

# Special Feature

# Wounded But Not Broken:

## Terror, Grief, Healing and Music<sup>1</sup>

Zuzana Jurková,<sup>+</sup> Oldrich Podebradský<sup>++</sup> & Zuzana Gulová<sup>+++</sup> (Czech Republic)<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

On December 21, 2023, a student of Charles University in Prague, one of the safest places in the world, shot dead 14 academics and students. Amidst omnipresent grief and mourning, the process of coping and “healing” started immediately, manifested in particular through a series of events called the “Month for the Faculty.” This text is based on participation in and research of these activities. The theoretical part uses the Durkheim's concept of *piacular* rites, the aim of which is to “reconfirm [a] community's solidarity.” Following the recommendations of Bin Xu (2016), we investigated who the main agents were in the decision-making regarding shapes of events, as well as tensions in its negotiations. Performed music of various genres is viewed through the perspective of *affect*. The following section present the process of renewal at the level of the university and its close neighborhood: events connected with the creation of commemorative sites, which became temporary “*lieux de mémoire*” (Nora 1989), etc. The third part is focused on two face-to-face communities where music played a crucial role. We look at the negotiations behind the organization of these (musical) events as well as their execution and what was expected from them. In the conclusion, function of music is discussed. It corresponds with what Frith (1996) calls “coming together through music as a performative social and emotional project” which is in agreement with functions of *piacular* rites.

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<sup>+</sup> Zuzana Jurková, Prof., Faculty of Humanities, Charles University Prague, Czech Republic.  
email: Zuzana.jurkova@post.cz.

<sup>++</sup> Oldrich Podebradský, Assistant Professor, Social-cultural Anthropology, Charles University Prague, Czech Republic.  
email: oldrich.podebradsky@fhs.cuni.cz.

<sup>+++</sup> Zuzana Gulová, Post - Grad Student, Social-cultural Anthropology, Charles University Prague, Czech Republic.  
email: zuz.gulova@gmail.com.

## Introduction

Friday, December 21, 2023, shortly before 4 o'clock. Like several other colleagues, I am in a hurry to attend the Christmas party of our school - the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University. Surprisingly, they won't let us into the building, even though there are obviously people inside. Within a few minutes, the dean (surrounded by police officers) tells us that due to the shooting in the building of the Faculty of Arts of the same university, all events are cancelled. It sounds quite surreal to us: a shooting at the Faculty of Arts? The first information begins to appear on the Internet: in a frenzy of gunfire, someone (we later learn that a 5th year history student at the Faculty) shot 14 people (the number of victims is initially unknown, but gradually increasing) and then committed suicide. A bit like in a ghostly dream, I take tram number 17, which coincidentally connects both buildings - ours in Troja with the main building of the Faculty of Arts in the very centre of the city, about 5 km away.



Figure 1. Faculty of Arts in the middle, Rudolfinum on the left, UMRUM on the right. Photo Z.J.).

At the bus stop I meet my student Zuzka. The tram doesn't run for a long time; only after about half an hour we realise that it is because of the disaster at the Faculty of Arts: the city centre is paralysed. Still at the tram stop, I start getting questions on WhatsApp. First from my friend Kay Kaufman Shelemay in Boston: "Zuzana, I'm reading about the shooting at Charles University. Are you okay? Confirm immediately!" Over the next 48 hours, I get many similar inquiries: colleagues from Oregon to Turkey to Israel express concern and participation.

Since that evening, December 21, 2023, the event - completely unprecedented not only in Prague but in the Czech Republic (Prague was, and still is, one of the safest places in the world) - filled the main TV and radio news, the front pages of newspapers and other media for many days...<sup>3</sup> The intervention of the police, who were on the scene within four minutes of the first emergency call, was discussed again and again; despite various comments, it is considered exemplary. Over and over again we watched videos of the intervention, and students crouching on the outside ledge on the 4th floor, trying to escape the room where the most massive shooting occurred.

A week later, I was the recipient of a mass email from a teacher in the Department of Religious Studies to the university's anthropologists:<sup>4</sup> The rector's board is planning a series of events, called Month for the Faculty, and is asking academics and anthropology students to document them so that it can later evaluate what worked and what didn't. A hectic email

discussion ensues, during which some express concerns about re-traumatization (especially of students). One anthropologist, however, points to the importance of rituals as ways of closing the event and establishing order.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, a team of six teachers and 15-20 students was formed;<sup>6</sup> our five-member ethnomusicology group agreed both to participate in the documentation and to try to understand the place of music in this extraordinary situation - especially since one of the first known victims was the head of the musicology department, Lenka Hlávková.

On the second of January, the first team meeting took place (a WhatsApp group was set up to share information), and on the fourth of January, the first big, extremely emotional event, called the Embrace of the Faculty, took place with 4 - 5 thousand participants. Already in the "Hug" some features manifested themselves, which we then witnessed repeatedly in the "Month for the Faculty." Three of these were particularly striking. The first, surfacing in every conversation, and observable in every event, was community solidarity, whereas communities could be understood at different levels, from the most intimate - face-to-face groups (students of the same major), to the global e.g. state communities, as evidenced by the numerous questions from my fellow ethnomusicologists. The second striking feature was the ubiquitous presence of two women at the head of the institutions in question: the dean of the Faculty of Arts, Eva Lehecková, and the rector of Charles University, Milena Králícková



Figure 2. The Dean Lehecková, second from the left, and the Rector Králícková, next to her, at the Embrace of the Faculty. Photo Z.J.

Photo from the culmination of the Faculty Embrace (By the way, for the first time in the nearly seven hundred years of history of the university, both positions are held by women). Both of them seemed very empathetic and authentic in the sense that they were experiencing real grief. At the same time, in short, with new speeches each time, they shaped a narrative that contained both effective compassion and support,<sup>7</sup> and an increasingly hopeful outlook for the future; the main emphasis in these speeches was on the cohesiveness of the community. A third striking feature of the "Embrace of the Faculty," a feature later hidden in many other events, was the involvement of top professionals: those involved in the organisation of large "events" such as the parade through the centre of Prague and the later placement of modular houses on the square in front of the Faculty, which will be discussed later (the building of the Faculty of Arts was closed until 19 February), psychologists, security forces, and also the management of neighbouring institutions – UMPRUM (Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design), the National Theatre and the Czech Philharmonic. For a whole month, a "memorial fire" was also burning in the square, which

was tended by students in addition to security guards most of the time. Some students testified to the importance of their representatives' constant vigil, but on the other hand, it was not possible to provide student guards for all two-hour slots.



