

# 18<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY SLOVAK NATIVITY PLAYS FROM ZSOLNA<sup>1</sup>

The Nativity is one of the best-known and most popular folk customs alive worldwide. The Department of Manuscripts of the Slovak National Library in Martin (Slovenská národná knižnica, Literárny archív) preserves a volume of manuscripts entitled as the “Songbook of Zsolna” (*Cantionale Solnensis*), which contains the most beautiful Slovak-language pieces of this genre from the 18<sup>th</sup> century:<sup>2</sup> two pastoral masses by Georgius Zrunek (*Harmonia Pastorales, Vianočná omša 1-2*), and the 25 short Nativity or Epiphany plays and carols of *Prosa Pastoralis* created by Georgius Zrunek and Edmund Pascha. All of them are high-quality musical pieces, plays, and important sources for ethnography. They are also most valuable sources for the early Slovak language in the region of Zsolna (Žilina). Not long ago, the two Christmas masses and the pastorals were published in a critical edition.<sup>3</sup>

Both Christmas masses (*Vianočná omša 1-2*) in *Harmonia Pastorales* were composed by Moravian Piarist, Juraj Zrunek, who lived in Hungary. However, for a long-time, it was believed that Edmund Pascha, another Moravian Piarist – living also in Hungary – was their author.<sup>4</sup> Authorship of Zrunek was evidenced by Ladislav Kačic.<sup>5</sup>

The first mass was composed in Zsolna in 1766.<sup>6</sup> It is a monumental ceremonial composition. Its performance needed highly qualified musicians, chamber choir, solo singers, and an orchestra. The singers were accompanied by an organ and various folk instruments, such as bugle (clarina), flute (flauta) shepherd’s pipe (tuba pastorica), overtone flute, fiddle, and bagpipes.<sup>7</sup>

The actors of the play are named *Pastor Primus, Pastor Secundus, Angelus Primus, and Angelus Secundus*, and very often the speaker (singer) is only mentioned as *Solo*. We can conclude from the text that there were, in fact, two Angels and four shepherds, named Juro, Jano, Mišo and Ondrej. Jano is the second shepherd, the oldest, a comic figure. The author gave no further instructions about this. The solos of *Pastor primus* must have been divided between three characters: Juro, Mišo and Ondrej. Other times, only one of them sang, and the others were silent roles. This was probably decided by the conductor of the performance.

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<sup>2</sup> Slovenská národná knižnica, Literárny Archív sign. XXXVIII/10 Sk-Mms.

<sup>3</sup> ZRUNEK 2017a; ZRUNEK 2017b; ZRUNEK 2017c

<sup>4</sup> TERRAYOVÁ 1987.

<sup>5</sup> KAČIC 1989, 10; MAROSZ 2009/2010, 158-159.

<sup>6</sup> MAROSZ 2009/2010, 162. Editions: PASCHA, 1987, ZRUNEK 1993. ZRUNEK 2017a.

<sup>7</sup> ZRUNEK 2017a, 554–555, 558, 566.

In this Christmas mass, the Nativity play is incorporated in the Liturgy. The permanent parts of the Mass are in Latin (as it was usual at this time), and the Latin text is completed with the Slovak Nativity play texts. The play starts after the *Kyrie* (only the Greek text, without Slovak supplements), and it is incorporated in the text of the next permanent part of the Mass, into the *Gloria*. In this phase of the Annunciation to the shepherds, the Angels tell the shepherds the news about the birth of the Messiah. The shepherds first get scared, and they believe that the noise is caused by thieves. They want to chase them away and threaten the unknown and unexpected guests with a beating. The Angels comfort them and tell them the news about the new-born Jesus. This part (the *Gloria*) starts with the duet of the two Angels. After a short dialogue between the Angels and the shepherds, they start to glorify God together. Finally, the Choir and the whole congregation in the Church joins in.<sup>8</sup> The turning point is at the line „*Qui tollis peccata mundi*”.<sup>9</sup> Before that, the scene takes place in the fields where the shepherds tend the sheep, but afterwards, the scene changes to the stable in Bethlehem where Jesus was born. The shepherds give gifts (cheese, sheep, goat) to Jesus and the Holy Family, and they worship the child. This scene ends with joyful singing and dancing.<sup>10</sup>

A next part of the Mass is the *Credo*. While the choir and (maybe) the congregation sings the Latin *Credo*, one of the shepherds sings a meditation in Slovak about the mystery of the Incarnation and Salvation, and gives thanks for it.<sup>11</sup> The shepherds give presents to the child again; this time they bring plums and pears.<sup>12</sup> The other meditation of the shepherds during the *Credo* is about the Last Judgment. They recognise their guilt and ask Jesus' mercy for that day. Finally, they dedicate themselves to Jesus and ask for salvation in exchange. The composer put great emphasis on the last request by means of wind instruments.<sup>13</sup>

