

# Viennese Czechs dance the “Czech Beseda”: form and meaning of the dance in the 21st century

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*Abstract* The Czech Beseda dance represented an important and frequently chosen piece of salon dances repertoire in the Czech Lands which was often danced from the 1860s, through the era of the First Czechoslovak Republic and the period of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. However, only few dancers are able to dance the Beseda today. Both in the past and present, the Beseda represented an element of Czech culture, which has been frequently evoked, revived and practiced among Czech emigrants and expats abroad. Till the present it is possible to observe dancing of the Czech Beseda at social gatherings and cultural events of the Viennese Czechs. Through a theoretical perspective of ethnomusicology, respectively anthropology of dance, the aim of this study is to reply to following research questions: which form of the Czech Beseda do the contemporary Viennese Czechs dance? Where and in which contexts is it possible to encounter the Beseda dance with? Who is interested in learning and dancing the Beseda

in Vienna today and why? Who does teach the Beseda in Vienna and how is it transmitted? Why the Beseda is important for the contemporary Viennese Czechs, which values and meanings are associated with the dance?

*Key words* ethnomusicology, anthropology of dance, Viennese Czechs, Czech Beseda.

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## Introduction

The Czech Beseda dance represented an important and frequently chosen piece of salon dances repertoire in the Czech Lands which was often danced from the 1860s, through the era of the First Czechoslovak Republic and the period of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. However, only few dancers are able to dance the Beseda today. Both in the past and present, the Beseda represented an element of Czech culture, which has been frequently evoked, revived and practiced among Czech emigrants and expats abroad. Till the present it is possible to observe dancing of the Czech Beseda at social gatherings and cultural events of the Viennese Czechs. Through a theoretical perspective of ethnomusicology, respectively anthropology of dance, the aim of this study is to reply to following research questions: which form of the Czech Beseda do the contemporary Viennese Czechs dance? Where and in which contexts is it possible to encounter the Beseda dance with? Who is interested in learning and dancing the Beseda in Vienna today and why? Who does teach the Beseda in Vienna and how is it transmitted? Why the Beseda is important for the contemporary Viennese Czechs, which values and meanings are associated with the dance?

## Methodology

This study is based on the data from my fieldwork, which I started to realize in 2012 in Vienna and which was originally intended for the Ph.D. dissertation project (Skořepová 2015; Skořepová 2016). The most important element of the research was participant observation of musical events organized especially by the Comenius School Association (Školský spolek Komenský) and the Sokol. However, participant observation of music education at Comenius schools, music/dance activities of the Comenius school pupils together with formal semi-structured as well as informal interviews represented another important source of the data. Other sources of the data represent video recordings of the Czech Beseda dance at various events since 2010 till the present day which were created by the author of this study as well as by the others (e.g. youtube channel of “Realgymnasium Komenský” (Comenius high school), Czech and Slovak minority programs “České & Slovenské ozvěny” broadcasted by ORF), relevant articles in Czech daily periodicals were used as a supplementary source. Few master thesis dealing with the Czech Beseda appeared in the recent years, however, these thesis focus rather on possible innovations of teaching method (Havelková 2016) or they regard the Beseda in a broader ethnological perspective of the ballroom dancing of the 2nd half of the 19th century (Šámalová 2013). **Finally, for the purposes of supplementary comparative analysis I used different editions of the Czech Beseda, as well as source materials for its musical component (Erben 1864; Erben**

– Martinovský – Jindřich 1951). The aim of this comparison was an evaluation of the today's version of the live performance of the Beseda which is annually danced in Vienna. However, the question of creation and subsequent transformations of the Czech Beseda itself in the context of different historical epochs is out of range of this paper and it would be worthy for a separate study. As Stavělová (2006; 2008) shows within the context of the Czech National Revival in the 2nd half of the 19th century, besides the polka dance, it was especially the Czech Beseda, which "helped to visualize the process of creation of the ethnic awareness" (Stavělová 2008: 165).

## Theory

I regard dance activity as the part of expressive culture, which can reveal us a lot about its bearers: in this case about the Viennese Czech minority, its values and priorities and its integration to the Austrian society on the one hand and about the character of relation to the Czech Republic and its culture, respectively about the relationship to cultural elements, to which Viennese Czechs feel a need to identify with or refer to, on the other.

As in the study of musical phenomena in ethnomusicology, the subject of study and methods of research have been transformed also in the study of dance (Giurchescu – Torp 1991). Folk songs and dances had been studied primary as mere products and de facto static structures. The main goal of researcher's work was their systematization, classification and comparison, or eventual tracing their formal transformation and development. With application of the semiotics and anthropological point of view to musical and dance phenomena in the 1970s and 1980s, the interest of researchers shifts to processes, change and broader sociocultural significance (Blacking 1984). It is thus possible to study the dance in performance situations as a way of nonverbal communication and as the cultural symbol, which bears a meaning in a concrete sociocultural context. According to Anca Giurchescu (2001), dancer is always an individual as well as a member of a community. To recognize the significance of dance, it is necessary to study it not only as a system of knowledge and belief, social behaviour and esthetic norms and values (Giurchescu 2001: 109), but to deal with it as an integral part of social events. Many examples reveal dance as a powerful symbol, which does not only reflect the changing world, but becomes an instrument of change as well. A holistic and integrative perspective on dance regarded as a multi-dimensional cultural text (Schmidt 1973; Winner and Winner 1976) and combination of ethnochoreological and anthropological point of view enables us to recognize and describe a broader context and primarily cultural meanings.

