



# Smetana and the Hussites: In Memoriam Lenka Hlávková<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This essay, in honor of Lenka Hlávková focuses on the structure of the Hussite song, *Ktož jsú boží bojovníci*, noting that its three phrases are always presented in a “loud-soft-loud” manner, where the outer parts are easily coded male, and associated the warriors, and the middle section, coded female, suggests those things the warriors are protecting. The study further asks whether rather than viewing the warrior as the focal point of our interest, as is borne out by the literature, we need to enshrine that soft middle, the warriors are protecting.

## Keywords

Hussite song; *Ktož jsú boží bojovníci*; analysis

This essay circulates around three images:



The first is a photograph of our dear friend, colleague and mentor, Lenka Hlávková who was shot and killed at Charles University on December 21st, 2023, and to whom this essay is dedicated. I hope the significance of this second image will become clear in the course of this study:

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<sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Hana Ehlová, Sandra Bergmannová and Olga Mojžíšová of the Smetana Museum for giving me both materials and ideas, and for their kindness. And thanks also to Pavel Kodýtek for his help during the research for this paper and to Viktor Velek for providing me with information about the historic uses of *Ktož jsú Boží bojovníci*.



The third image is Smetana's setting of the middle four bars of the Hussite song, *Ktož jsú Boží bojovníci* from *Tábor*, part V of *Má vlast*. Scored delicately for woodwinds and marked *piano* and *dolce*, it appears between fortissimo statements of the outer phrases:

### Example 1

Ob. *p dolce*

Cl. in B *p dolce*

Fag. *p dolce*

Here it is again in the context of the entire setting of the song. I have marked it as B, surrounded by A and C (which has something of the psychological effect of a return to A):

### Example 2

The musical score for Example 2 is presented in three systems. The first system, labeled 'A', begins with a piano introduction marked *ff* and includes the tempo instruction *L' istesso tempo* with a quarter note equal to a common time signature. The second system, labeled 'B', features a melodic line in the right hand marked *p dolce*. The third system, labeled 'C', returns to a more complex piano accompaniment marked *ff*. The score includes various dynamic markings such as *sfz* and *rit.*, and uses a variety of musical notations including slurs, accents, and fermatas.

Before trying consider just why and how the middle phrase became *piano dolce*, I would like to briefly trace the use *Ktož jsú Boží bojovníci* in various compositions, arrangements and contexts in the decade before Smetana first employed it. It seems likely that the idea of quoting the song in large-scale composition belonged to Alois Hnilička, (1826–1909) who completed his symphonic poem, *Táborita* in 1862, and sent the score to Smetana who tried to arrange a performance – for various reasons no performance ever took place.<sup>2</sup>

Here is the section of the *Táborita* that quotes the song, and as we can see, unlike Smetana’s version, the middle phrase is treated as the Hussites might have sung it if they sang it at all, that is, with no dynamic change in the middle phrase.

<sup>2</sup> For access to the score and recording of *Táborita* I’m indebted to the work and help of Tomáš Židek and Viktor Velek.

## Example 3

Grave

Tenor 1: Kdož jste Bo - ži bo - jov - ni - ci zá - ko - na je - ho pro - tož od Bo - ha po - mo - ci a dou - fej - tež  
 Tenor 2: Kdož jste Bo - ži bo - jov - ni - ci zá - ko - na je - ho pro - tož od Bo - ha po - mo - ci a dou - fej - tež  
 Bass 1: Kdož jste Bo - ži bo - jov - ni - ci zá - ko - na je - ho pro - tož od Bo - ha po - mo - ci a dou - fej - tež  
 Bass 2: Kdož jste Bo - ži bo - jov - ni - ci zá - ko - na je - ho pro - tož od Bo - ha po - mo - ci a dou - fej - tež

We know that Smetana himself heard *Ktož* performed in a unison choral version in February 1862 as this snippet from *Slavoj* makes clear:

panem skladatelem provázení. Pan B. Smetana mistrně sobě počínal přednášeje „Nocturno“ od Chopina a č. 4. z „Upomínek Slovanských.“ Jakož však obecenstvo uznání své v hlučném potlesku na jevo dalo, tak že pochvaly nebylo konce, přidal p. S. jednu skladbu, která taktéž byla uznání všestranného došla. „Vávra“ od Nápravníka jest skladba velmi příjemná, máme ale za to, že p. skladatel básníka nepochopil, dav skladbě více opravdivý nežli žertovný ráz. Sbor „Kdož jste boží bojovníci (z 15. století) přednesl spolek zpěvácký v hlučném a dojemném unisonu výborně. Ku konci zapěli

One of the first piano arrangements of the song was made by Hynek Palla a year earlier, in 1861, and it is the earliest instance I can find of casting the middle section as *piano*:

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## PÍSEŇ TÁBORŮ.