Figure 3. Modular houses in front of the Faculty. Photo O.P.

Over the next six weeks or so, several dozen events took place both in the modular houses and elsewhere, only some of which were formally framed by the university initiative; these are discussed in the following sections of this text. In addition to the musical events on which we focus here, there were, for example, the "Readings for the Faculty," initiated by the faculty linguists, since one of the victims was a Scandinavian language teacher, or a workshop organized by the neighboring UMRUM in which a commemorative object was made from the remains of candles lit in the first days after the shooting (photo). At the end of January, the Month was formally closed with a concert by the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra with Mahler's Symphony No. 3; the auditorium of Prague's main concert hall, the Rudolfinum, was reserved for those who had participated in the restoration at Charles University. By way of explanation, the Czech Philharmonic building is adjacent to the Faculty of Arts and after the December shooting became a backroom for terrified students and academics. By offering a special concert for the Faculty of Arts, the Philharmonic now affirmed a kind of local solidarity, which was also demonstrated by the UMRUM, located on the other side of the square, by organizing a workshop.

Another milestone was the reopening of the Faculty of Arts building on February 19th with the singing of the university choir, thus starting the new semester.<sup>8</sup> In May, the so-called "Quiet Place" was opened on the 4th floor, where the most massive shooting took place. And then on June 21, 2024, half a year after the event, a memorial was unveiled in front of the faculty building, which will be discussed later. We see its installation as the beginning of a new chapter - a chapter of remembrance. So what was it all about before?

### Search for Interpretation

Over the last few years I have been working on a book on musical recollection,<sup>9</sup> and so it is perhaps not too surprising that I expected an explanatory framework in *memory studies*; indeed, other colleagues have thought so too. But we didn't witness anything of the sort at

the Month for the Faculty events, and the recommended readings<sup>10</sup> didn't correspond with the events either. Two facts seemed obvious: first, that everything that was happening was aimed at healing the wound in the community, at whatever level we see the community; and second, that the relatively frequent music of very different genres played during Faculty Month corresponded with this "community-healing" function.

In the first case – alongside with the symbolic-anthropological conception of ritual as an event creating new relationships - the classical sociologist Emil Durkheim and his concept of *piacular* rites were explicitly offered... These represent a communal response to tragedy. They usually include mourning, prayers, or various unusual symbolic practices. All of these, according to Durkheim, are not expressions of individual emotions, but a kind of moral obligation that society imposes on its members in moments of loss. Thus, while tragedy causes devastation and death, the subsequent reactions bring community members together and reaffirm their solidarity.

*When society is going through events that sadden, distress, or anger it, it pushes its members to give witness to their sadness, distress, or anger through expressive actions... It does so because those collective demonstrations, as well as the moral communion they simultaneously bear witness to and reinforce, restore to the group the energy that the events threaten to take away, and thus enables it to recover its equilibrium. (ED (orig. 1912) 1995: 415-16).*

As anthropologists, we rejoiced at how reality corresponded with classical theory. At the same time, however, we knew that the interesting things emerge where tensions, or at least negotiations, are revealed. And indeed: while the visible reality seemed (as much as possible in this situation) coherent, the interviews with the actors showed a much more plastic backstage.

### What About the Music?

As mentioned earlier, music, which was part of most of the activities, can be seen as a medium that performs the function of bringing together and healing the community, in Hagen's words "coming together through music as performative social and emotional project" (Hagen 2019: 16). The ways in which this was done deserve future, more thorough analysis; here we mention just two possible analytical perspectives.<sup>11</sup> The first is well applicable where the performance of music resembled a concert, i.e. what Turino (2008) refers to as the presentational modus of performance. In these, the compositions that were performed echoed a kind of common cultural ground of the community formed at that moment: *Hospodine pomiluj ny* [Lord have mercy on us], one of the oldest Czech songs,<sup>12</sup> referring to the millennia-old Czech cultural tradition, of which Charles University has been a large part, at the Embrace of the Faculty, Czech folk songs at the opening of the Faculty of Arts building, or the concert of classical, mostly medieval and Renaissance music at the Rudolfinum, organised by colleagues of the slain head of the Institute of Musicology Lenka Hlávková as a reminder of the joint - and as deliberately emphasised, uninterrupted - research in this field.

The second group is represented by active, in Turino's words, "participatory performances," most notably "Guitar Play" in modular houses and ecumenical prayer in song. Affect theory, as presented in conjunction with music by, for example, Thomson and Biddle (2013), offers itself as explanatory: affect here is something 'in between' and sound creates a specific atmosphere that allows for the modulation and circulation of moods and feelings 'that are felt but at the same time belong to no one in particular' (p. 5). This corresponds well,



moreover, with Asad's (2003) conception of pain and suffering, which he understands as largely intersubjective, localized in the social space inhabited by the individual (p. 69). That is: if the grief and pain of loss primarily resides in social space, then music, by stirring up the communal performance of music (without strictly depending on what kind),<sup>13</sup> the experience (affect) of togetherness, is the ideal medium for fulfilling the goals Durkheim speaks of.

### Behind the Curtain

As mentioned earlier, we were engaged by the Rector's board of Charles University to document, that is, observe and describe the events. However, our ethnomusicology group conducted semi-structured interviews with the main actors at distinctly musical events; we were convinced that their answers would change later. In late March, I arranged an interview with one of the essential actors in the aftermath of the December shooting, a member of the Rector's board, R. The interview revealed the complexity of negotiating the final shape of events primarily between the Rector's board and the student community, and the strength or weakness of individual actors. R. mentioned the offer of help from abroad (for example, Norway, which has already handled the series of terrorist attacks by Anders Breivik in 2012), and the involvement of top professionals in the field of organizing mass events that we observed. He mentioned negotiating with the media, whose representatives indeed behaved much more aggressively during the first events than later, and with politicians, some of whom tended to influence the shape of the events of the Month for the Faculty. But this was hampered by the university's efforts to maintain their somewhat communal character.

