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Songs about St. John of Nepomuk from the 17th to the 19th century (especially broadside ballads)

Jakub Ivánek

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on St. John of Nepomuk, the most popular saint of the Czech Baroque period, and his hymnography, which constitutes the largest group of songs in the entire Baroque hymnography from the Czech lands, whether in Czech or German. The study is dedicated not only to analysing the song material from the perspective of literary history (leitmotifs, other frequent motifs, metaphors and terms, song genres, forms of narration) but also to seeking relations between the songs and piety itself. Songs about St. John of Nepomuk, preserved mainly as broadside ballads, were in fact closely connected to the religious services performed during the May feasts in Prague and in front of his statues and chapels, which were spreading across the country from the beginning of the 18th and far into the 19th century. My research is based on 328 gathered songs, of which 201 have so far been analysed in more detail.

KEYWORDS

St. John of Nepomuk; Baroque hymnography; broadside ballads; religious songs; songs about saints.

CZECH ABSTRACT

Písňe (zvláště kramářské) o sv. Janu Nepomuckém od 17. do 19. století

Príspevek sa zaoberá svätým Janom Nepomuckým, najpopulárnejším svätcom českého baroka, a písňami složenými k jeho počťe, ktoré tvorí najrozsáhlejšiu skupinu písní o svätých v celej baroknej hymnografii z českých zemí, ať už v češtině nebo v němčině. Studie se věnuje nejen rozboru písňového materiálu z hlediska literární historie (leitmotivy, další časté motivy, metafory a způsoby

pojmenování svěťce, písňové žánry, podoby vyprávění), ale také hledání vztahů mezi písněmi a zbožností jako takovou. Písňe o sv. Janu Nepomuckém, dochované převážně v podobě kramářských písni, totiž úzce souvisely s bohoslužbami konanými při májových slavnostech v Praze a před jeho sochami a kapličkami, které se v 18.–19. století šířily po celé zemi. Výzkum se opírá o 328 shromážděných písni, z nichž 201 bylo zatím podrobněji analyzováno.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Svatý Jan Nepomucký; barokní hymnografie; kramářské písňe; duchovní písňe; písňe o svatých.

St. John of Nepomuk (in English also John Nepomucene, in Czech sv. Jan Nepomucký) is undoubtedly the most famous and popular saint of the Czech Baroque period. This explains why he has been repeatedly researched over the decades. The most helpful publication for today's researchers is the monograph about the saint, his canonisation, and afterlife by the Czech historian Vít Vlnas (VLNAS 1993, 2013). Examples of Baroque, as well as later texts about St. John were collected in three volumes by Vilém Bitnar in the interwar period (BITNAR 1932, 1933, 1934). Literary historians in the late 20th century showed their interest in homiletics dedicated to St. John, especially in those connected with the cult that was fostered at the church on Zelená Hora ("Green Mountain") in Žďár nad Sázavou by abbot Václav Vejmluva.¹ The present study researches the topic from the perspective of popular literature, especially broadside ballads, to learn how this cult functioned in the broader society, where the popularity of songs was immense and songs about St. John of Nepomuk played a significant role during the feasts and religious services dedicated to him.

The real story and the legend

John of Nepomuk was born around 1345 in the town of Pomuk in Bohemia. He studied at the universities in Prague and Padova, and was then made vicar-general of Saint Giles Church in Prague by the Archbishop of Prague Jan z Jenštejna (John of Jenstein). He died in 1393 while being tortured under the orders of the Czech king, Wenceslaus IV, who had come into conflict with the archbishop regarding the confirmation of the abbot of the powerful Benedictine Abbey of Kladruby. Under the cloak of night, Nepomuk's dead body was thrown from the Prague (Charles) Bridge into the Vltava River.

1) Editions of sermons (LIFKA 1995, KOPECKÝ 1998, HORÁKOVÁ 2000) were followed by a monograph about the phenomenon of Nepomucene's homiletics (HASHEMI 2007).

The later legend (which emerges during the 15th century but was established by the chronicler Hájek of Libočany in the 16th century and completed by the Baroque humanist Bohuslav Balbín) articulates another reason for the killing John of Nepomuk. King Wenceslaus, they say, wanted John to divulge the contents of his wife's, Queen Johanna's, confession, and because John refused, he was sentenced to death by drowning in the river. The incident was also (by mistake) shifted ten years back, to 1383.

