling the bagpipes, such as for instance a pillow.

However there are also playable bagpipes documented, made for children (sometimes made from rabbit skin to be smaller), but they were probably never really used as a real educational, or practice instrument.

A toy of much higher importance for learning the basic principles and fingering of bagpipes were the reed pipes of straw that were made by boys already with a serious intention to play. They called them "Straw bagpipes".

Self-learning

Self-learning mostly by trial/error was naturally applied because the boys had a lot of time to practice when shepherding.

From father to son - keeping the art of playing in the family

The skills of playing were kept in families “from father to son”, or better to say “from grandfather to grandson”, as piping was not their profession (they were usually peasants or workers), fathers normally had a lot of other work, than teaching the bagpipe playing.

Teacher and method

The older players, who were in the role of a "Teacher", generally did not have any theoretical or classical music education. They did not know any teaching methods used in classical music education. Their method was partly intuitive and partly they “copied” the approach by which they were taught.

Practically the only method used was listening and visual observation of singing and playing of the teacher and subsequent imitation by the student. This

approach teaches both - the interpretation of the song (the sung version) and instrumental interpretation of the bagpipe melody (instrumental version).

In our experience the old "teacher" did not try to teach any simplified version of the instrumental melody first, but he directly taught the student the complex ornamented instrumental version. This method was very important for keeping the same style, led to "copying" the ornaments, phrasing, tune structure (number of repetitions of phrases etc.), as well as other musical habits of the teacher and therefore to the preservation of the archaic, traditional playing style.

Instrument

With the exception of toy bagpipes, whistles, straw bagpipes and toy horn-pipes, the pupil used the same instrument as his teacher from the very beginning of the learning process. No special practice-chanter was used in Slovakia. Sometimes the chanter of the bagpipe was of course pulled out of the instrument and used by the teacher for instruction or by the student for trying some fingering patterns. However as the moisture and high temperature in the mouth changes stiffness and therefore also tuning of the reeds, bagpipers did not use this approach much except for preparation of the instrument and tuning.

Repertoire

There was no special children's repertoire of bagpipe songs. From the very beginning, the child learned repertoire of adults.

V. Current conditions of learning the bagpipes in Slovakia and method of teaching the bagpipes in the children's folklore ensemble

From father to son? Teaching the bagpipe in Musical schools?

Keeping the art of bagpipe playing in families occurs today only very, very rarely. There are no authentic traditional bagpipers living any more - the traditional style of playing can not be learned directly from the traditional player. (For the purpose of this work we use the term authentic bagpipers to designate bagpipers that used to fulfill traditional function in their village community – such as playing to dance, at Carnival, at weddings etc., without being a member of any stage/performance oriented folklore group.)

There is only small number of people who are able to teach children how to play the bagpipes. There is a well established system of Musical schools in Slovakia, but the bagpipe playing is not taught at these schools at all. There is no method available for bagpipes. Collections of bagpipe songs [4] and literature on Slovak bagpipes (e.g. [3] or [5]) are out of print and it is practically impossible to come by.

From teacher to student

Nowadays the teacher must be musically educated; he has to know the basics of music theory, notation and music education methods. Moreover he has to master the traditional style of playing. For instance the teacher in the Kobylka folk ensemble is an active player, he learned personally from the authentic bagpipers in the villages, and documented their play in the years 1982-1986.

From older students to younger pupils and competition among students

The older students help the teacher in the children folk ensemble with teaching the beginners and younger pupils. Moreover the students are compared with each other and this raises the healthy competition that brings motivation to improve their technical skills. Some of the students also meet in private and play music just for fun.

Self-learning

There are new, modern possibilities available - audio and video recordings on various media, e.g. Facebook that make self-study a very effective way of learning. Some of the students use audio and video recordings for listening and studying bagpipe songs at home. Their home preparation often intensifies before competition (annual children bagpipers contest at Gajdovačka festival).

Teaching method

The basic method is that of listening to the recordings and demonstration by the teacher. First holding the bagpipe and blowing is taught, then singing, playing melodies on classical instrument, and playing tunes on the bagpipes; then follows teaching the ornamented version of the tune. Playing with singers helps understand the relationship between singing and instrumental tune. Playing with other instruments and with the orchestra improves rhythmical skills and intonation. Regular rehearsals with other musicians, playing to dance and playing at festivals not only systematically increases technical ability of the player, but also helps the young bagpiper understand his role in the collective of musicians and in the folk ensemble community. Quite frequent performances help let him experience the contact with the audience which he can later utilize when playing on various occasions off the stage.

Every musician has to attend the Music School on classical instrument

Each of the children who are learning to play the bagpipes has to attend the Musical school where they study some of the classical instruments (violin, recorder, clarinet, flute, harmonica etc.) to acquire basic musical education. The bagpipe is then taught in the folklore ensemble as an additional instrument.



