

# Romani Song in the times of racist upheavals

Emília Rigová is an engaged artist who dedicates her installations and performances to the themes of Roma identity and cultural appropriation of Roma body in the Western culture. Her auctorial exhibition *Revive/Purano Hangos* (Reviving Old Voices) builds on one micro-particle of Roma culture – a song surviving only in score – reveals the precariousness of collective memory, tradition and life broken down by genocide, the (im)possibility to revive lost voices. Rigová explicitly opens the topic of violence on exerted upon Roma people (the text accompanying the exhibition contains a note, that not long ago, there were Roma children beaten by policemen in Krompachy) and points out that without knowing about the continuous historical oppression of the Roma people, we are unable to recognize and address the contemporary one. The exhibition opening took place during the outbreak of racist upheavals in the U.S.A. and many other countries in response to the murder of Georg Floyd. This is one more reason for us to stand up with vigour against brute force used by repressive bodies against people suffering racial discrimination.

According to ethnomusicologist Zuzana Jurková, every collector of Roma halgató songs encounters specific problems connected with recording their rhythmical and melodic components. Standard European notation does not have notes to record the rhythmical nuances and long drawn melodic forms, which are typical for songs of this kind. (Jurková, 1997) As the curator of the exhibition, Tamara Moyzes said during the interview for *HateFree Culture*, halgató songs originally played the role of an intimate singing of women and were addressed to men in the household. During WW2, themes of concentration camps entered into these songs.

Emília Rigová based her exhibition *Revive/Purano Hangos* on one musical relic of that time – it is the song *Aven aven o žandára* (The cops caught us all) connected with Roma Holocaust (in Roma language the word *porajmos*, is a term for the attempt to exterminate the Roma people in Europe). The chosen song is a part of a cycle sung by Roma singer Ján Cibula from Klenovec and recorded in musical notation by non-Romani composer Bohuslav Valaštan in 1957. The cycle from Klenovec was published in Romani quaternary *Romano Džaniben* in 1994.

The song *Aven, aven ó žandára* is in the exhibition space dispersed between the score, unfinished memorial, and sound of an automatically playing piano, that mechanically replays the melody written down in score. In the space, there are also videos with non-Roma musicians, interpreting the song individually according to the score. According to the author, these attempts of non-Roma people to revive once-lost music of Roma people present a symbolic gesture of historic justice. This cultural exchange does not sound as interesting as did the interpretation of the Klenovec cycle by Roma musicians. The singer Pavlína Matiová and pianist Jakub Tököly presented revival of the song in the exhibition space, on the basis of their own knowledge of the oral tradition of the halgató style. Diffident groping of non-Roma interpreters had its symbolic value.

Experience of interpretation given by Matiová and Tököly, who worked with the Klenovec cycle for the first time, but got their musical bearings soon, was more interesting both from the musical point of view and also better accented due to their Roma identity. The exhibition of Emília Rigová deals with complicated questions of identity and problems of coming to terms with historical trauma through various ways of retrieving of traditional music, that did not survive in voice record.

## HISTORY OF EXCLUSION

Wave of riots following the murder of Afro-American Georg Floyd coerced a broad discussion about racial justice in the context of history of slavery and segregation. Similarly, recent acts of police violence in Roma communities demonstrate the necessity of a society-wide recognition of the fact, that there has been a historic oppression of Roma people, continuing up to the present. According to Emília Rigová, it is impossible to understand contemporary violence committed on Roma people without granting the Roma Holocaust its proper place in the history of our countries.

Soon in the early period of the Slovak State, the conditions for movement of Roma people deteriorated and members of this community had strictly allotted time for leaving their settlements and visiting towns. In cases of violating the order, policemen beat Roma men and shaved Roma women's heads. Laws of that time enabled policemen to make swoops in Roma households. An awkward echo of this historic practice was the swoop on June 19th, 2013 in Moldava nad Bodvou. Dozens of policemen raided the Roma settlement Budulovská and attacked 31 men and women inhabiting it. The anthropologist Zuzana Sekeráková Búriková writes about contemporary history of police violence on Roma people and points out that we also have our own Georg Floyds: Roma men Karol Sendrei and Ivan Koliščák died as victims of police brutality in years 2001 and 2013. There is plenty of other cases of police violence committed on bodies of Roma people.