The author of this paper applies this theoretical background to the study of the Czech Beseda, which is today performed by the Viennese Czechs. According to the aforementioned theoretical background and methodology, the goal of

this study is thus not a detailed dance or musical analysis of the Beseda's version practiced in Vienna today. Instead of this, my effort is to reveal its significance for the Viennese Czechs in the present day. It is possible to encounter with many studies from history and ethnology dealing with the Czechs in Vienna, different character of migration waves to Vienna and various strategies of integration to Austrian society from the end of 19th century practically till the present day. Ethnomusicological research focused on various musical events and activities of Czech Viennese minority members also demonstrates a heterogeneity of Czech Viennese minority, respectively the heterogeneity of the group of people identifying with Czech national identity or having family roots in the Czech Republic. Another aim of this study is thus replying a question which *cultural cohort* (Turino 2008) of Viennese Czechs is interested in knowledge of the Czech Beseda and its practicing during events, where the Beseda is danced, and for which reasons it is danced.

### **Brief history of the Czech Beseda: creation, meaning and transformations**

According to Daniela Stavělová (2008), the dance had a significant role within the conceptualization of the Czech National Revival and Czech "high" national culture, which had been searching its sources in "pure" and authentic creativity of rural people in the same time. The Czech Beseda was created at the beginning of the 1860s as a potpourri dance. It consists of dance elements from Czech national dances as well as from European dances, which are put together to number of parts and four sections in the époque's quite popular form of quadrille. The creation of the dance was initiated by writer Jan Neruda and then realized by prominent dance master Karel Link and composer Ferdinand Heller. All three were known not only as recognized artists, but in case of Neruda and Heller also as figures engaged in the Czech National Revival, significantly developing in the period.

It is necessary to mention that Ferdinand Heller (cf. Volek 1954) also spent some time of his life in Vienna. Besides his activities as a composer and choir-master, he was also an able organizer of musical life and actively participated in several musical and choral societies and organization of Slavic music and dance gatherings in Vienna. After moving to Prague in 1861 he cofounded the most significant Czech choral society Hlahol and then opened the Piano School together with Bedřich Smetana. Besides the Beseda, Heller created another two quadrilles based on musical material of Czech and Moravian folk songs (*Kadryla z československých národních písní* (1860) and *Kadryla z moravských národních písní* (1863)).

Evidently, the creators of the Beseda took following factors into account: 1) reference to the French quadrille, a new and quite popular dance in the époque (Bonuš 1970), was supposed to increase popularity of the Beseda and

support motivation to its mastering; 2) usage of the elements of dances frequently danced in the Czech Lands: these elements were making the Beseda unique, original and nationally specific. Therefore, the authors supposed the Beseda would become an attractive and suitable way of expression and cultivation of national awareness; 3) the authors undoubtedly considered entertainment dimension of the Beseda and how to make it attractive for dance gathering programs; The overall character of the Beseda is optimistic, the joyful atmosphere is supported by funny song texts and music: song melodies as well as introductive or interlude melodic material are always in major keys. However, the joy experienced and performed by dancers should not exceed a level of salon dignity and appropriate social behavior. In his own introduction to the second edition of the Beseda from 1891, Link admonishes dancers to express “national character” of the dance on the one hand, but they should avoid exaggerated movements, stomping and careless dance steps, on the other (Link 1891: 2).

The authors declared their intention to preserve “original forms, if possible” (Link 1891: 2) of “national” dances used in the Beseda. However, symbolic message of overall choreography and description of particular elements in older editions of the Beseda as well as in a new edition by František Bonuš (1971) is to demonstrate an estheticized and disciplined version of chosen folk dances. This is supported by the intention of properly synchronized movements within one or more quadrille formations and floor plan design of individual sections and their parts. Another aspect of the Beseda’s popularity is certainly its mixed, potpourri character.<sup>1</sup> The creators chose according to their taste folk dances and songs associate with these dances (Link 1891: 1–2), which should represent typical features of the Czech national character: there is serene and lyrical *sousedská*, *furiant* with expression of gasconade and stubbornness, *polka*<sup>2</sup> and *dvojpolka*, elements of *hulán* and *obkročák*. Besides these dances, another dances frequently occurring in other regions of Europe appear in the Beseda: especially *řezanka*, *rejdovák* (Central Europe, France and Belgium), *kalamajka* (Central and Eastern Europe), and fragments of *bavorák* and *strašák*. Waltz elements, quite popular in the époque, are also used in the second part of *furiant* and *rejdovák*. Finally, *kuželka* itself was a popular quadrille. There is thus another level of the Beseda’s symbolic message: Czechs have their own individual and typical character, but together with other nations they appertain to European scape with developed bourgeois culture and concepts of social behavior.