The consistency of real events with the anthropological understanding of rituals, including Durkheim's concept of *piacoular rites*, also seemed clearer after the interview. Not only that, our anthropologist colleague's text on the importance of rituals for society may well have reached the Rector's board. Moreover, I learn that one of R.'s specialties is contemporary rituals. Our belief that events spontaneously testify to the validity of Durkheim's concept thus turned out to be partly naive: R. had so internalized this model that the steps he proposed to the Rector's board were, among other things, an updated realization of it. At the same time, however, it must be admitted that the concept of "healing rituals" also corresponded to events over which R and the Rector's board had no influence, such as the aforementioned concert at the Rudolfinum in memory of the musicologist Lenka Hlávková. Even during such events, however, there were various negotiations. In the following parts of the text we present relevant events and in the end we return to the stone monument in front of the Faculty of Arts, whose unveiling marks a new chapter for us.

### Spontaneous Solidarity

*We join the silent crowd of thousands mourning at the Faculty of Arts. An elderly woman asks me about the surrounding buildings on Jan Palach Square. At first, I'm surprised that someone would ask for tourist information in these commemorative circumstances, but I politely reply, "This is the UM-PRUM, this is the Rudolfinum, the home of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, and this is the Faculty of Arts." She thanks me and explains that she has come from Pardubice,<sup>14</sup> solely for this occasion, to honor the memory of the shot students. I ask her how she feels about the procession - she says she has goosebumps and that she brought candles in memory of the victims. We part quietly.*

The meeting with the unknown woman from Pardubice, who had traveled a hundred kilometers to share her grief and shock with people she had probably never met during the Embrace of the Faculty, illustrates well the wave of solidarity that spread across the coun-

try in the wake of the tragedy. Many Czech towns cancelled or changed the programme of Advent events; television stations adjusted their broadcasting schedules; a memorial site was set up in front of Karolinum, the seat of the Rector's Office, the day after the shooting, where not only academics and the Rector commemorated the victims, but crowds of people came with candles, flowers, even just to stand and many more brought candles to the main building of the Faculty of Arts. Saturday, 23 December, was declared a day of national mourning and services for the victims of the tragedy were held in most churches in the country. The most important of these took place in St. Vitus Cathedral at Prague Castle, attended by the President of the Czech Republic, the Prime Minister and other political leaders as well as university representatives. The Czech Philharmonic Orchestra, the country's most important symphony orchestra, changed the programme of its New Year's concert - instead of the originally planned march "Toward a New Life" by Josef Suk, it performed Dvorák's "Nocturne in B major."



Figure 4. Candles in front of the Faculty of Arts (Photo O.P.)

### Events Co-organized "From Above"

As mentioned before, following the tragic shooting and during Month for the Faculty, there were a number of commemorative events organized to reunite and heal the academic community. Some of these activities were initiated by the university's Crisis Staff, while other suggestions came directly from students and student organizations. For many of these activities, the Crisis Staff provided the organizational framework in terms of coordinating the public space, dealing with Prague's city authorities, police and other entities. External experts were co-opted into the crisis staff for this purpose, for example Michal Bek, a well-known producer of large music festivals. The University has set up a round-the-clock office for this group in a building near the Rector's Office in Celetná street,<sup>15</sup> which has enabled the Rector's board and the crisis task force to communicate effectively and solve problems promptly. This task was by no means trivial given the considerable heterogeneity of the university of approximately 40 000 students.

Rector's board member R. articulated the objective as follows, "The challenge was to create a framework that can be participatory enough to give back agency to the different groups that are going to want it, because what happened was that the attack took that agency at different levels. That is, the primary task was to give back agency, to allow things to be completed that could not be completed, and to do it in very improvised terms..."<sup>16</sup>

### "Embracing the Faculty" - The First Attempt at Community Healing

*January 4, 2024, 1:30 in the afternoon. Two weeks after the tragedy. I have been standing for several dozen minutes in the Fruit Market,<sup>17</sup> a few steps away from hundreds of burning candles next to the entrance to the Karolinum, the seat of the Charles University rectorate. More and more people keep coming from all directions. It's not only students, but I recognize a few professors, and there are certainly a significant number who have come just to show their support. Although everything was undoubtedly organised at the last minute and a substantial part of the organising team is student volunteers, the whole event runs smoothly. A little before two o'clock, the rector of the University begins to speak from the window of the Estates Theatre, whose building frames one side of the square; her voice carries over the silent crowd despite the small sound system. Volunteers in reflective vests hand out leaflets with the programme of the event and the lyrics of the songs "V temnotách našich dní" [In the Darkness of Our Days] and "Hospodine, pomiluj ny" [Lord have mercy on us], which will later be sung in Palach Square at the lighting of the memorial fire. Then the whole procession gets underway in complete silence, which is in stark contrast to the normally very busy Celetná Street, through which thousands of tourists pass every day. The crowds of visitors to Prague have now been replaced by a procession of mourners heading in silence towards the site of the tragedy. The university Rector and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts are leading the way, both carrying lanterns with burning fire, which they will then use to light the memorial flame on Jan Palach Square. When the procession reaches the building of the Faculty of Arts in silence, it splits and forms a human chain around it, symbolically embracing it.*

Most of the initiatives and proposals for commemorative events came from students, and the university administration provided the necessary support. One of the first events, and an attempt to "heal" the academic community, was an event called "To Us, To All: A Commemorative Procession and Embrace of the Faculty,"<sup>18</sup> which took place on January 4th 2024.

