

SLOVENIAN RECORDINGS MADE IN AMERICA PRIOR TO WORLD WAR II

CHARLES F. DEBEVEC

Slovenian music, brought to the United States by immigrants in the early years of the 20th century, evolved from its traditional form to forms influenced by American popular music as succeeding generations assimilated into the American culture. Its history, as documented and preserved in the medium of phonograph records, is described in this paper. Included are profiles of the recording artists and other individuals who made significant contributions.

Keywords: Slovenian-American music, Slovenian immigrants in USA, Slovenian recording artists, preservation.

Slovenska glasba, ki so jo v Združene države Amerike prinesli izseljenci v zgodnjih letih 20. stoletja, se je ob asimilaciji naslednje generacije ameriški kulturi iz tradicionalnih oblik razvila v obliko, na katero je vplivala ameriška popularna glasba. V prispevku je opisana zgodovina te glasbe, kakor je dokumentirana in ohranjena na gramofonskih ploščah; pri tem so vključene tudi značilnosti izvajalcev in drugih posameznikov, ki so pomembno prispevali k nastanku posnetkov. Ključne besede: slovenskoameriška glasba, slovenski izseljenci v ZDA, slovenski izvajalci na gramofonskih ploščah, zaščita.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional Slovenian music, handed down through generations in Europe and brought to the new world by immigrants, evolved into a decidedly American style as the immigrants adapted to their new surroundings and as they and their descendants assimilated. The process by which this occurred is documented and preserved in the medium of phonograph records.

The epoch under consideration can be divided into three periods, each of which had its own artists, instrumentation, and musical styles. The first, herein referred to as the “acoustic” period, extended from the time of the earliest recordings in the 1910’s until 1925. The artists were immigrants, and their musical styles and performances conformed to the old country norms. In that early period, recordings were made acoustically, without benefit of electronic amplification. The second period began in 1925, when the so-called “electrical process” of recording was introduced. A new generation of artists, the children of immigrants and immigrants who had arrived as children, appeared. While not abandoning the old traditions, they were influenced by American popular music, which included the jazz, ragtime, and Broadway genres. As part of their assimilation into the American culture, they introduced elements of

those genres, as well as some of the instrumentation, into the traditional Slovenian musical styles. Several factors, which will be detailed, resulted in very few Slovenian recordings being produced from 1930 until after the end of World War II, when a third period was underway. That period, which had its beginnings in the late 1930's, was dominated by polka bands. The peak of their popularity was reached in the late 1940's.

The marriage of Slovenian folk music with American popular music resulted in a unique form—Slovenian music with an American accent. The process by which this phenomenon occurred, the recording artists and other individuals who made significant contributions to the process, and current efforts to preserve their recordings are described in this paper.

THE BEGINNINGS OF RECORDED MUSIC IN AMERICA – THE ACOUSTIC PERIOD

THE IMMIGRANTS ARRIVE

Slovenian immigration to the United States of America reached its peak in the first two decades of the 20th century. Many, if not most, of the immigrants in that period left their homeland, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, for economic reasons. Although in America they did not find “streets paved with gold” and notwithstanding that they were forced into strenuous and low-paying jobs, they did manage, through diligence and austerity, to improve their lot and that of their children.

As with members of most immigrant ethnic groups, the Slovenians tended to settle near, associate with, and marry each other. They settled where jobs were available to them: industrialized cities such as Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Chicago, and mining areas such as Minnesota's Iron Range. After they became established, they organized fraternal benefit societies,¹ built churches and halls, and published newspapers. The benefit societies paid their medical and funeral expenses, the churches provided for their spiritual needs, the halls provided a place to congregate, and the newspapers kept them informed, in their native language, about world and local affairs. Church and lodge functions provided social activities. Music was an important part of their lives and entertainment. Not surprisingly, the earliest society to be formed by Slovenian immigrants in New York City was a singing society (Arnez 1966: 195), and this was likely to be true elsewhere as well. The immigrants also organized brass bands and theatrical groups. It was during this early period that Slovenian phonograph records, some recorded in America and some in Europe, began to be produced. The recordings of folk and art songs, comic sketches, and re-enactments of folk customs—reminders of family members and golden times left behind—had great appeal to the immigrants.