1 It is necessary to note, that especially the potpourri character of the dance reflects the taste of the Viennese Czechs of the époque: the Beseda itself could be considered a condensed modification of popular Slavic ball programs in Vienna in the 1850s and 1860s (cf. Zíbrt 1960; Karásek 1895).

2 About polka as a Czech national symbol cf. Stavělová 2006.

Musical accompaniment of the Beseda is based on songs and dances collected by Karel Jaromír Erben,<sup>3</sup> who published his collection of Czech national folk songs (*Písně národní v Čechách*) between 1842–1845. At the beginning of 1860s, four of total five parts of the collection were published already with harmonized song tunes elaborated by Martinovský.<sup>4</sup> According to records of its parodies, the songs used in the Beseda represented live and frequently sung pieces at the end of the 19th century (Thořová – Traxler – Tyllner – Vejvoda 2015: 626–637). First edition of the Czech Beseda appeared in 1863, soon after its first public performance on November 13, 1862 at Prague Konvikt hall (Vycpálek 1963: 181). From the 1880s, it is possible to remark a number of new editions (Link 1891; Link – Jirák 1944; Fiala 1947; Bonuš 1971; Ikarus 1991; Binderová 1992). Besides complete editions of the Beseda with detailed descriptions of the dance, step diagrams and song tunes, also a number of instrumental arrangements for piano solo or various chamber ensembles were published.

Especially the publication by František Bonuš from 1971 is more than another unchanged edition of the Beseda by Karel Link. His main goal was to give more exact descriptions and to emphasize the appropriate “salon” version of dance elements including comparison of original dance steps from folk dances with their arrangement by Link. Although Bonuš criticizes many “choreographic interventions and modifications” (Bonuš 1971: 18) which are already present in the majority of editions from the first half of the 20th century and regards them as simplified and distorted, he himself uses the piece by Link as a basis for his own creative adaptation of the Beseda. Besides this, he introduces his own methodology for the Beseda’s apprenticeship and recommendations concerning the rendition of instrumental accompaniment and singing. Finally, Bonuš distinguishes “top quality” version of the Beseda and its cheated, “decayed” form (Bonuš 1971: 95).

Some people could think that the Beseda is a finished author piece, which should not have been changing: Even in 1913, authorship of the folk songs arrangements in the Beseda by Ferdinand Heller was a subject of a legal dispute (*Ze soudní síně. Národní listy* 18. 6. 1913: 4). However, Czech musicologist and folklorist Vratislav Vycpálek defines the Beseda as being “artificial, at least only semi-folk” (Vycpálek 1963: 182). It is possible to remark variants of the songs suitable for concrete dances even in the first editions of the Beseda by Link without intervention of other editors. This fact thus determines a variability of the Beseda’s final shape in practice. Evidences of changing character of the Beseda are therefore present in 1) non-identical character and extent

3 Karel Jaromír Erben (1811–1870) – an important figure of Czech National Revival, archivist, historian and writer and well-known collector of folk songs and tales.

4 Jan Pavel Martinovský (1808–1873) – Catholic priest and musical composer of National Revival. He elaborated piano accompaniment and harmonizations of folk songs tunes collected by K. J. Erben.

of detailed descriptions of dance figures in different editions; and 2) in musical accompaniment: Each edition differs in keys of musical material, choice of songs for particular sections and parts, addition of song texts to parts with originally only instrumental accompaniment (e.g. in *kuželka*). As Bonuš notes, changes in keys were made due to the different character of singing during the Beseda (Bonuš 1971: 59): Joining of amateur singers required transposition of songs to keys enabling comfortable position for singing. Finally, there are more or less linguistic variants of song texts and melodic changes in song tunes, respectively in the notation style of vocal parts.

According to Bonuš (1971: 1), the Beseda spread to different Czech communities abroad soon after its creation. It was danced in the USA, Austria and some places in France. A separate research on rise and decline of the Beseda’s popularity and also impulses for its new editions in accordance with political regime transformations and changing climate in the society is yet to be done.

The first public performance of the Beseda in Vienna took place on April 19, 1863, only few months after its Prague premiere. Afterwards, the Beseda’s popularity in the Czech Lands have had its ups and downs: While it was quite popular in the last decades of the 19th century, some decline of its popularity occurs in the half of the 1920s, when the dance already didn’t have such significance as in the period of the National Revival. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Beseda was eliminated from dance floors by modern dances within a new wave of popularity of the jazz and swing and moved to balls explicitly presented as “national”, balls in the countryside or dance gatherings of associations of Czechs living abroad (Rey 1934; Schäferová 1937). During the WWII, daily press reflected some increase of its popularity, but also an ignorance of the young generation. According to Vycpálek, the Beseda was popular among Nazis, who respected and admired the dance (Vycpálek 1963: 183). Not only for this reason, the Beseda was suppressed after the communist putch in 1948. The dance was regarded by the new regime not only as out fashioned, but it was rejected due to its association with “reactionary” people and culture.

