



Oldřich Janota 1949–2024

While the work of the late experimental singer-songwriter Oldřich Janota falls somewhat outside the remit of this magazine's focus, his unique outlook and singular creative vision led us to decide that we had to attempt to introduce his oeuvre to an English-speaking audience. In addition to the summarising text by Petr Ferenc which you can read below, we also decided to include a selection of his lyrics translated into English.

In late July, the Czech musical public was shocked by news of the death of one of the most original individuals in Czech music regardless of genre: singer-songwriter Oldřich Janota. This tall, thin man with a full head of long hair and an acoustic guitar on his back was a seemingly subtle presence on the scene since the early 1970s. He distilled numerous inspirations into a unique musical and poetic language – inimitable, yet so captivating that it was often imitated. His name ultimately became an adjective: if someone says something is “janotovský” (“Janota-esque”), an atmosphere, an aesthetic, a mood are all immediately conjured up. What is this Janota-esque mood, then? It is gradual, whispered, repetitively plucked. It is the atmosphere of contemplative solitude, the mood of the boundary between singing and whispering. But it is also

the atmosphere of an almost imperceptible irony and a courageous searching in sound and music, a searching that is neither spectacular nor showy. And yet, it seems to be universal – Oldřich Janota is a favourite of folk fans, alternative rockers, children's choirs, and new age tearoom dwellers alike.

Everyone Only Has That Which Belongs to Him

The genre known as “folk” means something strikingly different in the Czech language than it does in English. It does not refer to folk music in the sense of traditional, non-artificial music (which we call *folklór*; folklore), but a genre and occupation generally referred to in English as the singer-songwriter. In Czechia, folk was

always grouped with country & western and “tramp songs” – to complicate matters further, the “tramp” in Czech is not a vagrant or hobo, but a representative of the tramping movement, established in the 1920s and still popular today. These “tramps” were young people who went out of the city, into the forests, to search for their dreams of the American West, and created their own striking aesthetic with a large repertoire of songs. Their songs also crossed over into bluegrass and country music territory, but the only thing the urban singer-songwriters shared with this milieu were shared stages at festival and the somewhat confusing label “folk & country”. The singer-songwriters were mostly influenced by English-speaking artists such as Bob Dylan, Donovan, Paul Simon, and Leonard Cohen, as well as the Russian tradition – Bulat Okudzhava, for instance. In the 1960s, singer-songwriters were inseparably tied to the scene of chamber theatres, while the strong generation of the 1980s relied on the clubhouses of youth organisations and the folk & country events mentioned above. Many singer-songwriters emigrated and did not continue their careers abroad, as their work was so intimately tied to the Czech language. At home, however, they were considered unofficial superstars whose recordings were disseminated through informal channels in huge volumes. They offered audiences their own – often highly uncensored – perspective on the social climate, often playing the part of the “wise fool”, and many of their songs have become completely entrenched in the collective consciousness, often being sung at campfires.

Oldřich Janota was different: an introvert, his songs were more about contemplation than declaration. His lyrics offered something complex and deeply private, often resonating with listeners at a level deeper than the intellect. In glimpses and short phrases, Janota demonstrated his mastery of the singer-songwriter's craft, yet in place of the perfect multi-syllabic rhymes that come so naturally to Czech, instead of diligent poetic rhythm and striking denouements, he championed the misty approximations of assonance, the blurring of metre, and the half-spoken character of the Zen *kōan*.

Musically, Janota went far beyond the folk genre with Mozart K, which was essentially an experimental rock group, and with his trio with experimental guitarists Pavel Richter and Luboš Fidler. While the foundations of folk – singing and the acoustic steel-string guitar – are still present,

the musical context is entirely transformed. I will say more about these groups, which unfortunately seem to have no successors, later.

His best songs are subjective landscape painting, a cut-out past the edges of which we suspect much, much more. Whether Janota is writing about felling the locust tree in the garden or the images flashing past the car window at night, something about these images – and how they are communicated – suggests a universal validity going beyond the banal events described in these songs. It was the last day to fix the roof. At night we are awoken by the creaking of stairs. The speeding train suddenly stops. In the atmosphere of Prague's fifth district, in the former peripheries of Smíchov, Radlice, and Jinonice, we find an entire universe, overgrown with nettles, intimately known only to locals, and threatened by demolition. “The entire neighbourhood awaits the spectre of future redevelopment,” Janota once sang, and now that's exactly what's happening. We need office buildings even in faraway valleys.

In Addition to Words and Above Words

It is a tough ask to recommend a Czech singer-songwriter to an English-speaking listener, as the linguistic barrier can prove impossible to cross. Yet I will attempt to do so on the basis of officially published recordings that are generally available (much of Janota's output exists on various bootleg and unofficial editions).