As a proto-martyr of the Seal of Confession, John started to be considered the most suitable Czech candidate for canonisation and elevation to patron saint during the time of Re-Catholicisation in the 17th century. Nevertheless, for a long time the Prague Archbishopric did not show much support in Rome for his canonisation. Change came with archbishop František Ferdinand Khünburg, who contributed positively to the process. John was beatified by Pope Innocent XIII in 1721 and canonised by Pope Benedict XIII in 1729. Aside from earlier miracles, the discovery of the saint's intactly preserved tongue in his tomb in St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague significantly advanced the case for canonisation.

The cult of St. John of Nepomuk in relation to his hymnography

However, the cult of St. John of Nepomuk in Czech, Moravian, Silesian, Austrian, and Bavarian society had begun to unfold a few decades before. It started to flourish after the turn of the 18th century, when many statues and broadside ballads emerged. St. John became the patron of the vilified poor, widows, and orphans, as well as the patron saint of waters (because they believed he was drowned). He is sometimes called the "saint on the bridge", where his statues were commonly placed (or on the waterfront; cf. VLNAS 2013: 154).

My research into broadside ballads about St. John of Nepomuk is ongoing. There are plenty of printed songs on this topic – and it is not only broadside ballads that must be studied, but also hymnbooks and other devotional books. So far, 328 discrete songs about St. John of Nepomuk have been collected (of which 290 are in Czech, 35 in German, and 3 in Slovak). Many of them are preserved in numerous editions throughout the 18th and 19th century.² Songs were published in various media. Strikingly, 274 of them are preserved in the form

2) When speaking about "Baroque" hymnography, we should not overlook its significant overlap into the first half of the 19th century, when Baroque poetics culminated in the Czech village and among the lower classes of urban society.

of broadside ballads, while only 68 have survived in another printed medium.³ This shows that the broadside ballad represents the main printing medium for publishing songs about St. John of Nepomuk in the Czech lands during the Baroque era and into the first half of the 19th century.⁴

What was the reason for such popularity? St. John became well-known at the same time as broadside ballads in the Czech lands started being more frequent (beginning of the 18th century). The news that the saint's tongue had been found intactly preserved caused a commotion in society and the process of canonisation confirmed the status of this exceptional patron. Current events and trends could be transmitted quickly through a small, unpretentious in all aspects, and cheap printing medium such as the broadside ballad (cf. IVÁNEK 2017: 213–215). The focus of St. John's cult on the poor, widows, and orphans must also have been very effective, since these groups were very common. The Enlightenment thinker Josef Richter speculates, with a certain amount of critical derision, on the Nepomucene's popularity among women (the main consumers of religious literature) in connection with the legendary fact that John did not disclose the contents of the queen's confession to the king (RICHTER 1784: Chapter 9). The addressees of broadside ballads were often the same people who worshipped St. John.

The saint's grand and costly feast in springtime (16th May), connected with the famous *musica navalis*⁵, led to a substantial influx of common people making a pilgrimage to Prague, where they worshipped the saint before his monumental tomb in St. Vitus Cathedral or on Charles Bridge, adorned with the saint's most famous statue by Jan Brokoff and the metal cross marking the spot believed to be from where John of Nepomuk was thrown into the river. Collective singing in squares, streets, and in private yards was also very popular (cf. ŠORM 1929: 140). People who could not go to Prague worshipped St. John through litanies, prayers, preaching and, above all, singing in front of his statue or chapel in their village or town, since objects of these kinds existed almost all over the Czech lands (cf. MALURA – IVÁNEK 2019: 431–438). The phenomenon of

3) If songs appear in a devotional book, they are usually confined to that one title. If they appear at the same time as broadside ballad, this cheap edition is usually older.

4) When, in this study, an edition of a broadside ballad is cited, I use either a link to the *Knihopis* database (NK [online], <http://knihopis.cz>) or the catalogue of the Moravian Library (MZK [online], <https://vufind.mzk.cz>), where the record can be found by searching according to the incipit. In the few cases where an edition is not present in either source, I directly cite the edition and its location in a collection.

5) *Musica navalis* ("Music on Boats") has been organised on Prague's Vltava River on the eve of St. John's feast (15th May) since 1715. The event once began with the ceremonial firing of cannons, the main programme consisted of a procession and a concert on decorated and illuminated boats, ending in fireworks.