Today, the knowledge of the Beseda is limited to the people with a deeper interest in ballroom dancing, rather in the countryside and smaller towns than in big cities. Besides these occasions, dance of the Beseda appeared for once in 2013 at the 150th anniversary of foundation of the Czech Sokol gymnastics organization.

### **Viennese Czechs dance the Beseda: Occasions for dancing and its musical accompaniment**

First, the Czech Beseda appears at events organized by the Viennese Sokol association such as *Šibřínky*, or *Moravské hody*, held every year in the autumn. Some Viennese Czechs even remember dancing of the Moravian Beseda at



this event. Nevertheless, I haven't observed this kind of dancing during my research.

Memories of dance of the Beseda in Czech folk costumes appeared within interviews with participants of various balls and other events organized by the Sokol. Celebrations of 150-year anniversary of Viennese Sokol foundation on October 21, 2017 were exceptional on this count. Participants of the event – Czech Comenius school absolvents at the same time – were dancing the Beseda in Czech folk costumes. Second, the Czech Beseda (or at least its part) was and is performed as a representative symbol of the Czech character of the schools of Comenius School Association. When the school celebrated its jubilee in 2010, a small street festival with music and specialties of Czech gastronomy together with an open doors day were prepared by the pedagogues and pupils of the Comenius schools. A reportage from the event was broadcasted by the ORF television within the program “*České & Slovenské Ozvěny*” (12. 12. 2010), photographs were published at the high school's website photo gallery.

Organization and realization of such events depends on the initiative of able and devoted individuals. Absolvents of Comenius school in the generation of thirty-year-olds especially remember music education of an exceptional pedagogue Eva Křenková. Under her guidance, the children mastered performances which were based on masterpieces by Antonín Dvořák or Bedřich Smetana. Thanks to enthusiasm and evidently positive motivation for the best possible mastering, the pupils were able to sing, declaim and dance to the accompaniment of original orchestral musical extracts playback or live accompaniment by piano or accordian. Probably the most interesting children's performance was a program *Má vlast*, where children performed a dramatization of the famous old Czech national tales, sang folk songs and danced in national costumes: The Czech Beseda was included in this performance as well.

However, the most significant annual performance of the Beseda appears at the Representational and Graduation Ball.<sup>5</sup> During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to observe the Beseda's dancing at the balls since 2012. Video recordings from some of the past balls are also available, especially videos showing the dancing of the Beseda are published at the youtube channel of Comenius high school.<sup>6</sup> The ball is organized in the actual form since 2004, when members of Czech minority associations agreed on fusion of the minority's Representational ball with the Graduation Ball of the Comenius School Association. According to the narratives of witnesses, the Beseda was danced also at antecedent Czech minority balls such as the Ball of Czech craftsmen in Vienna. This ball is the most visible and most watched social event of the contemporary Czech minority life in Vienna. News about the ball is never omit-

5 About the Representational and Graduation Ball in Vienna cf. Skořepová 2013.

6 See <https://www.youtube.com/user/orgkomensky>.



ted especially when a famous personality such as the bass-baritonist Adam Plachetka visits the event, or, a special program is advertised.

The announcement or report about the Czech Beseda dancing at the ball thus always draws attention. Its organization is divided between the Comenius School Association and the Minority Council of the Czech and Slovak Branch in Austria. Since the 1950s, the members of these associations held completely opposite political opinions.<sup>7</sup> Only a several years after 1989, the divided Czech minority in Vienna approached to some reconciliation and started to organize cultural events together with their former rivals. In the era of communist regime in Czechoslovakia, the Comenius School Association together with Vlastenecká Omladina and few other organizations were associated in a *Sdružení Čechů a Slováků ve Vídni* (Association of Czechs and Slovaks in Vienna). This association, founded in 1949, agreed with the communist regime in Czechoslovakia. After its temporary cancellation, the Minority Council was reestablished by Czechs of democratic and anticommunist orientation.

The ball’s program is always specific due to its association with the graduation ceremony of the absolvents. Nevertheless, the dance of the Beseda represents the peak of the ball. The Beseda dancing is announced by the musicians at midnight. After the trumpet fanfares and calling “Let’s go on, Czech Beseda, Czech Beseda!”, several quadrille formations are being created every year. As the participant observation reveals, particular formations always have similar casting. An overall analysis explores a simplified version of the Czech Beseda which is danced at the ball. When one looks at the dancers, character of the performance of particular choreographic elements by individuals and synchronization of their movements during the dance, the performance lacks a precise character. Evidently there are no professional or at least experienced dancers. Especially dancing of some individuals draws on situational observation of the others and of those more skilled in the dance.

