



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Construction, Arrangement, Revival: Slovenian Vocal Music Practices and National Perception
Research Report

Topic of research:

My dissertation in the field of Ethnomusicology, with the provisional title “Construction, Arrangement, Revival: Slovenian Vocal Music Practices and National Perception,” examines the repertoire of composed arrangements of Slovenian folk songs in relation to perceptions of Slovenian identity. I explore two basic questions: How is folk music, a multifaceted and problematic concept, transformed into a national music? What is “Slovenian” in the diverse musics perceived as ethnically or nationally Slovenian? I thus examine theories of folk music and the processes in which such music is constructed, as well as how this repertoire of Slovenian folk songs simultaneously represents and influences perceptions of Slovenian national identity.¹

¹ I have chosen to examine mainly choral arrangements of folk songs due to the facts that song is the most common form of Slovenian folk music (Kumer 1975; 1996) and that choral singing is one of the most widespread musical activities in Slovenia (both premises were corroborated by my findings in the field). Although the folk music revival is still in my provisional title, I am currently negotiating the extent to which I will focus on it. I recognize the importance and particularly the upsurge of revival activity since Slovenia’s independence in 1991, but there is an overwhelming abundance of material on Slovenian choral activity and choral arrangements of folk songs which I find more relevant to the history of creating a Slovenian national and musical identity.

Relevance and contribution to field:

My study of the processes of the creation of a national repertoire of folk music presents new approaches to several areas of scholarship. Slovenia as a culture area is not often examined by American scholarship, in spite of its position on the crossroads of Eastern and Western, Northern and Southern Europe. There also exist no studies of Slovenian music outside of Slovenia.² Arrangements of folk songs, though common in many cultures, are often neglected by the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology alike as they fall between definitions of “folk” and “art” music.

I propose that precisely these “gray areas” – Slovenia as an ambiguous culture area and arrangements bordering both folk and art music – reveal much about constructions of culture as well as nation. For example, the arrangement of folk music synthesizes political, national, cultural, and musical ideologies. This study raises numerous methodological and theoretical issues of broader relevance not only to musicology studies, but to Eastern and Central European cultural studies as well.

Although my research is grounded in the humanities, it bears relevance to policy development. The notion of national identity, which is expressed through cultural forms such as music, influences state policies, allegiances, and political attitudes. Due to Slovenia’s position on the crossroads of Europe, its varied landscape which divides it into seven distinct geographic regions, and exposure to various cultural, historical and political influences, the Slovenian people have continuously grappled with defining themselves and expressing a national culture. Based on my research, I assert that Slovenian identity is still in flux today. The development of cultural and political identity is a prime issue for the recently-formed nation and demands further examination.

Approach and research methodology:

My study requires historical and contemporary examination of people, institutions, and their supporting ideologies, as well as detailed music analysis and observation of musical activity. I have been researching the roles and attitudes of folk-song collectors, composers, choir directors and cultural organizers; the activities of choral societies; repertoire selection; and the cultural policies and influences of government, education systems, and religious institutions on the creation and performance of such folk music. To do this I conducted both archival research and fieldwork in Slovenia.

My archival research consisted of an examination of manuscripts of field-transcribed folk songs as well as choral scores, concert programs, concert reviews, and various other documents on composers, choirs, music schools, cultural societies, and government organizations. The sites of my archival work were the National and University Library (primarily the Music Collection); the Music-ethnography Institute of the Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences; the Historical Archives Ljubljana; the Library

² Though there are many publications on Slovenian music in German, Croatian, or even Italian, most are written by Slovenian scholars (e.g., Zmaga Kumer, *Die Volksmusikinstrumente in Slowenien*, 1986 ; Julijan Strajnar, *Rozmarin: canti popolari sloveni*, 1992).

of the Department of Musicology, University of Ljubljana; and the archives of several choirs, including Akadamski pevski zbor Tone Tomšič, ŠOU v Ljubljani.

My fieldwork consisted of interviews as well as observation of performances and rehearsals. Among those I formally interviewed were composers, choir directors, and various cultural administrators, such as the coordinator of choral activities at the Republic of Slovenia Public Fund for Cultural Activities. I also attended numerous concerts and choir rehearsals throughout Slovenia, attempting regional coverage of musical activities. My fieldwork was concentrated in Ljubljana (where I met many of my informants, though they traveled from other areas of Slovenia), but also included the city of Maribor, the towns of Ribnica and Ajdovščina, and the villages of Črni vrh, Horjul and Radomlje.

Summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions:

Through my fieldwork in Slovenia I investigated several questions, including which folk songs were/ are collected and then arranged (and by whom)³, which regions' music has been chosen and which aspects of folk singing styles are preserved in the arrangements. I also surveyed choral activity in Slovenia to examine the current performance and reception of composed folk song arrangements. While my conclusions are very preliminary (much of my work in Slovenia was data collection, the analysis of which I am now undertaking), I can report that my findings were more abundant than I had anticipated.

In terms of repertoire selection and regional representation, I have noticed a distinct shift in recent decades in both the composition and performance of folk song arrangements. Whereas arrangements from the beginning into the middle of the 20th century tended to be based on songs from the more central and alpine regions of Slovenia, many recent arrangements are of songs from the periphery of Slovenian ethnic territories: Rezija (valley now in Italy), Benečija (in Italy), Prekmurje (bordering Hungary), Porabje (in Hungary), and also from eastern areas bordering Croatia. I am still assessing the reasons for increased attention to these regions. Although songs from the periphery of Slovenian territory may represent a trend to exoticize folk culture (songs from these areas tend to have unusual musical characteristics, a result of the mixture of neighboring music cultures), I believe they also represent a trend to emphasize the diversity of Slovenian culture. Rather than a Slovenian identity forged from one unified culture or language, these songs assert an identity composed of the many unique characteristics of each individual region.

My investigation of choral activity and the current status of folk song arrangements has shown that choral singing is a remarkably developed and widespread practice in Slovenia, with state support of folk song arrangements. In a population of only 2 million, there are over 2,000 organized choirs. In addition to financially supporting choirs and publishing music (including folk song arrangements), government agencies such as the Public Fund for Cultural Activities (JSKD) and Association of Cultural

³ While there are perhaps thousands of composed arrangements of folk songs, they represent a small fraction of all versions and variants of Slovenian folk songs. The selection of a song for arrangement is a decision which immortalizes a particular version of a particular song variant, often leaving other versions or variants forgotten.

Organizations (ZKO) determine the repertoire for festivals, competitions, and mass meetings, and often *require* the performance of folk song arrangements.

I will continue to assess the nature of this government support of both choirs and folk songs, particularly whether or not state sponsorship favors certain music or activities. I also intend to pursue my finding that church musicians have had a great influence on the development of musical activities, particularly in the villages and countryside, despite a certain local desire to decry the Catholic Church's influence on Slovenian culture. For instance, I encountered many examples in my field work of church organists/choir directors organizing choral and other secular musical activities for the entire village community. In addition to informing the character of Slovenian culture and formations of identity, I believe that this and other such findings will show the complex integration of political, national, religious, and social ideologies in the self-conscious construction of cultural forms such as arrangements of folk music.

Suggestions for future research agendas:

I would encourage more inter-disciplinary studies that assess the place of Slovenia in relation to world cultures and states, particularly in light of Slovenia's impending admission to NATO and the EU. Further studies of Slovenian cultural history as well as current cultural practices would reveal underlying attitudes of Slovenia's self-perception. I would also recommend a critical evaluation of the Slovenian media, especially the influences (direct and indirect) of government.

Recommendations for the US policy community:

I am not in a position to make specific policy recommendations, but I can offer my impressions and observations from Slovenia. While to outsiders things might look prime for eventual admission to NATO and the European Union, Slovenians are in much turmoil over it and do not seem to have a clear perspective of their place in the world. On one hand, being part of these larger powers would open them up to vast economic and political opportunities. On the other is the fear that these larger unions will diminish their autonomy and cultural expression. I overheard much anti-NATO and anti-American sentiment, though politicians tout the opposite.

All policy involving Slovenia must take into consideration the complicated and disturbing history that fuels much of their internal political conflicts, and which prevents them from developing sound policies of their own. For example, Slovenians are continually plagued by the same conflicts that divided them in their civil war during World War II. With this in consideration, the US also needs to be careful which political forces it supports.