Figure 1. A May religious service held before the flower-decorated statue of St. John of Nepomuk in Sievering, Austria (today a part of Vienna), depicted by Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller in 1844. The picture shows collective singing led by a local cantor who is singing from a hymnbook (or a block of broadside ballads?), while the woman among the villagers to his left is singing from a single broadside ballad printing with her neighbour (Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller: *Die Verehrung des heiligen Johannes / Johannes-Andacht*, Wien Museum Inv., Nr. 8153, CC BY 4.0, photography: Birgit und Peter Kainz, Wien Museum).



Figure 2. St. John's pilgrims at the New Castle Stairs in Prague on a lithograph by Quido Mánes from 1851. In the foreground is a woman selling chapbooks and broadside ballads, with her goods displayed on a bench. (Národní muzeum, České muzeum hudby, Muzeum Bedřicha Smetany, Výtvarná sbírka, inv. č. M 261, digitally cleaned).

May feasts, held at St. John's statues in the countryside, in relation to the song culture of broadside ballads, was nicely presented in an article focusing on the Lower Austria region (SCHMIDT 1970). These events are again documented in Richter's Enlightenment criticism, where they were condemned for being rendezvous at beautifully decorated and illuminated statues under the pretence of religious services, during which, however, singing from tiny prints tempted men to look at women's cleavages (RICHTER 1784: Chapter 9). When, from 1762, these religious services started to be banned in Prague (unsuccessfully), one of the arguments was the risk of fire, but also the fact that the invited musicians played later for a dance (ŠORM 1929: 140; see there also the variety of musical accompaniment at these festivities).

Whereas the aristocracy and clergy supported St. John's cult mainly through ambitious artistic endeavours (nobles, for example, commissioned sculptures and signed themselves with coats of arms in relief on their pedes-

tals),⁶ the form and content of devotions was created in the spirit of popular piety, which to a large extent shaped the overall image of the cult.⁷ Songs and prayers (especially broadside ballads and other chapbook production)⁸, as well as the close and intimate relationships between devotees and their saint, are frequently already mentioned in proceedings recorded during the interrogation of various kinds of people prior to Nepomuk's canonisation (VLNAS 2013: 141–142: 153–154).

The Czech lands, as well as neighbouring Lower Austria and Bavaria, in these years perfectly represented a “St. John's country”. We know about special blocks (so called *špalíčky*)⁹ containing primarily broadside ballads dedicated to St. John of Nepomuk – a special phenomenon revealing both extraordinary devotion and a passion for collecting. Songs from the broadside ballads are mostly the same ones we find in manuscript hymnals dedicated to the theme of St. John, representing another level in the deepening intimacy of the piety. However, manuscripts appear more frequently as we enter the 19th century, apparently with an increase in literacy.¹⁰

Age and popularity of the songs

The oldest songs about St. John of Nepomuk come from 1684, when two songs (“Svatý Jene zповědlníku, z toho slavný mučedlníku” / “Saint John the confessor, for that a famous martyr”; “Kdož dá vodu mé hlavě? Očím prameny studně?” / “Who'll give water to my head? Fountains from a well to my eyes?”) and one hymn as part of a little office (“I Jana Nepomuckého, též kanovníka pražského, sluší Čechům velebiti” / “So, John of Nepomuk, also a canon of Prague, befits the praise of Czechs”) were published in a book narrating the legend of the saint (BALBÍN 1684: 88–108). It is a translation of an older book in Latin by Bohuslav Balbín, which did not include any songs. Their author – and

6) Schmidt, for example, refers to the significant role of the originally Bohemian House of Harrach in spreading the fame of St. John of Nepomuk in Lower Austria (SCHMIDT 1970: passim).

7) The tension between the ambitious and the popular could lead to some seemingly incongruous situations, so characteristic of Baroque cults. Schmidt mentions the example of a statue of St. John in the Austrian town of Lilienfeld, which depicts the executioner's assistant throwing John into the river. Czech pilgrims heading past the site on their way to Mariazell physically attacked the figure of the assistant. Thus, by symbolically damaging a work of art, people expressed their affection – a kind of devotion – for the saint (SCHMIDT 1970: 350).

8) For use of the terms “broadside ballads” and “chapbooks” in the Czech cultural context, cf. FUMERTON – KOSEK – HANZELKOVÁ 2022: 15, 36–37, 89–90.

9) IBID. 16–17.