It is only at this ball, where the Beseda is performed with a live music accompaniment. The groups Nota Bene and Caroline Band accompany the Beseda’s dancing at the Representational balls for many years. The musicians perform at Viennese Czechs minority balls thanks to the personal contact of the Nota Bene’s group frontman Jaroslav Musil. The ability of the live music accompaniment for the Beseda was the main desired criterion of the band’s selection. Originally, the Czech Beseda was not in the repertoire of neither group. Jaroslav Musil himself was not able to find a score of the Czech Beseda, so he decided to create his own arrangement. Surprisingly, the only model for Musil’s own arrangement was the listening of the Czech Beseda, interpreted by the Studiový orchestr TONUS. The arrangement of the music, song tunes and texts of the Beseda are thus based merely on his own ear. Musil’

7 About the history and character of Czech Viennese organizations and associations cf. Basler – Brandeis et al. 2006 and Brousek – Vocelka 2002.

arrangement of the Czech Beseda uses wind instruments (clarinet in B flat, trumpet in B flat, trombone, tuba), the drum kit and the mixed vocal choir. We can thus observe the version of the Beseda, where musicians play the instruments and sing, while dancers only dance. However, it is possible to notice an occasional quiet singing by some dancers. Certainly, the singing can facilitate the proper performance of dance movements and their succession.

In comparison with the older editions of the Heller's musical arrangements of the Beseda, Musil's adaptation contains a practical supplement, the chord symbols for guitar. In general, his arrangement is smooth and easy to play. The instrumental accompaniment is usually based on primary triads and the fundamental harmonic functions. Jaroslav Musil uses triads, dominant seventh chords, somewhere triads with augmented or diminished fifths. A short unprepared modulation appears in the song "Haló, páni muzikanti" (*polka* in the second part of the first section) or "Však nám tak nebude" in the final *sousedská* which is in the second part of the fourth section. The chosen musical keys are being selected to provide a smooth instrumental play and comfortable position for singers, who sing by chest or head voice. Their style of singing is possible to characterize as a trained pop singing, with clear pronunciation and common diction of the contemporary Czech language.

When one compares the performance by the Nota Bene group with one from the oldest editions of the Beseda from 1891 as well as with the newer ones (1947, 1992), it is evident that musicians choose always the first alternative from several variants of the songs suitable for particular dance. At the end of the second section, the original text of the tune "Koukej, koukej, koukej, Vašku" is replaced by "Pata, špička, celá noha...". Any instrumental introduction nor the *kuželka* dance is accompanied by singing. The version of the song texts is shifted to more actual Czech language. Some rarely used words are thus replaced with the more ordinary ones, which are being used today.

### **Conclusion: The usage and meaning of the Czech beseda for the Viennese Czechs, or who, how and why dances the Beseda in Vienna today?**

In the present-day, it is not possible to consider the interest of adolescents and adults in ballroom dancing being immense. An effort and will to learn and then dance together the Czech Beseda are thus really remarkable. The Beseda is a quite complicated dance when considering the variety of used choreographic elements, succession of particular sections and parts, as well as its duration of approximately twelve minutes. As an experienced pedagogue, František Bonuš himself characterizes the Beseda as a sophisticated quadrille for advanced dancers, which is not suitable for children nor the very beginners (1971: 63).

How are the Viennese Czechs being trained in the Beseda dancing? How did the contemporary Viennese Czechs familiarized with the Beseda, who from them has a possibility to encounter with the dance and who does consider the Beseda worth to know?

Today's center of the interest of the Beseda is situated within the two linked and cooperating organizations of the Viennese Czechs: the Comenius School Association and catholic Don Bosco club. In the last decades, the key person responsible for the learning of the Czech Beseda was Mrs. Paula Novotny-Carmignato. She was the pastoral assistant in the Czech Don Bosco club, as well as the teacher of catholic religion at the Comenius school. The Viennese Don Bosco club focuses mainly on children and youth. The club organizes various masses and other events, where the children, youth, parents and their friends meet in the occasion of the most important Christian holidays. Besides this, the Don Bosco club also organizes summer camps. Some Comenius school absolvents also participated at the events of the Don Bosco club. While remembering their participation at summer camps, usually they mention the training of the Czech Beseda:

*"People at Don Bosco Klub try to maintain the Czech culture and traditions ... long long ago before the ball we had the first opportunity to learn the Beseda there, in the Don Bosco Klub ... so it was there where I've learnt it. I would say they could be considered a religious minority ... they organize meetings each month, holy masses, summer camps and so on... I also participated in the events of Don Bosco. Now I don't, but before I did, so I've learnt the Beseda there ... yes, it was quite interesting ... people dance it every year and of course there are always new people who are willing to learn the Beseda."* (Andreas Egermeier, 4. 9. 2013)

Learning of the Czech Beseda under the guidance of Paula Carmignato was a repeated and regular part of the program of the Don Bosco Klub events. Additionally, archive materials of the Don Bosco club document the training of the Beseda as well as another Czech dances for more than thirty years. The current director of the Comenius high school Helena Huberová learnt the Beseda also from Mrs. Carmignato. Then it was the director herself, who learnt how to dance the Beseda the other pedagogues of Comenius schools. A part of the Comenius school pedagogues originates from Viennese Czech families: especially they are among those in some of the few quadrille formations, who dance the Beseda every year. All the Comenius school absolvents from the generation of today thirty-year-old thus know at least about the Beseda's existence. However, the dance is better known by those, who participated at the events of Don Bosco club.