The *Sanctus* and the *Benedictus* are two independent items. Only the *Sanctus* contains Slovak texts within the main (Latin) text. Here, the shepherds sing about the beauty of the new-born child and about the earthly and heavenly joy on his birth.<sup>14</sup> The *Benedictus* begins by repeating the first syllable of the text (be-be-be...) for several times; this way, the composer imitated the sheep bleating in the stable in Bethlehem.<sup>15</sup>

In the last item, (the *Agnus Dei*) they pray for peace for everyone in the world. Finally, the shepherds invite the child Jesus to a feast, offer him delicious food and wine (!), and they ask the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph to take care of the child., The old shepherd (Jano) is rocking him, Juro is playing the bagpipe, while the others

<sup>8</sup> ZRUNEK 2017a, 550–555.

<sup>9</sup> Zrunek 2017a, 555.

<sup>10</sup> ZRUNEK 2017a, 558.

<sup>11</sup> ZRUNEK 2017a, 559–560.

<sup>12</sup> ZRUNEK 2017a, 560.

<sup>13</sup> ZRUNEK 2017a, 561–562.

<sup>14</sup> ZRUNEK 2017a, 563.

<sup>15</sup> ZRUNEK 2017a, 564.

are singing and saying goodbye with the last sentence of the *Agnus Dei: Dona nobis pacem*.<sup>16</sup>

The Nativity play is bilingual Slovak and Latin, but the Slovak text is more important. The original Latin text has been shortened, but the meaning does not suffer. The Slovak and the Latin texts are interrelated even though they have a meaning in themselves as well. Even if the author was Moravian, and in this age the Czech language was often used by Slovakian authors as well, the language of the play is Slovak. More specifically, the text was written in the dialect of the Zsolna region. There are no significant Bohemisms in it.

The second Nativity play is very similar, but somewhat less complex.<sup>17</sup> It contains a Choir, soloists, an organ, and some wind instruments (bugle), but there are not as many as in the first mass. According to the text and the director's instructions, there were five soloists, three shepherds and two Angels, a chamber choir (shepherds, angels), and the congregation sang the usual items included in the Mass. The play is incorporated into the Mass the same way as the previous one.

The first difference between them is that in this second Mass the *Gloria* is not the first item with a Slovak text, but rather the *Kyrie is*. Here, the Slovak text is profane, shepherds sing about the joys of the pastoral life.<sup>18</sup> In the region of Zsolna, a lot of residents bred animals, particularly sheep; consequently, a significant number of the people who listened to the mass were in fact shepherds or they owned sheep. This prelude could bring closer these shepherds to the plot of the play, show them that the first visitors of the child Jesus, the main characters of the play, were simple men like them, sharing their joy and feelings. Another interesting fact is that here there are some Hungarian words with Slovak spelling (juhas, lovas)<sup>19</sup> in the Slovak text. These words must have been commonly used in the region of Zsolna by the Slovak population as well.

The plot of the play starts during the *Gloria*. The first sentence of this item is sung by the two Angels in two voices. The usual action begins after this: the shepherds first get scared, the Angels comfort them and tell them the news about the birth of Jesus, then the shepherds rejoice, find some presents and set out for Bethlehem.<sup>20</sup> Here, the turning point is at the line „*Laudamus te, benedicimus te, adoramus te, glorificamus te*”.<sup>21</sup> From here, the scene is the stable in Bethlehem, the shepherds adore the child, give thanks to God the Father for the Incarnation of the Son, glorify the Holy Trinity, and pray for the remission of their sins and for eternal salvation. During the *Gloria*, the joy of the glorification is expressed through dance as well.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> ZRUNEK 2017a, 564–566.

<sup>17</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b

<sup>18</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 609.

<sup>19</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 609.

<sup>20</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 610–611.

<sup>21</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 612.

<sup>22</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 615, 632.

The Latin text is shorter than the official liturgical text of the *Gloria*, and sometimes the meaning is lost:

For example:

„*Agnus Dei... Qui tollis peccata... Qui tollis peccata... Qui sedes qui sedes... Quoniam, quoniam, quoniam tu solus... quoniam... quoniam... Cum Sancto Spiritu. Cum Sancto cum Sancto cum Sancto ...*”<sup>23</sup> (Latin text without the Slovak tropes)

The Slovak text sometimes substitutes the Latin: „*Qui tollis peccata, odpust naše provinieni*”<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes the Slovak text is a loose translation of the Latin:

„*Qui tollis peccata, ktorý svieta brichy snimas*”<sup>25</sup>

„*Domine Deus, Pane všemohucý, Rex coelestis, Krali prežaducý*”<sup>26</sup>

Usually, the meaning of the Latin text is irrelevant. The author focused on the Slovak text, which has a meaning by itself. The congregation, the audience was made up of simple Slovak-speaking people. They understood the Slovak language, but not the Latin, so the Slovak had to be more important.