Složil BORUSLAV z ČECH TIC miláček  
Jana Žižky z Kalichu.

1. Kdož jste boží bo-jo-vníci, a zá-kona je-ho,  
pros-tež od boha po-moci, a doufej-tež v-něho,  
žu-ko-ne-čně s nim vždycky zvi-tě-zí-te.

When Karel Šebor first quotes the tune in *The Hussite Bride* in 1868 we not only find the middle phrase marked *piano* but there's the addition of *dolce*. It appears, by the way, that Šebor simply copied Palla's harmonization:

Example 4

Musical score for Example 4, showing piano accompaniment. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first measure is marked *f* (forte) and the second measure is marked *p* (piano). The music features block chords in the right hand and single notes in the left hand.

Example 5

Musical score for Example 5, showing vocal line and piano accompaniment. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. The vocal line is on a treble clef staff with lyrics: "Pro - ste Bo - ha po - mo - ci". The piano accompaniment is on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The piano part is marked *p dolce* (piano dolce). The lyrics "Tr.I." and "Trbní senza Tb." are also present.

And we can see when Smetana uses the song in *Libuše* in 1872, the middle phrase is already marked *piano dolce*.

Example 6

Musical score for Example 6, showing piano accompaniment. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The music is marked *p dolce* (piano dolce). The piano part features a more complex texture with moving lines in both hands.





firm will? There is never going to be a single answer to this question. In fact, from a conventional analytic vantage point, you could argue that the middle exists only to accentuate the outer phrases, to make them, as it were, more warlike and powerful through contrast with the *dolce* middle; in effect, that the middle vanishes in support of the Hussite armies. But before offering an alternative interpretation, I want to look more closely, not only at the middle phrase, but at the *middle* of the middle phrase, where Smetana's touch is truly different from anything else.

### Example 7

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Clarinet (Clar.) and Bassoon (Fag.). The music is in 2/4 time and one flat (Bb major). The Clarinet part begins with a dynamic marking of *p dolce*. A rectangular box highlights the second measure of the Clarinet part, which contains a Bb major 7th chord (Bb, D, F, Ab). The Bassoon part provides harmonic support with sustained chords. The score continues for several measures, showing the interaction between the two instruments.

In this harmonic modal maze, this sonority appears as a *dolcification* of dolce: the Bb major 7th chord in the second measure, which along with the woodwinds, provides a specific and more gentle aspect to go along as well with the tone of a religious chorale.

So, despite all the words of the composer himself, and many, many future commentators, directing us to the warlike power of the Hussites, and a tacit celebration of military victory, I would like to suggest that there been scant attention paid to what the Hussites might actually be protecting. I have come to believe not only that this middle phrase represents that thing, a protected space, but that it is, in fact, *the most important thing*, or at the very least, something the work, Smetana and nation cannot do without.

Now you may think at this point, that we have misrepresented the whole thing by devoting undue attention to this four-bar section of the song and tying it to notions of “protected space,” but let’s look at what happens in *Blaník*. If *Tábor* is based on several iterations of the complete tune stated as a coherent whole, *Blaník* expands the structural design such that essentially each larger part primarily references one phrase of the tune. *Blaník* opens with references to the beginning of the song, and ends with a march based on its third phrase, but what a wonder, and an unexpected one, exists in between. After a fascinating transition between worlds, we have an extended version of the middle phrase of *Ktož*;

## Example 8

*Più allegro, ma non molto* ( $\text{♩} = 76$ )

*dolce*  
Como  
Ob.  
Flauto  
Ob.  
pp dolce

...and this is followed by one of the most exquisite pastoral passages of the 19th century. It is one of Smetana's "superpastorals" where there's a beautiful open sonic field consisting of nothing but F, and we may note it uses the same instrumentation as the middle section setting from *Tábor*.