The Rector's board provided the technical and organizational background for the implementation of this primarily student initiative. The University communicated with the police, the city council and coordinated student volunteers. The undeniable and much-testified emotionality of the event was also evident in the high organizational quality: the exclusion of traffic in the very centre of the city for the duration of the procession, the number of marked volunteers navigating the procession and distributing the programme... Despite the festive and emotional nature of the event, there were, however, instances of excesses by media representatives. The event was comprehensively covered by news teams - public television, radio and also private stations. The assertive behaviour of some reporters, inadequate to the context, set a precedent for subsequent faculty events: stricter rules were set for media representatives, and some events were denied media access at all.

Especially obvious was the good organization quality evident at the end of the procession, on Palach Square, in front of the Faculty of Arts. Several thousand participants must have crowded here, the memorial fire (which will burn here for a month) was lit ceremoniously,<sup>19</sup> and a choir sang on the steps of Rudolfinum, Prague's most important concert hall. Its brief performance, barely 15 minutes long, is well worth mentioning. The singers were



from two independent choirs: the choir of Charles University and the choir of the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts. The very fact of their joint performance just a few days after the tragedy well demonstrates the urgency with which people engaged in commemorative activities in the first days and weeks. The sound of the choir, distinct but not deafening, testified to the professional sound system and sound engineering. Particularly eloquent was the repertoire<sup>20</sup> of Mozart's *Ave Verum Corpus*, the oldest surviving Czech sacred song, *Hospodine pomiluj ny*, and the meditative song of the ecumenical community in Taizé, France, *V temnotách našich dnu*. The universally known *Ave verum* with the transcendent hope in the last verses opened up a space of common perception. While the musical language of *Hospodine, pomiluj ny* - medieval tune in a monophonic setting - is undoubtedly very different from the musical experience of most listeners, the fact that it is one of the oldest documents of the culture to which it relates and of which Charles University is a bearer was the hallmark of this issue. The third song was of a quite different character: it is a song intended to be sung together. That is why its lyrics<sup>21</sup> was on the printed programs handed out by volunteers during the procession, and why the choir sang it first between the "Ave Verum" and then again after "Lord have mercy," each time in many repetitions, so that the participants in the assembly could join in. The fact that relatively few people joined in can be interpreted in various ways: from the "hushed" mood of the whole assembly, to the reluctance or inability of the Czechs to participate in musical performances they did not know well, to the spatial arrangement that separated the choir from the others - thus creating a kind of imaginary barrier to participation. But in each case, the choir's singing showed the role music can play in collective grieving and healing.

### Partial Access to the Faculty

On January 21, 2024, one month after the tragedy, the so-called "reopening" of the faculty took place. This event was also a "reopening" in terms of organisational structure. Although the institution called the event as such, the complete program was provided by volunteers - teachers and students, mostly those from the language departments. The fact that students and the public could enter the main building of the Faculty of Arts for one day was seen as an integral part of the healing process. The media were strictly prohibited from attending the event (filming was only allowed until 30 minutes before the event started, after which any use of professional equipment was prohibited) and participation required prior online registration. Approximately 300 people turned up, although registration was not effectively checked.

After a short introduction at the memorial fire in the midst of freezing weather (-10 °C), the faculty was opened. The whole event was held in a very peaceful atmosphere, with the Charles University choir singing in the corridors. The chosen compositions - Smetana's "Veno" [The Dowry] and the folk songs "Mikulecká dedina" [Mikulecká village] and "Což se mne, má milá" [Which to me, my dear] - may not belong to the listening mainstream of today's students, but both their selection and their classical interpretation (in Turino's presentation mode, Turino 2008: 51) created a kind of aural sense of expectancy and therefore security. Only the ground floor was accessible - the staircase to the upper floors was guarded by the security agency Crowd Safety.<sup>22</sup> Faculty volunteers and psychology students, were on hand to provide psychological help; free coffee and small pastries were available. There was a calm and friendly, almost intimate atmosphere, but this was only made possible by the considerable efforts of the Rector's board behind the scenes, as R. commented:

"They started to get political actors involved.... And it was clear to us that unless we come up with a framework that sends a clear signal that we are in firm control of the situation, in the sense that there is an official structure that is coordinating something and that needs to be addressed, there will be clear tendencies and efforts to actually like steal it. And that's what happened."<sup>23</sup>

### The Politicization of the Monthly Anniversary

The interest of political leaders in officially joining the commemoration is evident from the official draft programme drawn up by the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic, which was emailed to those interested in the events at the faculty in winter 2024:<sup>24</sup>

"One Month After" - a symbolic commemoration of the brutal act at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. The aim is to "open" the building and show public solidarity.

"There are two planes - physical and virtual. The physical one takes place on Palacký [sic!] Square,<sup>25</sup> in the faculty building and at other Czech universities; its primary addressee is the academic sphere and its goal is a return to everyday life. The virtual plane represents a society-wide event produced by public television and live transmission from various locations that will be connected in this way."

The proposed programme included:

1. Opening on Palach Square
2. Speaking from the balcony and launching the sound installation "Opening" and inviting to enter the building
3. Physically opening the door and starting the "Opening" sound installation
4. Live broadcast of students entering the building on a large screen in the square
5. Speech in the main hall
6. Student band starting inside, ending the installation "Opening "
7. Joining other musical ensembles from the Czech Republic in the motto "you never play alone" in a live TV broadcast on the big screen in the square
8. Expression of gratitude
9. Czech national anthem performed by virtually connected orchestras playing synchronously during the live broadcast, with the finale in front of the silhouette of Prague Castle, where Band of the Castle Guards and the Police of the Czech Republic will play
10. "Ode to Joy" performed by the Music of the Band of the Castle Guards and the Police of the Czech Republic, with a real-time connection of other "state" orchestras of the European Union countries on a split screen in the square

Thanks to the intensive work of the rector's board, this rather self-servingly pompous concept was avoided.