The spectrum of conducted interviews reveals the profile of young adults who are interested in learning and dancing of the Beseda. They are

descendants of the third or fourth generation of Czechs born in Vienna or from mixed families, who did not forget their Czech origin. As Janková and Čech (2010: 41) show in their questionnaire based research on Czech compatriot organization, also my qualitative research confirms an interest in the knowledge of the Beseda among those, who have Czech ancestors in their matrilinear ancestry. Additionally, today's thirty-year-olds with whom their mothers or grandmothers spoke Czech retained a better knowledge of Czech language.

On the contrary, those who came to Vienna in their childhood or adolescent age nor their parents were not interested in the learning of the Beseda. The Czech Beseda is disregarded by the majority of those, who did not participate at the events of the catholic Don Bosco club. In sum, the Czech Beseda is attractive for the Viennese Czechs, who themselves or their parents are members of some of "old"<sup>8</sup> Czech associations and they did not stand aloof the activities of organizations with catholic orientation associated with the Czech Church of the Holiest Redeemer at Rennweg, such as Don Bosco club or Jednota svatého Metoděje.

The knowledge of the Czech Beseda spreads thank to initiative and activities of "old" Viennese Czech associations, such as the Comenius School Association, Sokol and partly also Vlastenecká omladina and Minority Council. The Don Bosco club which cooperates with Comenius schools has a specific role: As Jan Horák, the priest and representative of the Czech Catholic Mission in Austria told me, this institution is financed either by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Austrian state: Support of music, singing and dance in the Czech Viennese minority is thus one of its required activities. The people who came to Vienna as children or adolescents and their parents arrived there as emigrants in the second half of the 20th century (and not only for political reasons after 1968) are not interested in the Beseda. After the mentioned transformation of the ideological character of the Czech associations after 1989, some changes may occur in the following decades. While Czech underground sympathizers and dissidents coming to Vienna as asylum seekers in the 1980s (such as the singer Dáša Vokatá) never chose the Comenius schools for their children, their grandchildren already attend the school. Also Jiří Chmel, the founder of "Nachtsyl", the Czech musical underground club in Vienna, confirmed a cooperation and contacts with the Comenius school. The school's former alliance with de facto pro-communist Sdružení Čechů a Slováků (Association of Czechs and Slovaks) is today not actual and becoming forgotten. Therefore, we can ask who and to which extent will be interested in the Czech Beseda in the few following decades: probably a future profiling

8 As "old" associations I consider those, which were founded in the 1860s (e.g. Sokol, founded 1867) and 1870s (e.g. Školský spolek Komenský – Comenius School Association, founded 1872) and are still active today. In general, ancestors of their members came to Vienna between 1850 and 1945.

of Czech schools and Comenius School Association and of the other active organizations matters.

How we can characterize the contemporary dance practice of the Beseda at the Representational Balls and other events? There is a “stable core” of dancers, comprising the teachers, absolvents of the Comenius school with their parents, and eventually some others who identify themselves with the Czech minority and are more or less active in usually more than one minority organization. Besides these regularly participating dancers, it is possible to encounter with some few new figures every year. Naturally, the spectrum of these occasional dancers of the Beseda changes. Dancers also have different level of their own dancing skills and sovereignty during dancing: While some dancers give an example, others are sometimes confused and unfamiliar with the appropriate way of dancing. Each quadrille formation thus consists of the both kinds of dancers.

How is the knowledge of the Beseda maintained in the present-day? In 2018, together with Silvia Jancovicova (also the absolvent of the Comenius school), the Comenius high school director Helena Huberová organized a training of the Beseda’s dancing, which took place in the big club-room of the Comenius school at Sebastianplatz and also in the Slovanská beseda at Drachengasse. An unspecified compact disc recording had been used for the training in past years. Today, dancers use audio sources which are available online for free: the training of the Czech Beseda dance was thus accompanied with the interpretation of the Beseda by the group Moravanka Jana Slabáka from 1981, which is available for free listening at the website [www.spotify.com](http://www.spotify.com). A two-page instruction manual with the simplified description of the particular parts and sections of the Beseda is also available. For each part’s identification, only song texts incipits appearing in the Beseda are used. Many dancers thus are not probably aware of the fact that e.g. the *sousedská*, *řezanka*, *obkročák*, *strašák*, and so on is actually danced. However, if the Beseda was not available at online sources, newer CDs or such a brief printed manual, it would not be known at all. In the actual way of the Beseda’s learning and its following performance by dancers and also within the process of its musical adaptation and arrangement by Jaroslav Musil, another phenomenon appears: some kind of bricolage and a tendency to cope with everything in the fastest and simplest way as possible. Even for such a historical piece as the Beseda is, people prefer searching information on the Internet, rather than browsing printed and archive sources. As it was mentioned above, Jaroslav Musil did not feel a need to find some previous editions of the Beseda, or to obtain a musical score and compare different versions. The only model for his own adaptation was the listening of the Beseda’s performance by the TONUS orchestra. When we compare the aforementioned manual used during training as well as the form of the dance actually danced in Vienna with the descriptions of the Beseda in different editions, the Viennese Czechs apparently

