Czech Bluegrass is an important, original and highly personal contribution to the defining characteristics and development of one of the more unlikely (but nonetheless significant) forms of musical expression in Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic. Bidgood’s approach, which is broadly ethnomusicological, renders his work accessible to a range of readers with a general interest in Czech culture and folk-spectrum music, as well as to musicians and musicologists with a more specialist knowledge of and/or liking for bluegrass. I am very much in the former category, and can claim no expertise in the making or interpretation of music, but I still found much of the content engaging and perspicuous.

The study, which includes a Foreword (pp. vii–ix) by Tony Trischka, comprises an Introduction, five chapters, and (appropriately enough here) a so-called ‘Tag’. The Introduction (pp. xi–xviii) outlines the author’s own involvement in bluegrass music, and how he came to undertake ethnographic fieldwork in the Czech Republic. Chapter one (pp. 1–20), ‘Places, meaning, community, and inbetweenness’, locates Czech bluegrass in its geocultural and semantic context, and introduces the shifting and sometimes illusory concept of vono (which might be loosely translated as ‘the real thing’, but which Bidgood defines as ‘what people want to experience’, p. 17). The second chapter (pp. 21–51), ‘Czech bluegrass histories and backgrounds’, considers what makes bluegrass Czech, and includes some thoughtful observations on the traditions and sense of identity of bluegrass musicians pre- and post-1989. Chapter three (pp. 52–68), ‘Making bluegrass at home, abroad, and in between’, is a more descriptive account of performances featuring the author in Europe, as well as of the manufacture of banjos. The next chapter (pp. 69–98), ‘Learning and playing Americanness on the fiddle’, considers some of the more technical aspects of music playing, and the difficulty for Czechs of reproducing ‘Americanness’, or rather the subtleties of articulating and negotiating the differences between Czechness and Americanness. The penultimate chapter (pp. 99–118), ‘Singing truth, fidelity, and play in Czech bluegrass gospel’, addresses, inter alia, the tensions surrounding the performance of sacred material by non-believers, and the question of acculturating gospel music to the Czech context. The final chapter (pp. 119–24), ‘A tag: America/Amerika’, reflects on the constructedness of the Czech bluegrassers’ romanticized notions of America.

For practising musicians with a specialism in bluegrass, chapters three, four and five may well be of greatest interest. Bidgood’s narrative, informed by detailed personal knowledge of the art form, extensive on-stage collaboration, and numerous encounters and interviews with musicians and luthiers, sheds light on the subject-matter in a way that only an accomplished bluegrass musician can do. The author is both an insider, thanks to his musicianship
and shared aesthetic and extra-aesthetic experiences, and an outsider, by dint of his nationality and the scholarly detachment inherent in academic writing. (His position vis-à-vis Czech bluegrass music to some extent parallels the ‘inbetweenness’ of Czech bluegrassers — whose music is both American and Czech — as discussed in detail in chapter one.) The study perhaps inevitably focuses more on the production of music than its critical reception, although it also includes some fascinating comments on the Czechs’ attitudes to gospel music, in particular.

For me (and, I suspect, for many other readers with an academic interest in things Czech, but without expertise in bluegrass), the major contribution of the work resides in chapters one and two. In the first chapter, Bidgood analyses the problem of the appropriation of an originally and quintessentially American musical form, and adopts the idea of ‘in-betweenness’ ‘as a way of describing how Czech bluegrass music makers situate themselves in relation to “America”’ (p. 5). He argues that ‘the meaning and utility of bluegrass-related activities’ increases in relation to the number of locales that they inhabit (p. 7). He further helpfully cites Alexei Yurchak’s explanation of the Russian concept of vnye, which Yurchak interprets as being simultaneously inside and outside a given setting (p. 18). In chapter two, Bidgood asserts that ‘Czech bluegrass, while part of a globalized discourse on bluegrass music, is nevertheless uniquely Czech’ (p. 21). He traces the development of bluegrass from the tramping tradition to the present day, and points out that music has been a key part of Czech Americanism. His comments on normalization, cottaging and accommodation elucidate the context in which Americanism (including bluegrass as one of its principal manifestations) operated and developed during late Communism — ‘a space between dissent and complicity’ (p. 41).

Bidgood’s account of the negotiation of musical, cultural, geographical and temporal boundaries, in the context of bluegrass, is accompanied by Notes on language (pp. 125–30) and Recommended media (pp. 153–60). While these may not be of relevance or interest to everyone, they provide useful supplementary information, which will assist the uninitiated. There will be comparatively few readers who will find all aspects of Bidgood’s study equally illuminating and stimulating, not least because there is hardly anyone who shares his experiential and knowledge base, but many will be able to take at least something from this well-considered publication.

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