### Mahler's Third Symphony - Czech Philharmonic, January 30, 2024

Another event, very formal and carefully organized, was the Czech Philharmonic's dress rehearsal for Mahler's Symphony No.3 on January 30, 2024. The Czech Philharmonic, whose headquarters - the Rudolfinum - is adjacent to the building of the Faculty of Arts, thus expressed local solidarity with the affected institution. Although the choice of this majestic composition, one of the longest in the regular symphonic repertoire, was not related to the tragedy at the Faculty of Arts, its meditative character with a final movement dedicated to "heavenly love" seemed very appropriate and was perceived as such not only by many listeners but also by the musicians in the orchestra.<sup>26</sup>

Prior registration for the event was required and available exclusively to students and faculty members. The event was dedicated "to all staff, students and supporters of the Faculty of Arts as a symbol of deep belonging and hopefully a milestone on the road to recovery." The event was not publicly announced, was designed to be invitation-only, and attendees had to register via an online form. Those without registration were not allowed in, this time under close supervision right at the entrance to the Rudolfinum. The event was almost entirely full; however, the recommended dress code was not always strictly observed (photo by the soloist).

After the concert in the Rudolfinum, a brass quintet played Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" and other popular pieces of the classical repertoire in front of the building. When asked who they were and why they chose to play here, the young musicians said they were students of the Conservatory (which is located in the immediate vicinity, literally a block away) and wanted to express their solidarity with the Faculty of Arts. It was also the last day of the "Month for the Faculty," and thus the final day and evening of the memorial bonfire on Jan Palach Square.

### A Quiet Place

The final step before the full resumption of normal academic life at the faculty was the establishment of the so-called Quiet Place on May 24th 2024.<sup>27</sup> This was set up in the rear wing of the fourth floor, which was most intensely affected by the shooting. It consisted of two smaller classrooms and a corridor between them. Now, for the first time in more than five months, the entire fourth floor was opened to the public. The quiet place - two smaller classrooms and the corridor between them (see photos) - was open every weekday from 9am to 6pm, with a daily ritual at noon led by the group "To the Roots," which specialises in alternative funeral rituals. There were 14 stones placed in the corridor, one for each victim, and cork boards hung on the walls where visitors could leave their messages. In two classrooms, now ceremonial rooms, the aforementioned rituals were held each day, a silent ceremony in one room and (a room with) musical accompaniment in the other.

Clear and written rules were established for the Silent Place: it was dedicated exclusively to commemorative activities, visitors were to behave quietly and it was forbidden to make audiovisual recordings for use in public media. The midday ritual consisted of a symbolic purification by water - anyone present could "wash away the bad stuff" with water poured into a symbolic well - as a counterpoint to the memorial fire that burned outside the building throughout January. An impromptu piano lesson followed.

*We are the only two visitors in the room, then a pianist and two women performing a cleansing ritual. Soft piano tones resound through the room, it is a minimalist improvisation in a pentatonic scale with a meditative atmosphere. The music has no fixed order, it flows like water from a carafe poured by one of the ceremonial women into a metal well.*

On December 11, 2024, the official transformation of the Quiet Place back to normal operations began. An audiovisual performance by former musicology department member Michal Rataj and artist Patrik Habel attracted approximately 50 people. It was presented as "part of the process of transforming the space in the context of other events held on the one-year anniversary of the tragic events of December 21, 2023."<sup>28</sup>



Figure 5. The piano performance after the ritual in the Quiet Place (Author O.P.).

### Student Initiatives

As mentioned above, on the very next day after the shooting, a wreath-laying ceremony for the tragically deceased took place in front of Karolinum, the oldest building of Charles University, which today serves mainly for ceremonial purposes. Around a hundred people gathered there to light candles and honour the memory of the victims. According to P., a musicology student I interviewed in April 2024, the scene was filled with deep sorrow and pain. She went there because the morning after the tragedy she realized, "I can't be alone here at home. I just need to be with these people."<sup>29</sup> After the memorial act, P. and her friends went for a drink at a nearby café in the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts (DAMU) building, where they were joined by several students there. Although they had never spoken to each other before, P. described a feeling of instant rapport and solidarity. Towards the evening, they went together to light candles outside the Faculty of Arts building. P. recounts:

"And there we were still sharing it and we were there together, hugging each other. It was incredible in that even though you don't know these people, you're seeing them for the very first time in your life, still...just the loose solidarity and just generally being with that person, not only do you say I'm here for you and I want to be here for you as much as you're here for me... But you just do it. So that was absolutely incredible. But actually, like, [it was like that] from the beginning. Just from the first moment it all happened."<sup>30</sup>

During those early days after the shooting, the students' needs to actively express themselves and do something together began to form into a creative and practical organisation. They formed a WhatsApp group to share ideas and to discuss organizational matters. P., along with others, welcomed this activity as it alleviated feelings of despair and loneliness. As she said, "It actually helped me the most. I traded one stress for another. If it wasn't for this initiative, I would have just been lying at home depressed."<sup>31</sup>

Just after Christmas, this student initiative contacted the university administration and arranged a meeting with R., a member of the Rector's board. He explained the vision of the

university and suggested ways in which the rector's board could support student activities. At this point, the two initiatives, one led from above and the other from below, connected and began to work together. Both shared a similar vision: to create a space to gather and honour the dead, to be in solidarity and provide safe space to those in need.

### Initiative of Musicology Students

The composition of students who wanted to express solidarity with the community in an active and creative way was diverse. Considering the aforementioned death of Lenka Hlávková, the director of the Institute of Musicology at the Faculty of Arts, it is not surprising that students from this institution were among them. However, at first glance their activities were not visible, which surprised us. However, their student organisation FFugatto<sup>32</sup> managed to organise several public events towards the end of the Month for the Faculty:

On January 23rd, a musical meditation was held, followed by an open jam session. Two days later a workshop on medieval music manuscripts was held. The next day a soundwalk was organised in the immediate surroundings of the then still closed faculty. On January 29th, interested people gathered at the memorial fire on Jan Palach Square in front of the faculty for an event called Kytarohraní (Guitar Playing) to sing songs accompanied by guitars.

Each event had its main organizer who was responsible for its successful course, and we also had our first conversations with them. We heard repeatedly that their biggest motivation was the desire to do something meaningful and to create a space for gathering. The activity itself was what helped them bridge this period and what they offered to help others with.