perform a simplified version of the Beseda. František Bonuš himself would probably consider this degraded version of the Beseda.

What thus the dancing of the Czech Beseda among Viennese Czechs regarded as multidimensional cultural text can tell us? First, the Beseda performance by as much dancers as possible even with many inaccuracies and hesitations is more important than its accurate and exact performance by few “specialists”. For this reason, the Beseda is not used as an introductory and presentational dance at the beginning of balls, where its perfect performance would be necessary, in the contrary (Bonuš 1971:63). Rather than its perfect dance performance, the live music accompaniment to the Beseda is important for the Viennese Czechs. The Nota Bene and Caroline band accompany the dance of the Beseda approximately from 2004. According to the organizers of the ball and older participants, the live music accompaniment to the Beseda’s dance is more impressive than a mere playback accompaniment. The live music thus ensures the expected atmosphere of the ball. Second, the timing of the Beseda is very important. By its performance at midnight (similarly as at events observed in the USA – see below), the Beseda’s function is the symbolic peak of socio-cultural events of the Viennese Czechs. As the fieldwork shows, the dancing of the Czech beseda with all its doubts and mistakes, is a unique and entertaining part of an event’s program.

Besides entertainment, the Czech beseda represents a key element, which main meaning is the identification with the minority, official affiliation with it as well as its representation outside. People who desire to be identified as representatives of the cultural cohort of Viennese Czechs who are engaged and actively participate in “old” Czech associations regularly appear at the Beseda performances. Even it is fascinating to observe the same people sitting practically by identical tables and casting within the same quadrille formations: the families of Koutník or Kalousek watch the dance from the same places, while other individuals dance in the same formations. Especially the Representational balls with practically identical programs for many years resemble annual festivities according to the Eliade’s theory of Eternal Return (Eliade 2003). According to A. Giurchescu, the dance is “primarily a non-verbal medium of communication which establishes contact between humans” (Giurchescu 2001: 112). Especially during the dance of the Czech Beseda at cultural events of the Viennese Czechs, the same people regularly meet for many years.

It is thus the dance which certainly helps the confirmation and maintenance of the social ties of pedagogues, members of the Comenius School Association and other associations. The Beseda provides the social integration, as well as building the boundaries (Barth 1969) of the cultural cohort of the members and sympathizers of “old” Czech Viennese associations. Who dances the Beseda, or at least participate at the events where the Beseda is performed, manifests his or her own position in the Czech minority. It is thus



evident, who is member of this cohort and who does not want to be associated with it.

While the conflict of associations having the opposite political opinions before 1989 seems to be surmounted, the emigrants from 1968 and post-1968 do not visit the events where the Beseda is danced. These people did not sympathize with the “old” Czech associations and even did not want to identify with the Czech minority and Czech cultural elements. In contrary, they tended to become assimilated to Austrian society as soon as possible. However, the active members of the “old” Czech associations and their sympathizers are those “invisible Czechs”, who are also fully integrated in the Austrian society. Just when having a need, they are able to speak Czech and are familiar with Czech cultural elements. Among those who refer to their Czech origins, it is thus possible to regard the dancing of the Czech beseda as the manifestation of the *symbolic ethnicity* (Gans 1979: 9). The symbolic ethnicity is not demanding, because it requires only a small effort (it is thus comparable to an occasional hobby). However, it helps maintaining of an ethnic boundary between members and non-members and enables thus the persistence of the cultural elements which would otherwise be the subject of acculturation (Esman 1984). In other words, dancing the Czech Beseda at least once per year is not much demanding, but for the interested participants of socio-cultural events is desirable to do.

The dance of the Czech Beseda also reflects the status of Viennese Czechs as completely accepted, integrated and obvious part of the Viennese society. Undoubtedly they belong to the contemporary Austria, but also to an idealized image of the “ancient” Austria. However, the Czech minority in Vienna, its position and reflection by the majority is totally different from the period of 1900s, when Czechs migrated to Austria as cheap laborers and they were perceived as a negative on the one hand, but needful element on the other.<sup>9</sup> Today, the Czech Representational ball is especially considered a prestigious event.