10) E.g. VOLEK 1792, HOLOUBEK 1818.

the translator of the entire book – may have been Jan Ignác Dlouhoveský, another important church official engaged in propagating St. John's cult and a writer of religious literature. The fourth song (“Svatý Jene Nepomucký, vlastenče pravý český” / “Saint John of Nepomuk, a true Czech patriot”) was published as part of its reissue after 1698. The oldest known edition of broadside ballads about St. John comes from Olomouc, dated 1700, and contains four songs (two taken from the book discussed above, and new songs with the incipits “Proti mé cti utračům, peským, jedovatým” / “Against slanderers of my honour, foul, poisonous” and “Velký hříšník přichází k tobě, muži Boží” / “A great sinner is coming to you, man of God”).¹¹ Czech songs on this topic dated to the first decade of the 18th century come from Olomouc and Litomyšl. Songs printed in Prague start appearing in 1711. From the 1720s onwards, all the printing houses of the time are busy publishing songs about John.

German songs emerge only a little later. A hymnbook of Capuchin provenance, *Hymnodia Catholica*, printed in Eger/Cheb in 1701, contains two songs about St. John: “Sei du von mir zu tausendmal gegrüset und geehret” (“Be greeted and honoured by me a thousand times”) and “Johannes heiliger Patron zu Nepomuck geboren” (“John, patron saint born in Nepomuk”). Both also appear in broadside ballads from the early 18th century (SCHMIDT 1938: 136). In the first decade of the 18th century, two more German songs started to be popular in broadside ballads printed in Prague: “O heilig treu-verschwiegner Mund” (“O holy, faithfully silent mouth”)¹² and “Sanct Johann von Nepomuck, gebürtig aus Böhmerland” (“Saint John of Nepomuk, born in Bohemia”).¹³ Many songs which we assume to have originated at that time do not mention any place or date of printing.

Some songs about St. John of Nepomuk were exceptionally popular, and remained in print for many decades, even centuries:

- “Boha mého vzývám, píseň si zazpívám” (“I invoke my God, I will sing a song”) – from the early 18th to the late 19th century,¹⁴
- “K tobě, můj otče, přicházím, Jene z Nepomuku” (“To you I'm coming, my father John of Nepomuk”) – from the 1740s to the late 19th century,¹⁵

11) This edition was registered by *Knihopis* No. 12876 in one specimen only, which has unfortunately been lost. But a reprint from the same printing house (in Olomouc) has been found: “Písně o svatém Janu Nepomuckém”, 1709, Ostrava Museum sign. 430.

12) *Drey schöne Neue Geistliche Lieder*, Prague, [1701–1710], KPK SPr 07770.

13) *Drey anmuthige Lieder [...] zu dem heiligen Johann von Nepomuck*, n. p., [before 1705], KPK SPr 07770.

14) *Knihopis* No. 12901, 12916; MZK catalogue

15) *Knihopis* No. 6029; MZK catalogue

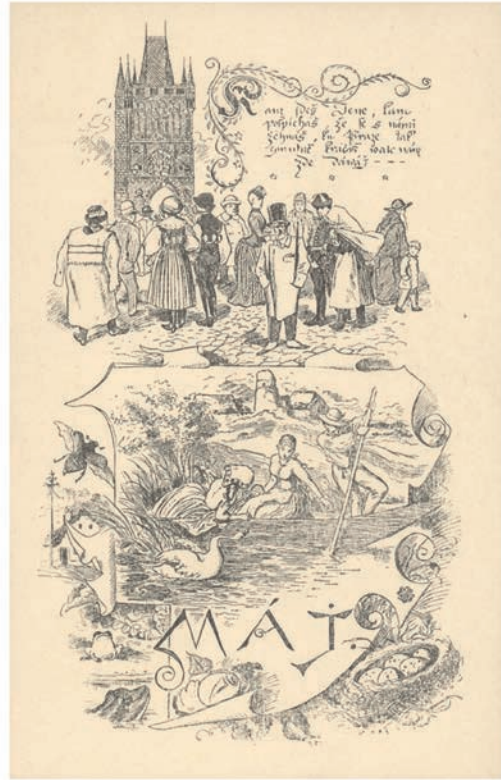


Figure 3. On the left is the oldest dated edition of the broadside ballad “Kam jdeš Jene, kam pospicháš?” from 1783 (*Truchlivé loučení svatého Jána Nepomuckého*, [Olomouc], 1783, MKP J-323).

On the right is a drawing called *Máj* (“May”) by the famous Czech artist Mikoláš Aleš from 1889, which depicts traditional pilgrims in folk costumes coming to Prague from the countryside to celebrate St. John of Nepomuk. Above the scene one can read the first stanza of this popular song, which was disseminated in the form of a broadside ballad for over a century. (Author’s private collection.)