### What Was that All About?

One of the main themes of the Month for the Faculty was to support the mental health of the community as part of the renewal of academic life. It was mental health care that inspired T., a PhD student from the Department of Health Sciences to organize a soundwalk around the faculty. He thought that something creative and unifying might be just as necessary and helpful as other activities in this situation.<sup>33</sup> In an intimate group of six participants, including T., we engaged in exercises based on Fluxus Event Scores and undertook a soundwalk of about forty minutes.

We have several tasks. We're not allowed to talk, we have to focus on what sounds we make when we walk, and then how those sounds translate into the macro soundscape. We can try to walk as accurately in someone's footsteps and as quietly as possible. It is not determined who leads the group, we can follow whoever takes the lead, whoever follows a sound for example. We're supposed to go as a group, but we can keep our distance if we want to. We (6 of us including T.) walked along the river first, it was interesting to see how the communication in our group intensified during the walk, even without speaking. Often we would stop for a few minutes at a certain place and listen. We walked past the Na Rejdišti Conservatory building and continued to the Faculty of Arts and then left to the Pinkas Synagogue. We walked around the back of the Faculty of Arts and climbed the stairs in front and stood for quite some time under the arcade at its entrance. Organically we formed a line and stood completely motionless for some time. We looked ahead of us at Jan Palach Square. Some passers-by kept their eyes on us for a while. [...] At about 2:40 p.m. we arrived back in front of the statue of Antonín Dvořák and we all felt that the walk was over. T broke the silence by asking "So, did the faculty building seem completely silent to you even now?"<sup>34</sup>



T. was referring to our previous discussion about subjective perception of soundscapes. We talked about how the faculty building seemed quiet when viewed from the square - perhaps because we knew what had happened there and that it was now closed. However, as we stood outside its entrance for a longer period of time, the building seemed to resonate with the sounds of what was happening around it. Someone commented that it would be interesting to organize a soundwalk inside the faculty as well. T. appreciated the idea, but admitted that he didn't feel up to returning to the building for the time being, and therefore didn't wonder if it would be possible. During the afternoon, we were encouraged to openly share our feelings and experiences, learning to be more sensitive to our surroundings and to build trust with each other. As the conversation with T. suggests, this was in line with his idea of how relationships and the mental health of faculty students could be strengthened in creative ways after such a traumatic event.

Student P. came up with a different idea to take care of mental health after a traumatic event and organized a musical meditation. Her aim was to offer a safe space for her colleagues to relax to music under the guidance of a music therapist who herself had previously studied at the Institute. However, none of her classmates came to Punctum, a small alternative club in Prague, where the meditation was held. Instead, the club was filled with about twenty "unknown" participants, which surprised P. but did not diminish her perception of the success of the event. Creating something meaningful was more important to her than who took advantage of such an offer and why.

The open jam session, which followed the musical meditation, embodied the idea of meeting and connecting the community through active participation in music. However, for much of the evening, the event was more of an expressive improvisational concert of well-rehearsed and experienced musicians performing in front of a seated audience, and thus would be more likely to fall into the mode of presentation described by Turino (2008). On the other hand, the participatory character, as Turino (2008) understands it, was fully manifested during the Kytarohraní event. In a March 2024 interview, one of the organizers of the event speaks of his motivation as follows, "and I said, OK, let's just come play, like, by the fire on the guitar, let's just make it a commemorative event, it'll be nice, people can sing songs they know."<sup>35</sup> On the impetus for creating the event, he says, "some kind of bringing those people together, reconnecting, and just kind of letting each other know, look, we're here, we're thinking about it, and we're just all in it at the same time."<sup>36</sup> Those goals were also summed up on the event's Facebook page with the sentence, "With this simple ritual, we want to honour their memory and light an eternal fire of remembrance and mutual solidarity in everyone's hearts."<sup>37</sup>

It's dark, cold and foggy, but still almost forty of us are here. In the circle around the memorial fire, the old familiar campfire tunes are to be heard - classics by Wabi Darek, Karel Kryl, but also songs by Buta or Olympic. The order and what songs will be played is not given in advance - everything is arranged ad hoc and selected from the well-known songbook "Já písnička ." What will be played is determined in accordance with the audience by one of the guitarists - I recognize him from musicology. At least the choruses are sung by almost everyone gathered here; those who don't know the lyrics hold a phone in their frozen hands and read from it. After more than an hour, everyone decides it's too cold and the whole group moves to the Green Tea Room,<sup>38</sup> where the singing continues in a similar vein.<sup>39</sup>

The type of activities and music chosen cannot be considered explicitly commemorative in the sense of music commonly associated with rituals related to death. However, as in Thompson and Biddle's example, the formation of its memorial nature can be viewed through the relationships between bodies, which they understand as entities with unique 'affective capacities' (2013:9). That is, bodies can affect others and be affected themselves. What we saw during these events, however, was not only the explicit commemoration of the victims, but also the sharing of affect, which manifested itself in a sense of belonging, solidarity and joy, which here music facilitated as an effective means and was what helped the community to 'heal.'

### Negotiations

Two events that had an explicitly spiritual dimension illustrate the complexity of negotiating commemorative and "healing" events in the public space of a university. As a state institution, the university faces a dual challenge: to maintain a secular character compatible with the modern nation-state, while allowing for the expression of spirituality in a crisis situation requiring processing and coping with death.

Shortly after the tragedy, a question arose among the faculty as to whether a prayer and spiritual gathering could be held on the campus to facilitate the return to the building of those interested in such a form.<sup>40</sup> This idea was brought up by D., a history student, who feared that unless they took the initiative into their own hands, nothing of the sort would take place on the premises of the Faculty of Arts. She describes her need to organize the event as one of her personal ways of dealing with the shooting at the faculty.