¹ Among the earliest of these are the American Slovenian Catholic Union (KSKJ), organized in 1894, and the Slovene National Benefit Society (SNPJ), organized in 1904. Both are still in existence.

RECORDING TECHNIQUES

In a typical acoustic recording session of the early 1900's, musicians crowded in front of large horns, one to three of which were found in a typical studio. The horns were connected via metal tubes to a sound box. Inside the sound box was a mica diaphragm to which was attached a stylus. When sound entered the box via the horns, the diaphragm vibrated and moved the stylus, which cut an undulating spiral groove in the wax coating on a rotating disc. The stylus' progress toward the center of the disc was advanced by a screw drive. Upon completion of the recording, a matrix number was scribed in the wax coating to identify the disc. Through a series of processing steps involving coating, plating, and cleaning operations, a metal master, from which records were pressed, was created. The recordings made by this process, while adequate, suffered from low fidelity—sounds in the high and low frequency ranges were missing. The sound from some instruments, such as violins, could not be detected unless the instruments were modified by attaching megaphones to amplify and direct the sound. Furthermore, it was difficult to record large orchestras—a limited number of musicians could be gotten sufficiently close to the horns. (Huffman s.a.; Francis 1996)

The companies that produced disc recordings of an ethnic nature during that period were the Columbia Graphophone Company, the Victor Talking Machine Company, and the Okeh Phonograph Corporation. Columbia early on saw a market for ethnic recordings, continued to produce them in large quantities throughout the 1910's and 1920's, and in totality produced the most Slovenian recordings of all major companies. Anton Heindl, the head of Columbia's international division, began recording immigrant artists as early as 1911, yet most of the ethnic recordings issued in the United States on all three labels prior to World War I were recorded in Europe. During the war, these were not available for importation and the companies began recording immigrant artists almost exclusively. The artists were recommended to the record companies by proprietors of music stores and other establishments which catered to the ethnic communities. In addition, Heindl sought talented artists in the cafes, halls, and taverns that the immigrants frequented. (Greene 1992: 74–75)

The early recording studios were located in New York City and, given the difficulties of travel in those days, most of the Slovenian artists who recorded resided in New York or nearby states. However, Victor (in 1924) and Okeh (in 1925) managed to make one field trip each to Cleveland, where they recorded some of the local artists.

MILKA POLANCER SCHNEID AND RUDOLF TROŠT

It is likely that the first recordings of Slovenian songs in the United States were made by Milka Polancer Schneid, an immigrant from Croatia. She recorded four folk songs for Columbia on 10 February 1913. A versatile performer, she also recorded in the Serbo-Croatian, Romanian, Slovak, and Bulgarian languages; and was capable of singing in the soprano, alto, and contralto voices. She recorded Slovenian songs for Columbia on four more occasions in 1913, and continued to record until 1921 on both the Columbia and Victor labels, although none of the recordings she made after 1919 were released. (Spottswood 1990: 2956)



Figure 1. “Na vrsaču” was recorded by Milka Polancer Schneider at the 10 February 1913 session (author’s archives).



Figure 2. A Victor flyer from 1919 features Milka Polancer Schneider and Franjo Potočnik (pseudonym of Emilio Blažević) (author’s archives).

The next artist to record was Rudolf Trošt, an opera singer who emigrated from Ljubljana to New York. He recorded several Slovenian and Croatian folk and art songs for the Columbia label on 13 May 1914.

AUGUSTA DANILOVA

Augusta Danilova (1869–1958) was a stage actress, director, and pedagogue from Ljubljana. She was born Avgusta Gostič near Ljubljana, performed her first acting role at the age of 14 or 15, then furthered her career by attending acting schools in Ljubljana, Vienna, and Prague. She worked at a theater in Ljubljana where she met fellow actor Anton Cerar (1858–1947), whom she subsequently married. His stage name was “Danilo,” after a character he played in a popular role. He adopted it as his surname; Augusta took the feminine form, Danilova.