- “Ej, služebník pána mého, jdu k tobě, Jene, od něho” (“Hey, as a servant of my lord I go to you, John, sent by him”) – from the early 18th to the early 19th century,¹⁶
- “Ó srdce mé, svatý Jene, já přicházím k tobě” (“Oh my heart, Saint John, I’m coming to you”) – from the 1740s to the late 19th century,¹⁷
- “Kam jdeš, Jene, kam pospicháš, že se s námi žehnáš?” (“Where are you going, John, where are you hastening to bless us farewell?”) – from 1783 to the late 19th century,¹⁸

16) *Knihopis* No. 12887, 12884, 13612; MZK catalogue

17) *Knihopis* No. 12925; MZK catalogue

18) See Figure 4.; MZK catalogue

- “Sem, sem pojdte, nemeškejte, sirotci a vdovy” (“Here, come here, don’t hesitate, orphans and widows”) – from 1781 to 1865¹⁹, etc.
- St. John’s popularity did not falter even after Enlightenment criticism revealed that the legend most likely contained little fact. The saint occupied such an important position within the populace that the lukewarm stance of the Enlightenment church could not hurt the established cult (cf. VL-NAS 2013: 266).

Character of St. John’s hymnography

The following observations are based on the 201 songs I have analysed so far. When ascribing genres to these songs, we need to tread carefully, because song genres are rarely unambiguous. However, it is safe to say that the lyrics to an entire half of the analysed songs can be considered meditative – usually spoken by an individual, containing prayers to a personal patron, meditative images from the saint’s legend, are narrated to the saint himself (in the second person), are valedictions, and – above of all – the laments or cries of an individual speaker presenting themselves as a slandered and impoverished orphan or widow, who is subsequently “running” to the saint. St. John is presented here as their one and only advocate and defender. Almost half of these meditative songs are formulated as a lament, which makes it the prevalent genre for the Nepomucene’s hymnography. The meditative songs usually end with a prayer for protection in one’s final hour, when the subject wishes to call out, like St. John during his torture, the holy names of Jesus’ family. The most interesting lyrics meditate on images from St. John’s life – they use narration in the historical present, direct speech, dramatic questions and vain entreaties addressed to the characters or to believers, as if they could alter the course of the story or have an emotional impact. Sometimes they are fully formulated as a dialogue between characters.²⁰

Many songs are hymnal or celebratory/laudatory in nature. This is characteristic for songs with a collective speaker (“we” believers and devotees). They can be quite joyful and praise the saint using incidents from the legend as well as metaphors, or else take on a more prayerful character and beg for peace,

19) MZK catalogue

20) There is also a song with a long monologue of King Wenceslaus, the villain of the story: “Jsem hněvy rozpálen, pomstu hledám na Hradě” (“I’m burning with anger, I seek revenge in the Castle”; *Knihopis* No. 12884).

a good crop, and sound health, sometimes also for the ruler and the House of Habsburg.

Purely narrative songs appear less often. They narrate not only the legend, but also the miracles attributed to St. John and stories about blasphemies in front of the saint's tomb in Prague, or before his statues. The latter stories are connected with a critique of the Protestant belief that saints cannot intercede on behalf of petitioners. In these songs, St. John acts as someone who punishes his mockers.²¹ A few songs also involve superstitious practices, especially the belief in a prayer which the saint bestows upon those in danger, and which could then be disseminated in society, encouraging people to buy a copy.²²

Though propagation is implicit in almost every song about the saint, there are also songs which are especially propagational, i.e. designed to spread St. John's fame, tell people why they should worship him, and invite believers to go on pilgrimage to Prague where his body lies.

Only a few songs, however, primarily relate to the practice of pilgrimage (i.e. a special form of song with different speakers – especially the praying devotees, the pilgrim leader who shepherds his flock along the route, and the saint promising help). Songs of a purely didactical character are equally rare.

Regarding leitmotifs, we record three of them in the songs about St. John of Nepomuk. The first is the tongue, whether the malign and poisonous tongue of gossips and enemies, or the intactly preserved tongue of St. John who refused to break the Seal of Confession. The example of St. John told people “when to keep silent and when to speak” (VLNAS 2013: 323). This is also formulated in the song “Jana, kněze příkladného” (“John, the exemplary priest”). from a hymnbook of the Enlightenment period (PÍSNĚ 1789). The symbol of the tongue is sometimes exchanged for that of the mouth. This synecdoche is usual in German texts, where the saint's mouth is praised (“O Sankt Johann von Nepomuck, glücklich ist dein Mund” / “O saint John of Nepomuk, blissful is your mouth”; BÜSCHLEIN) and St. John himself is also addressed as a “holy, faithfully silent mouth”.

