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Slavonic Dance Op. 46 No. 7

Description

From one of the many little caves excavated in the side of a terraced hill, a little man steps out and walks in the plain. He builds a straw house for himself. Amazed, all the hill people peek out from their cave dwellings; they rush to the plain and imitate the first man, building a whole city of straw houses.

Angered, the little character kicks down his house and builds a new and taller one, made of bricks. Soon, all the others do exactly the same; so, the man proceeds to add more stories to turn his house into a skyscraper. But the crowd keeps on imitating him.

Night falls. At his window, the angered little man ruminates about vengeance. In a comic balloon, we see how he wishes to kill his neighbors. Suddenly, a malevolent grin appears on his face.

He goes in the street and starts behaving in a foolish way: he jumps on two feet, on one foot, on his hands; he then makes a silly dance with an umbrella. He sits down and waits with a malicious face. Immediately, the crowd repeats all his pointless actions. So, he goes on with his plan. He does a somersault; he scratches himself and he hits his head with a hammer that he finally eats. All the people repeat this sequence. The man removes his head, while the others do the same; the imitation ensues also when he juggles his head. He then puts a chamber pot on his head; he takes a “standing at attention” military pose and does the roman salute. The imitation now includes three more gestures at the end (a military salute, a march-in-place step, and a victory sign made with the index and middle fingers), which the lead character maybe did while off-screen. Pleased, the man fixes a chin strap to his chamber pot; he puts on boots and pulls out a rifle from his jacket. The crowd proceeds to copycat him.

Now on a slope, the main character marches in place, making the goose step. The others start to follow him. He reaches the edge of the cliff and

notices a branch sticking out from the rock wall, just a little bit below his feet. He malignantly laughs while looking behind him, anticipating the fate of his imitators; he then throws himself over the edge, promptly stopping his fall by grabbing onto the branch. At first, he wickedly cackles; however, as nothing happens, he gets perplexed and climbs back to the cliff top.

When he peeks from the edge, the imitators, who were standing still in wait, swiftly turn on their heels, pull down their trousers, and bend forward to flash at him their bare bottoms.

Program Notes

The *Slavonic Dance* is the only short in *Allegro non troppo* that Bozzetto completely designed and animated on his own. He says that, according to his own recollections, he might have received some help only for the inbetweening.¹ Consequently, the stylistic features of Bozzetto emerge here with distinct evidence, much more than in the rest of the film: the “entomologic” distance from the subject, the sketchy and flat line art, and the stylized and caricatural characters with big noses make the *Slavonic Dance* a close relative of shorts like *I due castelli*.

The symphonic score that inspired the animated piece is the seventh in an 1878 collection of eight dances by the Bohemian composer Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904). Originally composed for piano four hands, they were commissioned by the Bonn publisher Fritz Simrock, who asked for some folk pieces in the fashion of the highly successful *Hungarian Dances* by Johannes Brahms (1833–1897). Brahms was friend both with Simrock and Dvořák; he was the one who brought his younger colleague to the attention of the publisher, recommending a release of Dvořák’s *Moravian Duets*, a collection of folk songs for two voices with piano accompaniment. The success of the *Duets* persuaded Simrock to advance a commission for the *Slavonic Dances*. In fact, at the time, the German music market was particularly receptive toward pieces that sounded “exotic.”² Dvořák, as he did for the *Duets*, complied for free;³ it was anyway a wise decision, as the *Dances* became his breakthrough to reach international fame and monetary success. There was nothing especially Bohemian in those pieces, though; they were modeled after Czech folk dance patterns, but the melodies were original creations by Dvořák (unlike Brahms’s *Hungarian Dances* that used Magyar themes). A second set of eight *Dances*, which followed in 1886, was truer to its title,

¹Personal communication to the author via Skype, March 14, 2019.

²Michael Beckerman, “The Master’s Little Joke: Antonín Dvořák and the Mask of Nation,” in *Dvořák and his World*, ed. Beckerman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 145.

³Kurt Honolka, *Dvořák* (London: Haus, 2004), 44.

as it used also dances from other regions and countries of the Slavonic area; however, the melodies were still by Dvořák. The overall setting of the music, moreover, was very far from folk music; it was in a late Romantic rigorous idiom not far from that of Brahms. This became even more evident when the *Dances* got orchestrated soon after their release by the composer, because of the good audience response: the resulting symphonic sound was not in tune with the popular heritage of Bohemia or Moravia, just like it happened to Brahms's *Hungarian Dances*. According to Michael Beckerman, "Dvořák was no more familiar with the ethnographic or spiritual source of his materials than was Brahms."⁴ So, when Dvořák identified as a *Skočná* his seventh *Dance Op. 46*, he just stated that the overall rhythmic pattern of the piece fits into a Czech tradition of duple-time fast dances that bore that name. The musicologist John Tyrrell noticed that the historical traits of the *Skočná* are actually so vaguely defined that the name is interchangeably used for many other duple-time dances from the same geographic area.⁵ That indeterminacy (and the lack of the ethnomusicological scholarship that would have developed in the twentieth century) allowed Dvořák to create his own imaginative take at Czech musical folklore.