In highly simplified terms, a song is a structure made out of two inseparable components: words and music. A failure to understand the lyrics, then, is not fatal, as attested to by the experience of many inhabitants of the former Eastern Bloc who took an interest in English-language popular music. Believe me: the songs of Bob Dylan do not stop being impressive even when we understand only fragments of the most complex lyrics. The melody, the vocal cadence, the arrangement, the associations arising from the few phrases we did understand... We could mine *Like a Rolling Stone* through the language barrier until it became a fairly accurate haiku.

Oldřich Janota knew this, and he would often let his voice be drowned out or silenced entirely. On his first, eponymous album (Panton, 1990), we hear his guitar and voice accompanied by Zdeněk Konopásek on percussion and trumpet and Irena



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Havlová and Vojtěch Havel on viola da gamba (their work being an interesting combination of minimalism, early music, and North Indian music). Janota could surely have made himself heard over this ensemble, but he decided to drown out his lyrics – already highly abridged, aphoristic, and fragmentary – in the instrumental parts, with only a word or two only surfacing here and there. The human voice is only heard in full on two occasions, with an unexpected toddler-like scream that might well scare you.

Janota also applies a similar strategy on the only album of the rather occasional group *Jiná rychlost času* (A Different Speed of Time). *Hvězdná mapa* (Star Map, Indies Records, 1993) was recorded at St. Benedict's Chapel at a monastery in the Western Bohemian village of Plasy. The remarkable renovation of the original Gothic structure was realised between 1711 and 1740 by three of the most celebrated Baroque architects working in the Czech lands: Jan Blažej Santini-Aichel, Jan Baptista Mathey, and Kilián Ignác Dietzehofer. The extensive monastery complex, which stands on water, similarly to the city of Venice, was used as a school and agricultural building during communist rule. In the 1990s, the monastery became the site of international symposia and exhibitions organised by the Hermit Foundation and Center for Metamedia Plasy, established by Janota's former bandmate, curator Miloš Vojtěchovský (see CMQ 4/18). The visual

and musical realisations created in Plasy at the time were documented in numerous catalogues, exhibitions, and recordings – *Hvězdná mapa* is one of them. Here, words sometimes sparkle like bright spots on depictions of the night sky.

For the most comprehensive presentation of Janota's trio with the stars of the unofficial rock avant-garde of the 1970s and '80s, Pavel Richter and Luboš Fidler, listen to the double album *High Fidelity* (Indies Records, 2001). Two live recordings from 1984 introduce their effective approach to instrumental minimalism with three guitars and reel-to-reel tape. Janota includes some of his most striking lyrics (*Měsíc nad Radlicemi*, *Žlutý kopec*, *Čekání* – see translations below), but some of them are only present in the booklet – he would decide spontaneously not to sing the words and leave the track as an instrumental. His bandmates, who were in any case close to instrumental music and the ambient stylings of Robert Fripp and Brian Eno, would later claim that this might have been an act of passive aggression towards their exceedingly uncritical folk audiences, and that they decided to stop the trio's activities after a performance during which Janota did not sing at all. He probably thought words were unnecessary at that moment, but we cannot be that precise in hindsight. If there was something about Janota that confused and provoked his folk fans, who worshipped him as a guitar-wielding poet, then it was his notion – expressed through actions – that in the hierarchy

of song, words sometimes fall below a pick strumming a guitar string.

Sometimes, Janota took the opposite approach: for the collective instrumental improvisation *Týden v malovaném domě* (*A Week In a Painted House*), which was only published in 2016 as part of the eight-album box set *Ultimate Nothing* (Indies Scope), he retrospectively added short texts which he recommends reading while one listens. Perhaps illuminated bridges might appear between the original recording, the later edits of a week of music-making, and the appended words.

Also a withdrawal from words were the songs from the later period, often called the “meditative” or “tea house” era. The new age movement made its way to Czechoslovakia following the fall of the Iron Curtain, three decades after it had appeared in the West. And Janota, who found in this lifestyle the silence, slowness, and space he needed, would repeat only a few words, knowing full well that the effect of the mantra lies in the number of repetitions, in concentrating on each one in turn, and in the subtlest of nuances.

And if we do not focus on the words, we can listen to the recordings of Mozart K (named after the popular Austrian snack Mozartkugeln), most comprehensively collected on the double album *Jako Měsíc* (*Like the Moon*, *Spojené náhody*, 2003), the same way we listen to experimental rock bands: for their *sound*. Here, Janota was accompanied by a rock formation that sometimes had no drums, occasionally replaced electric guitars with the Indian sitar, and whose backbone and breath was the sound of the harmonium (played by Miloš Vojtěchovský), an instrument that has its own, gentle time. Incidentally, the instrument had to be cut in half so it could be transported to concerts.

What follows is a selection of Oldřich Janota's lyrics (*Texty*, Punkva: 1991) translated by Ian Mikyska. Janota, who was a late debutant in the world of publishing, arranged these lyrics into fictional LPs. The selection below follows the chronology of this fictional “discography”.