Nevertheless, the situation in Vienna and Austria is different from the Czech Republic. According to the participants of my research, the participation at balls – especially those mentioned in the Viennese ball calendar<sup>10</sup> – and also the implicit cultural “pressure” to learn and master the ballroom dances is evidently of a higher degree than in the Czech Republic. These factors then determine a stronger will and effort to learn even such complicated dance as the Beseda. Another interesting insight represents the reflections of the Representational ball by the musicians of the Nota Bene band. As the group’s frontman Jaroslav Musil told me, the musicians are proud of their performances at the Viennese ball and they appreciate the will, effort and even

9 About migration of Czechs to Vienna around 1900 cf. John, Lichtblau 1990, Glettler 1972.

10 See [www.ballkalender.com](http://www.ballkalender.com).



the level of skills in the Czech Beseda and other ballroom dancing, especially among the young generation of dancers.

The dance of the Beseda in the context of Representational balls had evidently a different meaning, then if it would be danced at a musical event of the *invisible enclaves* (cf. Skořepová 2012): Such events are not registered by a majority society and even are not perceived in a positive way. In contrary, the Comenius School Association and also e.g. the Sokol use the Beseda at their events as an important element for identification with their Czechness and its representation outside. The current practice of the Czech Beseda in today's Vienna seems to be the most visible symbolic marker of the Czech national identity (Giurchescu 2001: 114–115), which does not concern only the generation of elders. The effort of its spread and practicing emanates from the institutions and associations working with children and youth reveal the intentional goal of targeting young people: besides the adults, the Beseda is always danced by the young members of the Vlastenecká omladina or Sokol, graduates and other younger students.

Additionally, the number of Beseda's dancers is constantly increasing: According to Comenius school director Helena Huberová, 56 dancers in 7 quadrille formations danced the Beseda on the ball in 2018. This number represented the record of the 21st century. As it was outlined, dancing of the Beseda occurs abroad rather than in the Czech Lands. It is probably its relative difficulty which determines the usage of the dance as the marker of ancestry origins, rather than an ordinary ballroom dance intended for entertainment.

A remarkable case with some parallels represents the study dealing with the Beseda dancing in Cedar Rapids, Iowa (Chadima 1990). According to the author, the Czech Beseda was danced especially in the local Sokol, but also in other minority organizations and clubs. Usually, the Beseda dance represented a culmination of various annual cultural events, May Day celebration or the Sokol celebration called *Šibřinky*. At the end of the millennium, the number of dancers decreased critically. Chadima's findings have similar character as those of mine: the dancing of the Beseda was full of chaos and comic situations, because among the dancers, there was a lot of people who were not familiar with the Beseda at all. According to Chadima, the majority of those, who chose their partner out of the Czech community, have forgotten the Beseda little by little. The version of the Beseda danced in Iowa and described by Chadima is very similar to the version which is danced by the Viennese Czechs until the present-day.

There is another interesting study by Ezra Zeitler dealing with the Czech cultural capital, ethnic identity, commoditization of music and dance, cuisine or handicrafts within a Czech festival in Nebraska (Zeitler 2009). Also here the social events and gatherings of those who were aware of their Czech origins culminated with the Beseda dance, performed in national costumes. According to Zeitler, the Beseda and other chosen phenomena appear here

within the *staged authenticity* (MacCannell 1973) as an idealized and consumable element of the romanticized past (Zeitler 2009: 79). One can observe the dancing of the Beseda in national costumes also in Vienna.

The cited cases as well as my own research reveal different factors determining the dance practice of Czech minorities abroad which is different from the dancing of the Beseda in the Czech Lands in the past: for the generation of the 1860s, the Beseda provided an opportunity to join the environment of European salon society of cultivated bourgeois and was regarded as an original author piece of the “high” national culture. In the contrary, for the people who are aware of their Czech roots abroad the dance is mainly the link with the region of their origin and its culture. Therefore, it can represent a unique segment of personal identity which they intend to manifest.

The status of Beseda as the symbolic marker of national identity is evidently emphasized with the usage of national costumes for dancing and preference of the highest possible number of people participating in the dance. That is what is preferred rather than an attitude of purists and the effort of reconstruction and safeguarding the original version of the dance. This reality of dancing the Beseda by Czech minorities abroad is thus in the definite contradiction with the opinion of František Bonuš. According to him, the dancing of the Beseda in national costumes is “completely problematical” (1971: 63). Finally, the Beseda may not be regarded in the future only as a symbolic marker of the Czech national identity. It depends on its users, respectively key individuals, the “influencers”, how will they use the Beseda, who will transmit the dance in Vienna (not only) and how it will be done. For example, the Czech Beseda has also a notable therapeutic potential (Capello 2007).

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Students of the Comenius School dance the Beseda. Comenius School Association Archives. Author unknown.



The Beseda dancing at the Representational and Graduation Ball, February 24, 2018. Comenius School Association Archives. Author unknown.