

Charles Bridge and its Role in Creating the Atmosphere of the Czech Capital. Who are the “Creators”?



Martina Hanáková, Department of European Ethnology, Masaryk University, Brno, CZ

A: When visiting Prague one would not miss to cross the Charles Bridge. This Czech jewel older than 700 years connects “the Old Town” and “the Lesser Town”. It is approximately 516 meters long and 9.5 meters wide. The bridge is formed by sixteen arcs and three towers situated on both sides of the bridge. Thirty baroque statues and sculptural groups are placed along the entire length of the bridge. However, not only these stony gentlemen create such charming character of the bridge. Apart from painters and artists, selling their paintings and products, there are five “artistic pitches” for buskers on the bridge. Nevertheless, not everyone is allowed to perform. The buskers have to be chosen first by a special jury. The bridge is administrated by “The Charles Bridge Artists Association” which selects the performers. This poster aims to examine these audition processes in more detail. It also discusses some possible advantages and disadvantages which busking brings to this place, supported by testimonies of buskers themselves. They are also introduced more closely as representatives of the art which has always had its special place in the territory of this important site of Czech cultural heritage.

Note: it all started after the revolution in 1989; before that there were just a few musicians at the end of 60', but it was illegal...

Every performer needs to attend a payed audition which is announced on special dates. He or she performs in front of the jury of the Charles Bridge Artists Association with the participation of a notary. It is a duty for any kind of an artist. If the performer is chosen, he/she pays a fee for 3 months in advance. Every performer subscribes for the exact days and times for busking on the bridge, he/she actually rents a spot and pays for it daily as well. There are five spots which are taken in advance and it is not possible to change it while performing. The allowed times for busking are: from 10 to 1, from 1 to 4, from 4 to 7 and from 7 to 10 PM. There are also some special regulations for example: using special light effects, holding a very colourful umbrella or putting anything on the wall is forbidden. There is also a security agency guarding the musicians but also checking if there is anybody performing without the permission.



The Bridge Band, Prague, 2015

“You can have unforgettable experiences on the bridge. I played in various cities but here it is just special. No city has such bridge around the world.”

“Unfortunately that’s how it works these days, there are crooks and criminals being among us; basically if you are disabled and you are singing, but even if you have not lost your sight completely you get robbed.”

“Well I take it the way that it is just open for everyone; if someone likes the performance, he stops and who does not like it carries on walking... They give me money voluntarily if they like it. Is it just more open... Moreover I have a problem I suffer from stage fright. When I have an official concert I am so nervous. Here it is a kind of therapy for me I do not care.”

“It is my hobby, but I realized that I have become a part of Prague. Like a character of the Lesser Town. It has been three years since I was first sitting on the same spot. I observe the city and the people and I feel that I am a part of it.”



Prague Charles Bridge, Prague, 2012



The Sightless Singer, Prague, 2015



The Barrel Organ player, Prague, 2016

C: The Charles Bridge is a unique place full of various elements. Apart from the old history represented by the statues and other parts of the bridge, it is people who make it so special — amazed tourists, painters but mainly performers. Even though the conditions for busking there are not easy they have been “faithful” to the bridge for many years. Most of them could barely imagine leaving the activity. It is a part of their identity. They feel to be a part of the city and really enjoy to perform there and please the passers-by.