The second motif is water, the important symbol of John's drowning. Therefore, he rules over waters and rain, and is compared to a “dumb fish”, whether as a positive signifier (“wise fisherman and dumb fish thrown into the Vltava River”), or a negative one (“dumb fish, dumb log”). The fish can switch, according to St. John's wise power over silence and speaking, from being dumb to “deftly

21) “Poslyšte, křesťané, malou chvíličku” (“Listen, Christians, just a little while”; MZK catalogue).

22) “Poslechněte divy velký Jana svatého” (“Hear the great Saint John's wonders”; *Knihopis* No. 8316).



Figure 4. St. John's intactly preserved tongue also used to be a popular motif in illustrations on the front pages of broadside ballads, such as on this booklet from the Litomyšl printing house (*Dvě písně S. Janu z Nepomuku*, 1811, MKP, sign. J-661).

speaking". St. John's opponents are contrarily "dead fishes", but he is silent "like foam". John's drowning is also compared to "drinking from a chalice full of water".

The third symbol appearing frequently in relation to St. John is light. Light appears during his birth in the form of lightning over his hometown, and after his death as five stars on the water of the Vltava River (that is why he is the only saint whose halo is, like the Virgin Mary's, made of stars). John is "illuminated by birth and death", his head is a "lantern of all virtues", extinguished after his death.

The most frequent name for the saint is *tatiček* ("daddy") or *otec* ("father") as he was the notional parent of orphans who had lost their real parents. The saint's most common metaphor is *kvítek májový* ("the flower of May") because floral metaphors were popular in Baroque literature and St. John's feast takes place in May. He can be addressed directly as "lily", "violet", "lily of the valley", "forget-me-not", and "narcissus", or using more refined formulations:

kvíteček rajský ("little flower of Paradise"),

poupátko rajských květin ("little bud of Paradise flowers")

růže trpělivosti ("rose of patience"),



Figure 5. St. John of Nepomuk as a flower growing on a rosebush. A folk woodcut from the Litomyšl printing house used for the broadside ballad (*Nová píseň k S. Janu z Nepomuku*, [1800–1850], MKP J-675).

fiala poníženosti (“violet of humbleness”),

červený kvítek (“little red flower”),

růže bez trní čistotou a svatostí na Hradě pražském se prejšťící (“rose without thorns on Prague castle gushing with chastity and holiness”), etc.

The floral metaphors relate to colour symbolism. The saint can be a forget-me-not, i.e. bearing the blue of faithfulness, or his tongue might be symbolically red and white (the colours of love and chastity, and together also of martyrdom).

But there are many other metaphors and terms of address for St. John:

advokát (“advocate”),

orátor (“orator”),

prokurátor (“prosecutor”),

předústojná hlava (“most dignified head”),

veslo mého života (“oar of my life”),

můj miláček (“my darling”),

přítel dobrý (“good friend”),

rozmilý stareček (“dear old man”),

skrejš všech ctností (“treasure-trove of all virtues”),
drahý pramínek (“precious little spring”),
drahý rubínek (“precious ruby”),
zlatý rubínek (“golden ruby”),
zlatý prstýnek (“golden ring”),
koruna (“crown”),
diamant (“diamond”),
poklad Hradu pražského (“treasure of Prague Castle”),
sláva Prahy (“glory of Prague”),
klenot pražský (“Prague jewel”),
perla země české (“pearl of the Czech land”),
z nebe perlička (“little pearl from heaven”),
hvězdička (“little star”),
hvězda nejjasnější (“brightest star”),
česká opona (“Czech curtain”),
opona před zarděním a zlehčením (“curtain against blushing and belittlement”),
lékař lidských duší (“doctor of human souls”),
lékař nad jiné lékaře (“doctor above all doctors”),
zrcadlo všech zpovědníků (“mirror of confessors”),
zrcadlo všech mládencův, vdov, také sirotkův (“mirror of all young men, widows, and orphans”),
moudrý rybář a nemá rybička v Moldavu shozená (“wise fisherman and speechless little fish thrown in the Vltava River”),
hrdlička (“turtle-dove”),
ovčička (“little sheep”).