D. contacted other friends from the faculty and they started a group chat on Messenger. The people in this group didn't even know each other, but they shared a Christian faith. One of them was also in contact with the organizers of the Month for the Faculty and through that with the faculty leadership. At one meeting they proposed the idea together and discussed its possible implementation. D. notes:

"For one thing, it was very good that there were some non-believers there, which we could use as a mirror, to ask them what they thought about it. Which was important because they told us things like: Yeah hey cool, but first of all we would like to make it look like it's not organized by the faculty, like officially, but by you. So that it's not publicized, and that it's very much like a wide-open, ecumenical thing."<sup>41</sup>

Doing it ecumenically may have been D.'s plan from the beginning, but even among her classmates, she said, there was confusion and there were "even spikes [...] about how broadly to do it."<sup>42</sup> In the end, the prayer was divided into two main parts. The first, communal part alternated between speeches and prayers by four clergy from different Christian traditions and a representative of the Jewish community, with a communal singing of about fifty participants. They sang from the hymnbook *Svíťá*,<sup>43</sup> with the organizers accompanying them on guitar and double bass. The second part was free, where visitors could choose from several rooms that offered different forms of prayer. The Facebook event described these options as "singing together, silent contemplation, petitions and thanksgiving, meditation on texts, or any form of your own."<sup>44</sup>

As D. describes it, participants could attend the prayer that was closest to their heart, or they did not have to attend the first or second part at all. They tried to make the event as

neutral as possible, so as not to "divide people,"<sup>45</sup> and the appropriate means for this was prayer in word and prayer in song. The most visited room was the one dedicated specifically to singing, with as many as twenty of us gathered at one point. There were only a few copies of the hymn book *Svítá*, from which D. selected songs she believed were familiar across different denominations. She herself accompanied the singing on guitar and was a little taken aback that she had prepared so few songbooks - she had only counted on a few people. She said she didn't even know many of the participants, but was all the more pleased to see how many of them joined in the singing. At the request of those who came, songs that were not in the original plan were then sung, which D. welcomed.

In this case, the university as an institution retained control over the general framework of the commemoration, even though the initiative and the specific form of the event was largely the work of students. The inclusivity of the ecumenical prayer at the faculty can be interpreted through the plurality of possibilities, which in a secular context represents an attempt to allow individuals to find their own way of spiritual expression (Kaene, 2013; Taylor, 2007).

The Department of Religious Studies also came up with a proposal to hold a purification ritual at the faculty shortly after the shooting. Others in the faculty leadership, however, saw the idea as susceptible to media misinterpretation and potential scandalization as 'esoteric.'

Members of the Department of Religious Studies later organized a Ritual Re-entry for themselves, during which they ceremonially sprinkled the faculty with holy water and sang the song "Gently Johnny" from the movie *The Wicker Man* together. The song, which comes from a folk horror film in which a man is sacrificed, had a special meaning to the organizers that was unclear to us. The very choice of this song may seem somewhat surprising in the context of the tragedy, which only emphasizes that its symbolism was shaped within a particular community and reflected what united the participants in this ritual.

The events of the Month for the Faculty correspond with the community's need to heal, reconnect and move forward. Although many organizers have expressed a desire to continue similar activities, none have been repeated in this same vein. This suggests that these events successfully created a transitional, healing period and allowed the community to move on to the next chapter.

### At Borderline

As is evident from the preceding pages, our direct participation in the Month for Faculty and in the events immediately following allowed us to examine from different perspectives the situation immediately after the society found itself in the face of an unexpected, powerful trauma, a situation surprisingly little reflected in the literature. As ethnomusicologists, we were primarily interested in the workings of music.

Why is the position of music in strengthening the community of the academy not enough to be interpreted only through the prism of semiotics, for example by incorporating Turino's concepts of participatory and presentational performance (Turino 2008: 23 n.)? At the events we witnessed, the audience and participants formed such a heterogeneous group that a sense of belonging could not arise solely through shared meanings or prior experiences, as a semiotic approach would suggest. Moreover, the repertoire was partly shaped

at the last minute, which further weakened this possibility. *Affect* – the shared experience of mourning, powerlessness, but also solidarity – seems to be an appropriate explanatory concept. Indeed, singing together strengthens relationships and evokes a sense of belonging, and this is helped by the shared interpretation of signs (often difficult to imagine in the case of thousands of students); however, the atmosphere itself plays a key role. It is not easily grasped or fully translatable into symbols (language) – it is something that is felt rather than interpreted. The unifying atmosphere is evident even in the distinct absence of music, for example during the silent procession during the Faculty Embrace.

But as Ana Hofman points out, affect does not necessarily stand in opposition to semiotic and discursive approaches: *'I believe that the affective turn's productive potential does not lie in abandoning the semiotic, representational and discursive paradigms, but in the production of meeting points for the semantic and affective dimensions/venues at the site of the sound experience'* (2015: 48). In other words, affect and meaning-laden agency meet and interact in musical experience. Singing or attending a concert together is therefore not only a question of participation or shared understanding of meanings, but also a question of an intense affective experience that circulates between people and connects them.

The second line we followed, which proved to be important for later musical activities, was the line of negotiation of the form of events. From the beginning, the strong role of the institution – the university (manifested by its leaders, and especially by its representatives, i.e. the rector and the dean) – was evident (and confirmed by the interview with a member of the Rector's board), both in relation to external actors (the media and the political representation) and internally, in relation to the students and its initiatives. Indeed, our role as "documentary filmmakers," initiated by the Rector's board, was also understood in this sense. When the stone monument was erected in front of the building of the Faculty of Arts on June 21st, half a year after the tragic event,<sup>46</sup> a new chapter in our understanding of the approach to the event began: the chapter of commemoration. On the pedestal of the memorial there is a QR code leading to short cards of all the victims. For the first time we read their names, for the first time we see their faces. In the following months, the role of the institution strengthens, while spontaneous, especially student activities recede.<sup>47</sup> At the "transformation:" of the Silent Place into a regular faculty operation in December 2024, we witness an audiovisual performance by two nationally recognized artists. The tendency to formalize culminates in the commemoration of the first anniversary of the tragedy: a documentary film about the families of some of the victims,<sup>48</sup> the publication of a book of poems by one of them, a newly discovered microorganism named after another, the creation of two new compositions to be performed at the anniversary concert (which will be attended by the President of the Republic on December 21, 2024). One cannot but recall Jan Assmann's concepts of communicative and cultural memory (2001, orig. 1997). He uses them to explain different ways of preserving memories. The carriers of *communicative memory* are the witnesses of the event. Their memories (and, in our terms, their ways of coping with them) are diverse, none more guaranteed than the other. But then – in Assmann's view, after the eyewitnesses have died – *cultural memory* comes into play. This 'collapses' the originally multidimensional, often ambiguous memory into 'symbolic figures' (Assmann 2001: 50); factual history is transformed into remembered history. The performance of memory is understood by special bearers: *...shamans, bards and griots, just as priests, teachers, artists, writers, scholars...* (Assmann 2001: 51). Assmann, however, in his conception only envisaged the linear passage of time as a fundamental factor in the transformation of memory. We are witnessing how an event that is inevitably moving away from us, and after