When silent movies were introduced into Slovenia, they captured the audiences’ attention, to the detriment of the stage theater. By 1913, the Ljubljana Provincial Theater, where they worked, was closed and Anton and Augusta found themselves among the unemployed. They then decided that Augusta should seek temporary employment in America. With the intention of staying for a year, she left home, accompanied by the eldest of her six children, son Rafael, who by that time was an adult. They settled in New York. Augusta’s plan to stay for only a year was thwarted when World War I began, and she was prevented from returning to Europe for the duration. She eventually found employment as a fabric cutter for a garment company. With help from Slovenian acquaintances, she was introduced to prominent New Yorkers, and began getting better offers. One of her acquaintances, the aforementioned Rudolf Trošt, told her that he had signed a contract with Columbia records. Augusta, who had also trained as a singer, approached Anton Heindl and was offered a contract with Columbia. She made her first recordings in January 1917, singing in a duet with Milka Polancer Schneider, who used the name Mila Polančeva on the records. Together, they recorded at least 12 folk songs at various sessions in 1917. (Slokan 1978, 1984; Spottswood 1990: 1024–1026)

Augusta made several more recordings for the Columbia and Victor labels as a soloist with accompaniment by an accordion or small orchestra. Her longing for her native country and the family left behind, as well as her impressions about life in America are reflected in a sample of her recordings: “Moj mili kraj” (My Sweet Country), “Kranjica v Ameriki” (A Slovenian



Figure 3. Augusta Danilova (Slokan 1978).

Girl in America), “Jezična Žefka v Coney Island” (Talkative Žefka on Coney Island)², “Na tujih tleh” (In a Foreign Land). All of those no doubt had great appeal to other Slovenian immigrants who could well empathize.

She finally returned to Slovenia in 1920, but two years later she came back to America by invitation, this time settling in Cleveland. During that residency, she made recordings for Columbia and Victor. In 1924, she opened a drama school in Cleveland and directed plays for the Ivan Cankar Dramatic Society. Her last recordings were made for Victor on 29–30 November 1924, in Cleveland. In all, she had recorded at least 54 selections in America. She returned to Europe in 1926, this time to stay. (Slokan 1978)

JOHN IVANUSH

Known as the father of Slovenian opera in America, John Ivanush (Ivanuš) (1879–1973) was born in Rogaska Slatina, Slovenia. An orphan, he spent much of his early youth at the famous spa in that town. As result of listening to the thirty-piece house orchestra, he became interested in music and took up the violin. He continued his studies at a music school in the city of Ptuj. In 1904, he immigrated to America and pursued his musical interests in various parts of the country, including New Jersey, Illinois, Minnesota, and South Dakota. He moved to Ohio in 1919, accepting a position as director of the Zarja singing society. He held that position from 1920 until 1940. In 1919, he became director of the marching band Godba Bled, and held that position until 1943. Besides directing choral groups (Zarja, Jadran, Cvet, Edinost, Slovan, Vilhar, Na Jutrovem, Primorje), he found time to compose an opera (“Turjaška Rozamunda”), orchestrate (“Gostilnica”), and provide musical arrangements (“Gorenjski Slavček,” “Count Nikola Šubič Zrinski,” “Hrbenica”). (Jartz 1980: 415–420; Gobetz 2011)

Two of the groups that Ivanush directed during the acoustic period were recorded. There is but one known recording of each: the Zarja Male Chorus recorded the Slovenian folk song “Veseli bratci”, and Godba Bled recorded the Czech polka “Dvajset krona,” both ca. May 1924 and both apparently at the same session.³ Both selections were issued on Columbia 25006-F.⁴

RUDOLPH PERDAN AND JEANETTE PERDAN

Rudolph (ca. 1882–1940) and Ivana (Jeanette) (1905–1988) Perdan, both immigrants, were a father and daughter vocal duet from Cleveland. In addition to singing, Jeanette was also a pianist. She was a program planner and performer on radio stations WHK and WGAR from 1922 to 1945, and later on WEWS-TV. She also served as an associate professor at Kent State University (Gobetz 1980: 554). Rudolph and Jeanette recorded eight selections in November 1924 for Columbia.

² Coney Island was the site of an amusement park in New York City.