There is also comparison to Biblical characters, such as the suffering Job, Eleazar, Jonas in Nineveh, John the Baptist, John Chrysostom, and Hezekiah. He is the “new Elisha”, “Elijah for his ardour, Moses for his quietness, Aaron for his clerical office”. We can also find allusions to classical mythology: St. John is the “new Amphion”, or a strawberry better than golden apples of Hesperides.

In contrast, the Czech king Wenceslaus IV is attributed with the epithets *král lenivý* (“lazy king”) and *lev zuřivý* (“furious lion”). We can also find a mention about how the king legendarily had his cook cooked.

Some songs also use John’s supposed surname *Hasil* (“he who quenches”), which leads to symbolical interpretations, such as “quenches hostile anger”.

At the forefront of the narration, we can observe the conflict with King Wenceslaus, John’s keeping the queen’s confession secret, and the subsequent tor-



Figure 6. St. John of Nepomuk as a pilgrim to Stará Boleslav. Broadside ballad with the incipit “Kam jdeš, Jene, kam pospícháš?” printed in Prague in 1859 (*Nábožná píseň k svatému Janu Nepomuckému*, author’s private collection KT33).

ture, ending with the drowning in the river. The version in which John, before his death, makes a pilgrimage to Stará Boleslav to revere the Virgin Mary of Stará Boleslav²³ is also popular. The interconnection with the Marian cult is also present in the legend of his Moravian counterpart John Sarkander,²⁴ who made a pilgrimage to the Virgin Mary of Częstochowa before he died as a protector of

23) The Madonna and Child icon appears in the form of a metal relief called *Palladium*, which was believed to give protection to the Czech land. During the 17th century, the legends of all Czech patrons were associated with the Marian cult of the Palladium. It was realised as a constitutive element in building a new, re-Catholicised state religion after the Hussite and Reformation period in the 15th and 16th centuries. St. John became the last patron, incorporated during his canonisation in 1729 (cf. DUCREUX 1997).

24) John Sarkander (1576–1620), despite the promotion of his cult at the turn of the 18th century, was beatified only in 1860 and canonised in 1995.

the Seal of Confession in 1620. The duality of Bohemian John of Nepomuk and Moravian John Sarkander (called the Czech “Castor and Pollux” by the well-known Czech Baroque preacher and writer Bohumír Hynek Bilovský; cf. BILOVSKÝ 1933: 203–208, 218) has been referenced, for now, only in two songs.

John’s pilgrimage to Stará Boleslav relates to the motif of saying farewell in Prague’s Church of Our Lady before Týn to everyone left behind and commanding them into the protection and the mercy of the Virgin Mary and God. This motif contributes to the development of meditative lyrics of the type “smutné vale” (“sad valediction”), of which the most widespread is the song “Kam jdeš, Jene, kam pospícháš?”.

We also encounter topoi such as John’s birth to his old and infertile parents (with many Biblical archetypes), his predestination to an exceptional fate, and his youthful piety followed by service to people in Prague as a confessor and donor of alms.

Of course, we can also find songs about important events in the building of St. John’s cult. The song “Radost nová nám nastává nyní, Čechové” (“A new joy is upon us, Czechs”)²⁵ comes from the year of his beatification (1721). It tells us, for example, of support from the Imperial couple, their letter to the Pope, the examination of the saint’s body – especially that part of his brain which was believed to be his intactly preserved tongue, and it presents a detailed description of the feast and its programme, or the new shape of St. John’s tomb. The song “Počnu marš tento čas” (“I’ll start the march this time”)²⁶ from the year of John’s canonisation (1729) contains anti-Turkish and anti-Protestant motifs, and, at the same time, it begs for the birth of an heir to the throne (who, as we know, did not arrive). There are also songs from the centenary of the canonisation (1829).

Several songs apparently react to the reduction of pilgrimages during the Enlightenment reforms of Joseph II. Lyrics explain that it is not necessary to attend the saint’s tomb in Prague, it is sufficient to confide in him at home. One suggests visiting Krahulčí, where stands the oldest church officially dedicated to St. John of Nepomuk in the Czech lands (cf. MALURA – IVÁNEK 2019: 433–438). But there are also older songs speaking about revering St. John by a “holy picture”, which people had at home and kissed. One of them – “Co mám

25) *Knihopis* No. 8313

26) See MZK catalogue – A religious song in the form of a march is not a completely unique phenomenon in the 18th century. It suited ceremonial processions, and even ordinary singers used to be accompanied by trumpets and drums during the feast in Prague (ŠORM 1929: 138).