which only memory remains, is understood by the most powerful - perhaps one can even say the most tangential - player, namely the institution, the university. The remembrance of the event is in the hands of specialists - for ethnomusicologists, most significantly, professional composers and performers. In the next chapter it will be possible to examine how they have dealt with the memory.

## Endnotes

- 1 The title is an echo of Marek Vácha's lecture "Academia Wounded but not Broken," delivered at the Charles University on March 5, 2024.
- 2 We took part in the research together, we discussed it continuously, but we divided the specific formulation of each topic. Jurková authored the introduction and conclusion, Podebradský's text begins with Spontaneous Solidarity, and Gulová wrote about the students' initiatives.
- 3 It is considered unusual that no names appear - neither of the murderer nor of the victims.
- 4 Social or cultural anthropology is taught at three faculties of Charles University: the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Humanities and the Faculty of Social Sciences.
- 5 Email correspondence from the constituent group on 12/29/2025. The formulation was also addressed to the Board of the Chancellor.
- 6 The participation of academics and students fluctuated slightly, so the numbers varied.
- 7 This included repeated interventions offered by psychologists, but also the modification of study plans according to the needs of the students concerned, etc.
- 8 Shortly after the shooting, there were doubts that it would be possible to start normal faculty operations on the regular date, February 19.
- 9 Jurková, Zuzana: *Pražské hudební svety: Hudba a kolektivní vzpomínání v dnešní Praze*. Prague: Karolinum 2025.
- 10 E.g. Fauser - Figueroa 2020, Bin Xu 2016.
- 11 We are encouraged to propose two interpretatively different theories by the generally accepted polysemantic character of the broad phenomenon known as music.
- 12 Probably from the turn of the 10th and 11th centuries.
- 13 Thomson and Biddle open their text with a description of the British riots initiated by government efforts to cut public spending and raise tuition fees in 2010. During these riots, mainstream pop music was played, which seemed ill-suited to political protests. Interviewee MC Tempz explained its use: 'it's not about content, it's about energy and aura' (p. 5). And it is the term 'aura' that the authors identify with affect.
- 14 Pardubice is a university and statutory town in eastern Bohemia.
- 15 Interview with R. 3.28.2024
- 16 Interview with R. 3.28.2024
- 17 One of the major squares in the very heart of historical Prague Old Town
- 18 <https://www.ff.cuni.cz/2024/01/nam-vsem-pietni-pruvod-objeti-fildy/> date of access 2.25.2025
- 19 The wood for the fire was donated from the Láň Game Preserve, the summer residence of the President of the Republic.
- 20 According to an interview with members of the choir, the repertoire was chosen in a discussion between the choirmaster and the choir.
- 21 The Czech version of "In the darkness of our days light the fire that never goes out, never goes out in us" was sung, which differs little from the French original.
- 22 A large Czech security agency owned by the aforementioned Martin Beck, providing protection and organisation especially at large music events such as AC/DC or Rammstein concerts at Letnany airport or summer festivals.
- 23 Interview with R. 3.28.2024
- 24 Internal material shared by the Documentation Month Task Force for faculty.
- 25 A completely different square in different Prague district



- 26 E.g. oral communication of JP, violist of the CF.
- 27 According to information shared by the documentation team, the Quiet Place was originally scheduled to open on May 21, 2024, again on the "anniversary" date. The authors do not know the reason for the three-day delay.
- 28 <https://www.ff.cuni.cz/2024/12/promenu-ticheho-mista-na-hlavni-budove-filozoficke-fakulty-uk-zahaji-umelecka-performance/> date of access 3.3.2025
- 29 Interview with P. 4.15.2024
- 30 Interview with P. 4.15.2024
- 31 Interview with P. 4.15.2024
- 32 Until then, this initiative was rather in its beginnings; the events of the Month for the Faculty actually set Fugatto in motion in a way, as we learn from the interviews
- 33 Interview with T. 1.26.2024
- 34 Field notes ZG
- 35 Interview with Y. 3.20.2024
- 36 Interview with Y. 3.20.2024
- 37 <https://www.facebook.com/events/683733673926926> dostupné 2.25.2025
- 38 One of the modular buildings on Jan Palach Square
- 39 Field notes OP
- 40 Prayers had already been held outside the faculty premises, but the aim was to bring such an event directly onto the faculty premises
- 41 Interview with D. from 6.13.2024
- 42 Interview with D. from 6.13.2024
- 43 GRUBER Jirí. SVÍTÁ. *Krestanské písničky (nejen) pro mládež*. 1. vyd. Praha: Kalich, 1992. 610 s. ISBN 80-7072-001-8. A hymnal used mainly by the youth of Protestant churches.
- 44 Faculty of Arts, Charles University. 2024. "Ecumenical Prayer." Facebook event, March 11, 2024. <https://www.facebook.com/events/1327099484646706> [Accessed February 9, 2025].
- 45 Interview with D. from 6.13.2024
- 46 The form of the memorial was again the result of negotiations, this time, according to the film "How the World Didn't Stop," primarily by the university in consultation with the sculptor Adamec, and the survivors.
- 47 In at least two conversations with student organizers, there was an intention to repeat the event. However, this did not happen later.
- 48 The film "How the World Didn't Stop," see <https://www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/16234768583-jak-to-ze-se-svet-nezastavil/>, includes information about a collection of poems or a newly discovered microorganism.

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