³ Spottswood’s discography (Spottswood 1990) does not list these recordings. The masters were assigned matrix numbers 89941 and 89944. The gap between the two numbers suggests that other recordings may have been made at the same session that were not released.

⁴ Catalog number 25006-F, apparently due to a mistake, was used by Columbia a few years later on another release.

OTHER ARTISTS

Victor Lisjak (1889–1979) was an orchestra leader, composer, and the first director (for a short period) of the Jadran Singing Society of Cleveland. He recorded for the Okeh and Columbia labels from 1922 to 1926. In addition, he accompanied the Milavec sisters on most of their recordings.

Josephine Milavec (ca. 1896–1955) immigrated to the U.S. from Dvorska, Austria, in 1913 at age 17 and settled in Cleveland. In the 1930's, she performed as an opera singer in the Slovenian choir *Samostojna Zarja* under the direction of John Ivanush. She had leading roles in such productions as “Gorenjski Slavček,” “Martha,” and “*Il Trovatore*” (Gobetz 1980: 422–424). As a contralto duet, she and her sister Mimi recorded for Columbia and Okeh in 1924 and 1925.

Frank Lovšin was a button accordionist who recorded polkas, waltzes, and folk dances on the Victor and Columbia labels in 1924. He accompanied Augusta Danilova on some of her comic songs and sketches. His last recording session was in 1929, for Columbia.

Ivan (John) Potokar (1891–1972), tenor, accordionist, and music teacher, sang with the *Kvartet Conemaugh* of East Conemaugh Borough, Pennsylvania. The quartet recorded four songs in 1925 for Columbia; Potokar recorded two instrumentals on the accordion at the same session.

Other early vocalists and vocal groups listed in Spottswood's discography include Elizabeth Grayhack, soprano; *Kvartet Ljubljana*; John (Ivan) Ribich, tenor; *Kvartet Slovenija*⁵; *Slovensko pevsko društvo “Slavec”*; Frank Švigel, Promos Kogoj, and Mrs. A. Švigel.

Besides Milka Polancer Schneid, mentioned above, there were other artists of different ethnic backgrounds who recorded Slovenian songs, in addition to songs in other languages. Emilio Blažević recorded in Slovenian as Franjo Potočnik, in Bohemian as Emanuel Bláha, in Slovak as Elnick Boda, in Polish as Emil Blazewicz, and in his native Croatian language. The tenor Obrad Djurin, a Serb, recorded several Slovenian songs for the Victor label in 1917 and 1918 using the pseudonyms Obrad Žurin and Janez Gorenc. Others include the Bohemian baritone Frantisek A. Pangrač (as Franjo Pangrac) and the Jewish tenors Naum Coster (as Anton Dolenc) and Jacob M. Medvedieff. (Spottswood 1990: 653, 936–938, 941, 1319, 1443)

THE GOLDEN AGE

In 1925, the Western Electric company introduced the electrical process, which allowed for the use of microphones, electronic amplification, and electromagnetic recording heads. The result was a significant improvement in fidelity over the acoustic process, and the ability to record large orchestras. Unfortunately for the record companies, the same electronic technology produced wireless broadcasting, and the public's favor soon turned from sound recordings to

⁵ “*Kvartet Ljubljana*” and “*Kvartet Slovenija*” are possibly two names for the same group.

radio. Hard times for the record companies ensued. Okeh was acquired by Columbia in 1926. Columbia went through a series of sales, mergers, and bankruptcies before being acquired by the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in 1938. Victor was acquired by the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in 1929. In spite of their problems, the companies continued to find a market for ethnic recordings. (Spottswood 1990: xvi–xvii; Laird and Rust 2004: 11)

In 1927, a portable hand–crank phonograph, “a splendid instrument of excellent tone and real workmanship,” could be purchased from the Sears, Roebuck & Co. mail-order catalog for only \$14.95 (Mirken 1970: 690). Records also were relatively inexpensive and were available in music stores, as well as in other retail establishments such as jewelry and furniture stores, or by mail order (Valencic 1998).