Furthermore, we should be reminded of the forced isolation of whole settlements during the Covid-19 pandemic and the military surveillance on the boarder between locked-down areas and rest of the country. In his article *Coronavirus and the racial regime in Slovakia* Jakub Črcha points out the spatial segregation of Romani population that begun under the rule of Maria Theresa (1717-1780) and consolidated in different politic regimes. In this context, lock-downs applied to whole settlements seem like a perfect cut-off Roma communities from the rest of society. It was during a lockdown when the above mentioned incident in Krompachy took place. Policemen there beat up children who were allowed by a military patrol to go to a brook outside the lockdown area. Emília Rigová appeals, that it is crucial to see these acts of violence not out of context, but to read them as part of a wider history of exclusion.

## VOICES OF THE DEAD PEOPLE

In the exhibition of Emília Rigová, Roma song has not the role of an ornamental part for arranging emotions appropriate for the Holocaust time. Moderate, pure white environment of the exhibition resembling even an operating theatre, contains only one expressive element – colorful carpet with a traditional motive – lets sound repetitive ambient of the piano, automatically playing loop record according to the score. The musical score reduces the song and extends it at the same time: reduces it to a text without voice, but extends it to a cultural object, branching its context and its alternative forms, in which it may exist. Machine lying on the piano represents pallid attitude towards a scored song as a technical cipher and emphasises the absence of living and resonating Roma bodies, able to interpret the song in its original form. According to the curator of the exhibition, Tamara Moyzes, mechanical interpretation of the song "evokes technocratic character of the WW2." (Interview for *Hatefree Culture*, 2020)

The cops caught us all,  
to shave our hair.  
Do not shave my  
hair,  
yaaay, I will  
rather go to  
the camp!

Aven, aven,  
ó žandára,  
hoj mre bala te čingheren.  
Mačhingeren mire bala  
jááj, in kam den  
man pro táboris!

Anyhow, with the cycle of dehumanization of the song, potential of the material is still not used up. An unfinished memorial bearing the same score, that was during the time of exhibition present in sound of carving notes in the stone, connected in a counterpoint of sculptural work and tones of piano two types of time: the real and the historic. Besides the theme of breaking the bonds, Rigová inquires in her exhibition into possibilities of musical (sound) language and it creating of contact fields across time.

## QUEST FOR EMPTY PLACES

Reducing the song to a structure made from simple interval and metric characteristics and its non-reference in its mechanic interpretation is to be compared to various forms of uprooting of Roma people in the Czecho-Slovakian space through our modern history.

Up to ninety percent of Roma people living in the territory of contemporary Czech Republic in the time of WW2 perished in concentration camps. Besides the Holocaust we should mention the post-war development and state-ordered "displacement and dispersion of Romani people" in 1965, when so called "twinning districts" in the Czech part had to absorb Roma men and women from Slovakia with the purpose to eliminate concentration of Roma population in that way, to make their quota in society less than 5 percent. The aim of displacement was also to break up of traditionally large Roma families. (Fraser, 1998)

Breaks in passing of tradition from one generation to another are connected with gaps in discourse. As mentioned in the press release of the exhibition, even today there is no memorial of the Roma Holocaust and ignorance of this topic opens the path for continuous exclusion of Roma people as something acceptable. In the time of racial riots in the U.S. and other countries, that point out historical roots of the institution of American police as an oppression and control of racially discriminated people we must not forget that in our region, Roma men and women were not long ago systematically murdered and punished for movement in public. The exhibition *REVIVE/PURANO HANGOS* is based on a commemoration gesture, but in its intimate space it involves also motives of overlapping history with the present. It confronts us with the fact, that Roma people have a long history of exclusion, and that we only seldomly acknowledge it. Their cultural heritage is broken by genocide and displacements, their civil rights are violated until today and unjust violence they are exposed to from the side of law enforcement agencies is not followed by adequate response and consequences. If we want to be consistent in our discourse and practice of racial solidarity, we must emphasize, that Roma men and women have the right to education, just trial, movement in public space, universal equality and historic justice. Roma lives matter.

On exhibition *REVIVE/PURANO HANGOS* of Emília Rigová (curator Tamara Moyzes, *Artivist Lab Praha*, 2. 6. – 3. 8. 2020)

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