Fig.4: Marcel Horák and Lukáš Lacko from the Kobyłka folk ensemble have to master both - clarinet, and bagpipe

The instrument

Bagpipes are not normally available in musical-instrument stores. Obtaining the instrument requires personal contact with the manufacturer. On the other hand, today's instruments tools of renowned manufacturers are much less demanding as far as maintenance is concerned. They are easily playable and reliable, which makes the playing more comfortable.

The instruments used in the children folk ensemble had to be adapted to the range of the children's singing voice, where the highest scale that fits the children voice range is F major. Therefore for instance the bagpipes in B^b traditionally used in Pohronský Inovec region had to be replaced by bagpipe in F. Recently the beginners use a newly developed, fully functional “children's bagpipe” designed as a beginners’ student instrument for children, which is lightweight, having extremely small air consumption and reduced loudness.



Fig.5: A student playing children’s practice bagpipe designed by Juraj Dufek (foto E. Sabella 2015)

Lyrics

Many of the texts of the bagpipe songs describe situations that relate to the old way of life that the present generation of children does not know. They also often include words and topics inappropriate for children. Using lascivious, erotic, texts, dirty words, double-meaning texts, texts about alcohol and the like, are nowadays considered unsuitable for children. Therefore, it is inevitable to look for different texts from other songs, or the text has to be changed or even newly invented.

The benefits of learning to play bagpipes in the folklore ensemble

Creating a new groundswell for bagpipe culture

The systematic education of young bagpipers including bagpipe songs and dances from different regions of Slovakia helps creating a new groundswell for bagpipe culture. New consumers of the bagpipe culture are appearing – such as all the members of the folk ensembles, their families and friends. The audience naturally repeatedly come into contact with elements of bagpipe culture and absorb it.

New bearers of the traditional and new bagpipe culture therefore emerge in the community, represented by bagpipers, other bagpipe band musicians (string musicians, clarinet players and others), singers, dancers and folk ensembles, but in a sense also the passive audience coming to listen to them and watch their performances.

The bagpiper has now whom to play – his playing is wanted by the audience.

New functionality of bagpipe music, creating new playing occasions and new listening occasions for the bagpipe music

Bagpipe culture is revitalized in the community; it again becomes functional and natural, although it contains new features. Participation in festivals and cultural events enables dissemination of the bagpipe culture back in the environment of the village. Playing at the meetings of members of the folklore groups and meetings with other ensembles is an ideal opportunity for dissemination of the knowledge of music, songs and dances to other ensembles. Playing at private activities of the pipers, in music clubs, or at the folklore balls (e.g. “Dance houses”) is also important. In many cases it presents the bagpipe music to the audience for which this music and tradition was not known.

Children (musicians, singers, and dancers) perceive the music of bagpipes during musical and singing training, rehearsals, performances, workshops and festivals and they naturally get to know it and get used to it. Bagpipe songs and piping become a natural part of the life of the folklore ensembles.

The bagpiper is needed to play at the stage for the dancers and audience, but also requested/wanted outside the frame of formal performances – e.g. to play during other folklore enthusiasts' free-time entertainment.

The bagpiper has now where to play - playing occasions are created with appropriate audience.

Increasing popularity of bagpipe music in Slovakia

The bagpipes will probably never reach popularity comparable to that of modern folk instruments such as button diatonic harmonica. To some extent, however they become fashionable again by introducing in the repertoire of folk ensembles, organizing “Dance houses” with bagpipe music, or being used in modern musical styles such as new forms of interpretations based on authentic folklore, but adapted to present conditions (e.g. dance theatre SLUK, bagpipe orchestra United Drones of Slovakia), World music or Jazz and Modern music bands (Balkansambel, Pacora etc.), or reconstruction of historical music (e.g. Slovak Bagpipe Association). Bagpipes may not be fashionable, but they surely are appealing to the audience.

*Bagpipes are „in“, they are getting more and more attractive for the audience.
It is again COOL to be a bagpiper!!!*



Fig.7: Matúš Kovár playing to the dancers of the folk ensemble Kobylka at the International Bagpipers' Festival in Strakonice, Czech Republic.

Conclusion

Bagpipes in Slovakia are largely understood as a symbol of archaic folklore expression. That is why some communities perceive it as a phenomenon evoking the feeling of common origin connected with archaic forms of holidays and festivities like Christmas and Carnival.

Compared to string music bands, brass bands, or more modern musical forms, the bagpipe music is much less frequently presented at cultural events,

and its recordings are hard to find. The bagpipe music bears the mark of rarity and attractiveness connected with the local culture, contributes to the strong sense of identity and continuity. In the areas with at least partly preserved bagpipe tradition the sound of bagpipes induces for the village community an unmistakable feeling of "our" music.

However as the overall social and other conditions have drastically changed, it is needed to modify the traditional approach to teaching the bagpipe playing. It seems that nowadays the environment of a folklore ensemble creates ideal conditions for systematic education of young bagpipers in Slovakia. Adult folk ensembles then represent a natural environment in which the young bagpiper can continue his activities.

Annoucement

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