Figure 7. The decorated reliquary containing the saint's "tongue". A woodcut from the printing house in Uherské Hradiště used on a broadside ballad with the incipit "Kam jdeš, Jene, kam pospicháš?" from the mid-19th century (*Truchlivé loučení svatého Jana Nepom.*, MKP, sign. J-634).

za trápení? kde vzít potěšení?" ("What is my affliction? Where to take pleasure?")²⁷ – even comes from the year of canonisation.

Many songs reveal how people would revere the saint, be it at home, before his statues in countryside, or before his tomb in Prague. At first, they used to kiss his intactly preserved tongue. We know that in 1729 this relic was placed inside a separate case, which pilgrims were given to kiss (VLNAS 2013: 173). They also used to kiss his tomb (or they could fall at his feet and kiss the ground, believing they were kissing his footprints). On pictures or statues, they kissed his "golden legs", his "golden hands" (which smote enemies), the hand in which he clutched the cross, or the crucifix itself.

27) *Knihopis* No. 7902

Changes of understanding

The oldest known hymn to St. John of Nepomuk comes from 1602. It was written in Latin by the humanist poet and high official of the Church, Jiří Barthold Pontanus of Breitenberg (“Inter tot celebres Czechia quos colit patronos” / “Among the many famous patrons that Czechia worships”; BARTHOLD 1602: 203–206) and translated into Czech in the canonisation year 1729 (“Mezi tak slavnými českýma ochránci nebudeš v menší cti”; SPRÁVA 1729). It emphasises the importance of confession and encourages people not to hide their sins but to confess. During the Enlightenment period, i.e. less than 200 years after the first hymn, a completely different moral message comes to the fore in our song material. St. John’s hymnography teaches people not to slander others and not to lend an ear to slander. In the song “Hvězdičko jasně svítící” (“Little star shining bright”; HOLOUBEK 1818: 77–80), the singer puts his finger to his lips and a lock on his mouth so as not to harm his neighbour by slander. In the song “Chvalme Boha srdcem celým” (“Let’s praise God with all our hearts”; IBID.: 80–83), John “teaches us to put a bridle on our tongue and be silent”.

But what about the period that lies in between? The Baroque must be regarded as a transition between these two points, significantly influenced by popular religion. As said above, the main issue the lyrics address is the status of orphans and widows. In the understanding of early modern society, these two groups have lost their protector, guardian, and moral model. Thus, they are sitting targets for defamation, as society tries to deprive them of their property and reputation. Sometimes in these songs it is the groups themselves who repent their sins (just like the humble sinner in one of the oldest and most popular songs “Velký hříšník přicházím k tobě, Muži Boží”), but more often lyrics focus on upbraiding the gossipers, so that songs about St. John promise punishment to those who slander others.

An interesting testimony is recorded in a manuscript copy of a broadside ballad (lament) with the pleading incipit “Ej Bože, v chudobě prosím poníženě skrze milého patrona mého, Jana svatého Nepomuckého, slyš volání” (“O God, in poverty I beseech you, humbled through my dear patron, Saint John of Nepomuk, hear the call”).²⁸ A woman has added the following sentence in a handwritten postscript: “They set my husband free, they sentenced the murderer, he was broken by the wheel, torn by pincers.” This, in my opinion, says much

28) Untitled, VMO E 18871–18903, přív.

about the perception of the saint among the common people (i.e. the addressees of broadside ballads) for the greater part of the 18th century (and later – in the countryside and among the lower classes of the urban society). The woman understood the song as a prayer to God mediated by the saint, who, in her eyes, was the lawyer, advocate, and prosecutor before God. She was apparently looking to the saint for help in her husband's unjust situation. And when his innocence was proved, she saw it as grace shown to her by St. John. However, I cannot help feeling that the sentence also contains satisfaction that the real culprit has been cruelly punished. And this was perfectly congruent with the beliefs of society at that time because, as Vlnas remarks on the early perception of John of Nepomuk, his character as understood in popular religion was, for a long time, not that of a typical saint. Rather, he was a magician or thaumaturgist, who took revenge on those who offended him, his tomb, or his worshippers. "However, it was this wonderful mixture of religious faith combined with superstitious reverence and awe that was the reason for the immense popularity of the martyr of the Seal of Confession." (VLNAS 2013: 131).

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ABBREVIATIONS

KPK – Kapucínská provinční knihovna (Capuchin Provincial Library)

MKP – Muzeum Komenského v Přerově (Comenius Museum in Přerov)

VMO – Vlastivědné muzeum v Olomouci (Regional Museum in Olomouc)

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