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Busy Kids Love
Music
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Hi everyone, and welcome back to Busy Kids Love Music, the podcast that helps families explore the wonderful world of music together. I'm Carly Seifert, creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so glad you're here with me today.

We are four stops into our summer world tour, and I cannot believe how much ground we've covered already! We started in Puerto Rico with the rhythms of bomba and plena, then traveled to Norway for the haunting resonance of the Hardanger fiddle, and two weeks ago we landed in Nigeria and heard a drum that actually speaks a language. If you've missed any of those episodes, they're all linked in the show notes and waiting for you whenever you're ready.

Today we are stamping our passport with stop number four, and we are heading to the heart of central Europe — a landlocked country with a long and complicated history, a fiercely proud cultural identity, and some of the most joyful and irresistibly danceable folk music you have ever heard.

We are landing in the Czech Republic.

The Czech Republic sits in the middle of Europe, bordered by Germany to the west, Poland to the north, Slovakia to the east, and Austria to the south. It's a relatively small country — about the size of South Carolina — but it punches well above its weight when it comes to art, architecture, literature, and especially music. The capital city of Prague is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, with a medieval old town and a castle that has overlooked the city for more than a thousand years.

The country is made up of three historical regions — Bohemia in the west, Moravia in the east, and a small area called Silesia (si-lee-zuh) in the north — and each of these regions has developed its own distinct folk music traditions over the centuries. When people talk about Czech folk music, they're actually talking about a rich patchwork of regional styles, instruments, and dance forms that are related to each other but not identical.

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Before we get into the music, though, a bit of history — because as we've seen at every stop on this summer's tour, the history of a place and the history of its folk music are always deeply intertwined.

The Czech lands have been home to people for thousands of years, and by the early medieval period. Slavic peoples settled across Bohemia and Moravia in the early medieval period, and over time the Kingdom of Bohemia emerged as one of medieval Europe's most powerful states. The city of Prague was a major center of trade, learning, and culture, and Czech identity was strong and distinctive.

But beginning in the 1600s, the Czech lands came under the rule of the Habsburg Empire — the great Austrian dynasty that controlled much of central Europe for centuries. Under Habsburg rule, the Czech language was suppressed in favor of German, Czech culture was pushed to the margins of official life, and the Czech nobility lost much of its power and independence. For a very long time, being openly and proudly Czech was politically complicated.

And yet — as we have seen in Norway and in Nigeria — ordinary people held onto their folk music, their language, and their traditions with extraordinary determination. Czech folk songs, dances, and instruments survived not in the courts and concert halls of the powerful, but in the villages, the fields, and the family gatherings of everyday people. Folk music was, once again, a form of cultural resistance and a keeper of identity.

By the 1800s, a powerful Czech national revival was underway. Writers, artists, composers, and scholars began deliberately celebrating Czech language and culture, collecting folk songs, and insisting that Czech identity deserved to be seen and heard. That revival produced some of the greatest composers in European music history — but we'll get to that in a moment.

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Now — you may recognize the first type of music we're going to talk about, because Czech folk music gave the world one of its most widely recognized dance forms: the polka.

The polka originated in Bohemia in the early 19th century — historians aren't entirely sure of the precise origin, but by the 1840s it had swept across Europe and then across the Atlantic, becoming a dance craze in ballrooms from Paris to New York. Many historians believe the word polka may come from a Czech term meaning 'half step,' referring to the dance's quick movement, though its exact origin is still debated.

At its heart, polka music is joyful, energetic, and very hard to sit still to. It's typically in a fast duple meter — meaning it has two beats per measure — with a bright, bouncy feel that practically insists you get up and dance. Traditional polka ensembles in Bohemia featured instruments like the clarinet, fiddle, bass, and often a button accordion or concertina, creating a lively, full sound that filled village dance halls and outdoor festivals.

What's remarkable about the polka is how far it traveled and how many cultures adopted and adapted it. Czech immigrants brought polka to the United States in the 19th century, and it took deep root in communities across the Midwest and Texas in particular, where you can still find thriving polka traditions today. The polka that Czech-American communities developed has its own regional flavors and variations — a perfect example of folk music finding new soil and growing into something both familiar and new.

Moving from Bohemia into Moravia, the folk music takes on a somewhat different character. Moravian folk music is often considered the richest and most varied of the Czech regional traditions, and it was Moravian folk song in particular that captured the attention of composers and collectors during the national revival of the 1800s.

One of the most distinctive instruments in Moravian folk music is the **cimbalom** — (cymbal-um) a large hammered dulcimer that sits on legs

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and is played by striking its many strings with small mallets. The cimbalom produces a bright, percussive, almost bell-like tone, and in the hands of a skilled player it can carry a melody, fill in harmonies, and provide rhythmic drive all at once. It's a fascinating instrument to watch being played, because the player's hands move so quickly across the strings that the whole thing looks almost like a kind of musical magic trick.

Moravian folk ensembles — sometimes called cimbálová muzika, or cimbalom bands — typically pair the cimbalom with fiddles, viola, and double bass, creating a rich, full-bodied sound that has a warmth and energy quite different from the bright bounce of Bohemian polka.

The verbunk (vair-boonk) is another important Moravian folk tradition worth knowing about. It began as a recruitment dance — young men would perform elaborate, athletic solo dances as a kind of display of strength and skill, originally connected to military recruitment in the 18th century. Over time it became a celebrated folk dance form in its own right, known for its dramatic footwork, improvised flourishes, and the way it builds in energy and intensity from beginning to end.

Now — I mentioned the Czech national revival and the extraordinary composers it produced, and I can't leave the Czech Republic without talking about Antonín Dvořák, because his connection to Czech folk music is a beautiful story from classical music.

Dvořák (DVOR-zhak) was born in 1841 in a small village in Bohemia, the son of a butcher and innkeeper who also played folk music on the zither. He grew up surrounded by Czech folk songs and dances, and even as he became one of the most celebrated composers in Europe, he never lost his connection to that folk world. His Slavonic Dances were inspired by Czech and other Slavic dance forms. You can hear in them exactly the rhythmic energy and melodic character that we've been talking about today, translated into the language of the symphony orchestra.

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Dvořák believed deeply that great music had to be rooted in the music of ordinary people, and his work is a testament to that belief.

Czech folk music is very much alive and celebrated today. The Strážnice International Folklore Festival, held annually in Moravia since 1946, is one of the oldest and most beloved folk music festivals in Europe, drawing performers and audiences from across the Czech Republic and beyond to celebrate regional folk traditions through music, dance, and costume. Young Czech musicians are also finding creative ways to bring folk traditions into contemporary contexts — blending cimbalom and Moravian vocal harmonies with jazz, world music, and new acoustic styles in ways that honor the tradition while keeping it fresh and vital.

Today we stamped our passport with stop number four on this summer's world tour — the Czech Republic, with its Bohemian polka rhythms that traveled the world, the warm resonance of the Moravian cimbalom, the athletic drama of the verbunk, and the folk roots that fed one of classical music's great composers.

I've put together a curated listening playlist in the show notes so you and your kids can keep exploring after the episode – and don't forget to print your passport stamp! You'll find all of that at busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/180.

And if you've been enjoying the summer tour, please take just two minutes to leave a rating and review wherever you listen to podcasts. It genuinely helps other families find the show, and I am so grateful for every single one.

One more passport stamp to go this summer — and it's a good one. I'll see you back here in two weeks for our final destination. Until then — keep listening, keep learning, and keep making music. Thanks so much for being here!