## Example 9

Clar.  
Como  
Flauto  
Ob.  
p Fag.  
Fag.  
Como

Smetana also writes about this section, although it takes him a while to get there:

This is a continuation of the previous composition: *Tábor*. After the defeat of the Hussite kings, they hid in Blaník and await in deep sleep the moment when they will come to the aid of their homeland. Therefore, the same motifs as in *Tábor* serve as the foundation of the structure in *Blaník*: “Who are you, God’s warriors!” Based on this melody (this Hussite principle), the resurrection of the Czech nation, future happiness, and glory will arise! With a triumphant hymn, in the form of a march, the composition concludes, and thus the entire series of symphonic poems “*Vlast*.” *A small intermezzo sounds in this composition, a brief idyll, a depiction of the Blaník landscape, a small shepherd boy calls out and plays (Schalmey) and the echo responds.*<sup>4</sup>

So even as Smetana acknowledges the “brief idyll” (and let us be clear, it is *not* so brief – 40 full measures of bagpipe drones in the bass) once again, his main focus is still on the warriors.

I think we can agree that musically and otherwise, these warriors are coded as male. But the middles, “soft” and “sweet,” often expanding to superpastorals, have a different population consisting of: “small shepherd boys” as we saw in *Blaník*, and references to mothers and children in the *Hubička* lullaby (which looks a lot like the idyll from *Blaník*):

### Example 10

Národní píseň

V. *p*  
Ha - jej, — můj an - díl - ku, — ha - jej a spi, ma - ti - čka

*sempre pp e leggierissimo*

V.  
ko - lé - bá - dě - ťá - tko svý, ha - jej, da - dej, ny - nej

*pp*

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

And then the “young girls” the composer invokes in his comments on *From Bohemia’s Woods and Fields*.

Example 11

The musical score for Example 11 is presented in six systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 2/4. The first system begins with a piano (*p*) and *espressivo* marking. The second system includes a Flauti part with a *pp* marking and a Fag. Oboi part with a *pp* marking. The third system features a complex texture with sixteenth-note patterns in the right hand and eighth-note patterns in the left hand. The fourth and fifth systems continue this intricate texture. The sixth system concludes with a *ppp* marking for the Clarinet part, a *dim.* marking, and a *ppp* marking, followed by the instruction *Lunga Pausa*.

Such spaces are a refuge from the battle. Critically though, they seem to be treated as incidental to the main story, at least partially because it turns out that it's much easier to speak of the outer phrases of *Ktož*, which are rational, tangible, and kinetic, than about the dream spaces in between.

I would like to further suggest that even as these middles have an abstract role in controlling the motion of these compositions, *they also have a powerful political message about what is valuable and essential*, what is worth protecting and preserving. This is not merely a matter of abstraction, and it would be wrong to conclude without suggesting more personal things. Some of the figures in the 19th century most active in the creation of these protected spaces were composers whose struggles were known, and manifest. So, whether such passages occur in a *Pastoral symphony* by a famously tormented German composer, or the middle section of the slow movement of Mahler's *First Symphony*, or in several places in *Má vlast*, we also understand there may be something autobiographical in the need to create sanctuaries of purity, beauty and continuity.

As noted, I believe this special world is present in microcosm, in a nutshell, in the middle phrase of the "Warriors of God."

We may now return to the second image I presented above: the result of a discussion between myself and Meta AI, seeking to frame a visualization of the relationship between the warrior and what the warrior is protecting. This is something which I believe is essential to understanding *Tábor* and *Blaník*, and *Má vlast* as a whole.

I further submit that our need for such spaces has not disappeared. We may ask what happens in our lives when places we might have understood to be protected, like the entire planet, the political arena, or the Charles University Music Department are violated by previously unimaginable forces? Modernism, particularly that brand that mandates that we stop looking for simple and naïve beauties and rather take a hard and true look at harsh reality, does not concern itself much with such protected spaces, tending to see them as reactionary, but it seems we need them now more than ever.

## Bibliography

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