It is, however, curious how Bozzetto's interpretation of Dvořák's *Skočná* is respectful of some of the few known aspects historically attributed to this dance. In fact, Tyrrell stated that this dance rhythm, and the texts sometimes sung to it, had a "humorous nature," which Bozzetto perfectly caught. Moreover, "skočná" means "leaping," because the dancers were supposed to do jump-like moves. In the *Slavonic Dance* animation, the gags about jumps and leaps are abundant, up to the final one, which sees the protagonist faking a deathly leap into a ravine. There is even more, though: it seems that in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries the term "skočná" identified a competitive dance, "in which the dancer attempts to jump higher than his rivals."⁶ The episode in *Allegro non troppo* is precisely about a rivalry between a crowd and a man who tries to outwit everyone. There is even one moment when the protagonist tries to reach higher than his opponents, by building a skyscraper. It is likely that all these correspondences are the fruit of Bozzetto's own deciphering of the choreographic values embedded in the music discourse, rather than of a philological study on Czech dances; his conclusions were nonetheless strikingly accurate.

The theme of imitation that Bozzetto developed in the short also comes from other musical features of Dvořák's work. The *Dance* is in fact replete with imitations, on multiple levels. At a larger scale, its main

⁴Beckerman, "Master's Little Joke," 145.

⁵John Tyrrell, "Skočná," *Grove Music Online* (2001), <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000043852> (accessed November 17, 2019).

⁶Ibid.

theme is distinguished by couplets where the same thematic fragment gets immediately repeated. More in detail, there is a continuing contrapuntal imitation: the thematic fragment is echoed in the lower registers by other instruments. However, this latter kind of imitation does not give way to audiovisual functions; Bozzetto used only the phraseological imitations in the main melody, immediately evident to the lay listener and thus more widely effective, to construct the unnerving action symmetries between the protagonist and his copycats.

The attention Bozzetto reserved to the theme of imitation and the comic relief he wanted to introduce in *Allegro* with this short were the premise for a thorough use of temporal perceptive functions in the audiovisual treatment: basically, the music and the images stick together thanks to explicit synchronies. Those are immediately evident, as in the initial long shot where the character walks in the plain: his steps happen perfectly together with the notes of the main theme. The music provides plenty of incisive points of synchronizations; for example, during the malicious manipulation attempts, the hammer hits the character's own head in synch with a cymbal crash. This evens out the lack of temporal perceptive functions in the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*; however, just like that short, the *Slavonic Dance* also presents synchronies with camera movements, which remark the subdivision into phrases of the musical discourse; they are much more evident than in the previous number, as Bozzetto resorts here to fast zoom-ins and zoom-outs and to whip pans. There are also instances of a spatial perceptive function, for example, when the full-orchestra repetition of the main theme coincides with the multitude of cave dwellers invading the plain, suggesting a parallel between the massive presence of their movement in the shot and the powerful surge of a multilayered full orchestral sound. On the other hand, the humorousness of the whole story is in tune with the overall emotional content of the *Dance*, instating in this way a macro-emotional function.

Another quality of the *Slavonic Dance* animated short is that it manages to follow closely the musical structure while reprising all the staples of Bozzetto's style. The whole short fits into the tradition of Bozzetto's taste in humorous retellings of the history of life and evolution, as it starts from cavemen (dressed in what seem animal skin clothes) and ends with skyscrapers and modern weapons. The whole process is mostly observed from a distance, with "entomological" objectivity, except from the part when we have a zoom-in on the main character at the window, plotting his revenge (while wiggling his fingers together with the swirling motion of the music, in yet another temporal perceptive function). On top of that, the action is often seen from the side (also because of the flat character design that is not as much effective when frontal views are used), swinging back and forth from left to right. However, this does not happen within the same shot, like in *I due castelli*, but it is conveyed by the editing, alternating

shots, and reverse shots. Thematically, the short is replete with Bozzetto's pessimism about mass-media communication. The first part of the short elaborates on the danger of the homologation of actions and desires. In the second part, instead, the focus becomes the concentration of communicative power in the hand of a single agent, who could manipulate the message in a malevolent way: it is an allegory of the perils inherent to gatekeeping in mass media, "the process of culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people each day,"⁷ in the words of Pamela J. Shoemaker and Tim P. Vos. The idea is not far from the brain-missile metaphor seen in *Vip, My Brother Superman*: a one-way message implanted in the head of a TV spectator by a malicious conspirator.

In conclusion, the *Slavonic Dance* achieves the difficult goal of staying pure Bozzetto while adhering to the choreographic needs of a musical piece with a completely different cultural background, by taking advantage of its bold, synchrony-prone sound events and its general playful spirit.

⁷Pamela J. Shoemaker and Tim P. Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 9.