In the text of the *Credo*, there are fewer changes or omissions. The author interrupts the Latin text only twice; once at the confession of the creeds about the Incarnation and later at the confession of the Ascension of Jesus. A song of three shepherds in three voices about the mystery of Incarnation is inserted between the sentences „*Descendit de coelis*” and „*et incarnatus de Spiritu Sancto*”<sup>27</sup> and a Solo of a shepherd, which is very similar to the Solo of the first Mass in the same scene after the sentence „*et ascendit in coelum*”.<sup>28</sup> In the name of the whole congregation, the shepherd asks the baby Jesus to have mercy on the day of the Last Judgement. He beseeches the infant to forgive their sins in exchange for their presents. Finally, he promises, that they will never sin again. The rest of the *Credo* is missing, the author has kept only the last sentence: „*Et vitam venturi saeculi, Amen.*”<sup>29</sup> After the *Credo*, one of the shepherds says goodbye to the Holy Family, and (in the name of the congregation) asks for blessing on their lives and for Salvation after their deaths. In the *Sanctus*, there is no Slovak text, the *Benedictus* is the same as in the first Mass.

The last item is the *Agnus Dei*. Here, there are Slovak tropes in the Latin text, the same way as in the *Gloria*:

<sup>23</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 613–614.

<sup>24</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 614.

<sup>25</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 614.

<sup>26</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 613.

<sup>27</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 616.

<sup>28</sup> ZRUNEK 2017a, 561.; ZRUNEK 2017b, 617.

<sup>29</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 617.

partial loose translation of the Latin text:

„Agnus Agnus Dei / O Beranku tichy / Qui tollis peccata / Kteri snimaš hrichy”<sup>30</sup>

Partially independent tropes:

„Dona danana dona nobis pacem. / Udiel nam pokoj svatý, / Abý bil naš viek zlatý, /  
Dona! Však sme dalý, co sme mali, / Prijmý od nas ten dar malý, / Az nam vic udieliš, zasej  
sa poziviš. / Ješče dnes naš Ježišku, spomeneš, / Kde sý našý valašý, / Co robia na salašý”<sup>31</sup>

One of the shepherds sings a solo. He presents the requests of the congregation (mercy, peace etc.). The others answer him with the refrain: „*Smiluj se, slituj se nad namý, tvojimi pastiri chudimi!*”<sup>32</sup> The Nativity play is finished by the joyful singing of the whole congregation.

Following the model of these two Slovak Christmas Masses, Zrunek also composed two Hungarian Christmas Masses during the next year. They are very similar to their Slovak sources, but they are independent creations, not translations.<sup>33</sup>

The second part of the „Songbook of Zsolna” is *Prosae Pastorales*, in which some shorter Pastorals and Christmas and Epiphany carols have survived.<sup>34</sup> The title page of the Manuscript has the following inscription: “Compositae et conscriptae Patre Claudiano (Ed.) Ostern (Pa.) Solnae”. Claudianus Ostern was the pseudonym of Edmund Pascha. Ladislav Kačic’s research proves that Pascha recorded the text, but the author was Juraj Zrunek, except for the last four items, which were composed by Pascha.<sup>35</sup>

The *Prosae Pastorales* includes 25 short plays and songs for Christmas, New Year’s Day, and Epiphany. The Pastorals are shorts, the stories are simple with two or three characters, and sometimes they include a choir. They were probably performed during the Christmas Mass. The first play „*Menalka a Damenta*” is a dialogue between these two shepherds.<sup>36</sup> Their names come from the 3<sup>rd</sup> eclogue of Virgil. The young Menalka is frightened by the appearance of the Angel, but the old, wise Damenta explains to him what it means. The dialogue begins in the fields, and it is finished at the manger of Jesus. The shepherds pray for the salvation of their souls and for protection in this world for themselves and for their herds. The second play (*Hore, hore pastuškove!*)<sup>37</sup> is a dialogue between a shepherd and an Angel, completed with a choir of other shepherds. It is a classical nativity play with the same requests and presents as the previous Nativity plays. They are followed by Christmas carols in

<sup>30</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 619.