Lost in the World

All the children born today cried
behind the hospital windows
when you were born with a single song
among windbreaks and dice
on a meadow
under the sign of Virgo by a blue well
the benefaction of cold water colour rainbow
three fulfilled wishes

Lost in the world

When it was before Christmas the trees came to
life
animals in masks danced
shepherds made of bread dough came from afar
took old clothes out the closet
The column clock left on horseback
among the blue cups
Hidden behind the curtain the white ballet dancers
covered you in kisses

Lost in the world

All around fell flowers from the hands
of the sleeping girl
her long dress amused you
you ran out after the colourful advertisement
and good fortune on the sidewalk
took out your harmonica
Streets city gates taciturn Brahmins
a sign on the horizon
girls the invitation of a stranger's hand

Lost in the world

The wind blew away clouds and dishevelled hair
the wind opened eyes
mystery met chance chance met exhaustion
so lift up your head
You walk back through the streets, rich fabrics
blue flowers, distances
beads fall on the ground

Lost in the world

All the children born today cried
behind the hospital windows
You sit under the stone horse with a single song
and the wind plays with fire
Streets, empty temples and dusty books
rivers flowers dreams

I see you for a moment more
and then you disappear

Lost in the world

Waiting

At night we are awoken by the creaking of stairs
the room sinks

into black points

The peculiar tenant goes hiking
shuffling against the walls
and aiming upwards

On the table I topple wine and water
the bread already broken

only waiting left

The metal flower
searches for its shadow
I turn the light switch
and there's soil in my mouth

The neighbour past the wall
cries in her sleep
for the black lambs and tigers in cages
And in a long shirt flicks through the jumble
of useless stuff
A light in her palms

In front of the white screens of cinemas
and the purple monstrosity of televisions
rings the screeching of voices
and wailing of synthesisers

Words grow weak
words grow weak
both bad and good
an age is ending
only waiting left

And a ship with a white sail pushes off the roof
colours refract
in puddles of diesel
And then a lift rolls by behind the wall
as the ropes screech
the Sun starts rising

And my neighbours put on masks
of polite smiles
and only the pills in their pockets
casually disclose these strange times
when the creaking of stairs accompanies us
through the night

The peculiar tenant goes on hiking
shuffling against the walls
and disappearing upwards

The Last Day to Fix the Roof

It was the last day to fix the roof
shadows of vapour danced above the pond
ducks added up into flocks as they flew
and children were afraid to walk from school in the
dark

It was the last day to fix the roof
flip the fur on the coats inside out
before snowflakes appear in nervous haste
and ice angels celebrate their engagement

I pour light in the bowl by the door
and shadows have already grabbed the axes off
their hooks

I search for the gap where the heat escapes
where life hides in shrivelled peas

It was the last day to fix the roof
to collect the whistles of straw from the fields
before the wind lets the dogs out from its leather
bellows
and we walk alone on the path towards night

Other Shore

For a moment you taste of bread
for a moment of grass
on country roads
For a moment clear with fire
for a moment with ice
you're my other shore

Whole long years
like a sleeping butterfly on a windowpane
on the upper floors of others' houses
I hear your footsteps
your breath in the wind

You're my other shore

And like an astronomer with his hand in the gears
feels the yellow Moon on his back
when you leave
I'm like a cripple without crutches
but then I feel easier

You deal as night falls
you pluck feathers against a silk cage
I return injury with injury
and then I say
go fly, then

You're my other shore

You run through the empty street
square of light
on a set table
you search for a path to a final station
in spirit, I call for you to stop

And like a drunk man on the corner
who was suddenly struck by lightning
we are
in our knowledge
similar to ripe fruit
but infected by nostalgia

You're my other shore

Snowball

I stand and gaze out the window
at a snowball
perhaps not only with my eyes

It used to be wings
they're still sailing through the air
Hands
faster than words every time
because
they used to be wings
hands
still sailing through the air
faster than words
because they used to be wings

I stand and gaze out the window
at a snowball
perhaps not only with my eyes

Meteors

From Prague to Brno on the highway
is as far
as crossing San Salvador
Even the stars above one's head are the same
and the same meteors
though we've never seen any

Not even at night with the lights off
as we drove
the stars
only stood and waited

Only during the day did figures in the fields
collect stones and load onto carts
radiant beams
with great mirrors
and strange objects
lay by the road

But we never saw flying meteors
only sometimes at dusk
a shining object moved beneath us
forward in the same direction as us
and inside some objects
moved in the same directions
Like hands eyes seconds stars and hair
like falling
transparent raindrops

Yellow Hill

Take me with you
to the yellow hill
over white buildings
and red fields

I know
perhaps it's late
The animals' shadow is nearing
the water
the shadow of branches and moon ships
But take me with you
to the yellow hill

Oh take me with you
to the yellow hill
on the green slopes
sleep plaster sheep

I know
perhaps it is late
The animals' shadow is nearing
the water
the shadow of branches and moon ships
But take me with you
to the yellow hill