<sup>31</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 619–620.

<sup>32</sup> ZRUNEK 2017b, 618–619.

<sup>33</sup> The Slovak and Hungarian Masses were compared by Diána Marosz and Réka Kővári. MAROSZ 2009/2010; KŐVÁRI 2013. Edition of Hungarian Masses: ZRUNEK 2017d; Zrunek 2017e

<sup>34</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c

<sup>35</sup> KAČIC 1989; Marosz 159.

<sup>36</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 651–653.

<sup>37</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 654–657.

the Manuscript. They were parts of Nativity plays due to their texts (*Do lesa, do hori valaši...; Včera sme Bratrove mili, z muziku v Betleme bili...; Divna novina, že Panna syna počala...*).<sup>38</sup> The 6<sup>th</sup> item is again a traditional Nativity play. It contains the classical Annunciation to the shepherds by Angels. The other scene is the Adoration of the child by the shepherds, with presents and the same requests (plenty of goods in this world, salvation after death). The performance is typical, having a dialogue between soloists, and finally the song by a choir.<sup>39</sup> The 7<sup>th</sup> item (*Juro a Kubo*),<sup>40</sup> however, is based on a new idea: it is a dialogue between two shepherds. One of them (Kuba) missed the Annunciation of the Angels, so one of his mates, another shepherd named Jura, tells him what happened. First, Kuba would not believe it. He begins to look for a rational explanation: the bright light was the sign of a fire, not of Angels, and their song was in fact a cry for help from the people threatened by the fire. At last, Juro persuades him to go to adore the child with him. After singing another Christmas carol (*Co si nového, neslychaného...*)<sup>41</sup> a similar Nativity begins (*Dva pastiri a Mišo* [Two shepherds and Mišo]),<sup>42</sup> but with three characters: a shepherd named Mišo and two of his companions. Mišo is on his way home from Bethlehem, when he meets two other shepherds who missed the Annunciation. Mišo tells them what happened and teaches them the mystery of the Immaculate Conception and Incarnation. He speaks about the Holy Family and about their arrival in Bethlehem. At last, they decide to go to Bethlehem, and Mišo accompanies them. This is followed by Christmas (*Pri Betleme na sallaši, tam jest dobra paša...; Vec divná se stala, nam se ukazala...; Sem hrišnici zarmúcení všeci pospichejte...; Budiš pochválen z milosti...; Povím ti novinu, bratříčku...; Spí muj sináčku, spí moje ditete...*), New Year's Day (*Nastava nam dnes rok novi...; Novi rok beží, v jesličkách leží...*) and Epiphany (*Co je to dnešní den za znamení?; O díte Bože vtělení...*) carols.<sup>43</sup>

The following plays are supposedly the creations of Edmund Pascha: two choir works in two voices (*K Horám chaso, k horám...; Novini z Betlehema jiste...*),<sup>44</sup> a short fragment from a Nativity play (*Incipit Bača recitativo...*),<sup>45</sup> a Christmas carol (*Nos mi Juhasi...*)<sup>46</sup> and at last, a short play: *Jano a Kuba* [Jano and Kuba],<sup>47</sup> in which two shepherds Jano and Kubo talk about the Annunciation of Angels. They explain to one another what it means, they visit the child, give him presents, food and some clothes, and in exchange, they request salvation.

<sup>38</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 677.

<sup>39</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 658–661.

<sup>40</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 662–665.

<sup>41</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 677.

<sup>42</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 666–668.

<sup>43</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 677.

<sup>44</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 677.

<sup>45</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 669–670.

<sup>46</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 677.

<sup>47</sup> ZRUNEK 2017c, 671–675.

Christmas Masses and Nativity plays are extremely valuable compositions not only because of their beautiful music and the literary value of the text. They are also valuable sources for historical linguistics. Despite the fact that the author is Czech, the language of these plays is Slovak. In this age, most printed books for Slovak readers in Hungary were in Czech, but the manuscript tradition has preserved for us Slovak texts. These plays are very important because they serve as a rare witness to the Slovak dialect in the region of Zsolna from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, they contain a great amount of interesting ethnographical information. For example: the food offered by the shepherds to the child must have been the typical food of shepherds at that time in that region, such as dried carrots, fruit, cabbage dishes, cheese, goat meat, and mutton. They present a particularly broad range of musical instruments, which must have been used in that region. The requests of the shepherds to the child show the struggles of the people in that region. They pray for good weather, large crops, and protection from bears and wolves. Participating in a nativity play was more than a simple performance for the actors. In the role of the shepherds of Bethlehem, at the manger of Jesus, they were praying in the name of the congregation, the people of Zsolna.