The new generation of Slovenian-Americans had a greater desire to assimilate into the American culture and accept the American popular musical styles. Even though they were less likely to join or remain members of their parents’ immigrant organizations (Mladineo 1929), they still tended to associate with their fellow Slovenes and maintain their ethnic identity. The nature of their concerns, customs, and social activities can be inferred from the titles of recorded skits from the period: “Za Velikonočno nedeljo” (Choir Rehearsal for Easter Sunday), “Ob trgatvi” (Vintage Festival), and “Ples v skednju” (Dance in a Barn) by the Adrija Singers; “Radi kotla v keho” (From Still to Jail)⁶ and “Oj ta zakonski stan” (Marriage Joys) by the Jadran Male Chorus. As a social activity, ballroom dancing became very popular in the 1920’s, and the need for danceable music led to the rise of polka bands.

ANTON MERVAR

Anton Mervar (1885–1942) was born in Slovenia, where he learned the art of accordion making. He completed his apprenticeship at Lubas & Sohn in 1912 and immigrated to Cleveland where he worked as a laborer while manufacturing and repairing chromatic and diatonic button accordions in his spare time. He saved his money and by 1921 was able to build a shop on St. Clair Avenue. Besides housing his accordion business, the building served as a retail music store where he sold phonographs, records, and other musical instruments. In addition, Mervar acted as a consultant and talent scout for the record companies—Victor, Columbia, Okeh, and later Continental. Among those he recommended were the Hoyer Trio, the Udovich–Lausche duet, Louis Špehek, and Anton Štrukelj. The Hoyer Trio’s earliest Okeh recordings (made under the name “Simončič Brater”) and the Columbia reissues of them include on the labels the words “Harmonica izdelal A. Mervar” (Accordion made by A. Mervar). One of the Hoyer Trio’s recordings—“Samo da bo likof” (Everything for a Bargain)—is a comedy sketch which describes a visit by Matt Hoyer to Mervar’s Music Store for the purchase of an accordion. In it, members of Chicago’s Adrija Singers act the parts of Mr. and Mrs. Mervar. Application of techniques he learned in Europe gave Mervar’s accordions a distinct and unique sound which has not been duplicated. He and his wife died in an automobile accident in 1942. (Gostilna 1986)

⁶ Prohibition was in effect at this time.



Figure 4. Mervar accordions were used by the Hoyer Trio and Joe Kusar, as noted on some of their recordings (author's archives).

THE UDOVICH–LAUSCHE DUET AND DR. WILLIAM LAUSCHE

Among the most important artists of the period were Mary Udovich (1897–1965) and Josephine Lausche (1894–1990). Josephine was a member of the well-known Lausche (Lavše) family which included a United States senator, her brother Frank. The Milavec sisters, mentioned above, were her cousins. Josephine had a beautiful voice and began singing at an early age, encouraged by her mother. In 1913, she met Mary Udovich. They formed a duet, Josephine as the soprano lead and Mary as alto. They were accompanied by another of Josephine's brothers, William (1898–1967), on piano. William also acted as composer and arranger for the duet. He used elements of popular music—jazz, ragtime, and Broadway—in his arrangements of the Slovenian tunes, thus modernizing the sound, giving it its unique American character, and perhaps most importantly from the standpoint of record sales, making it palatable to other nationalities. Dr. Lausche—he was a dentist by profession—greatly influenced the development of the “Cleveland style” of Slovenian polka music. (Petkovsek and Tomsick 1989; Postotnik 1988)



Figure 5. Josephine Lausche, Mary Udovich, and William Lausche (Postotnik 1988).

The Udovich-Lausche duet made their first recordings for the Victor label on the recommendation of Anton Mervar, who arranged a four-day session at the Slovenian National Home on St. Clair Avenue in Cleveland in late November 1924.⁷ Four selections were recorded acoustically by the duet with accompaniment by William Lausche on piano.

Three years later the duet began recording for Columbia, which was now using the electrical process. Between December 1927 and August 1931 they recorded 56 selections, most of them accompanied by the Columbia studio orchestra. Their releases were typically of Slovenian folk songs arranged in polka or waltz tempo and embellished with instrumental interludes composed by Dr. Lausche. Some of their most popular have become standards in America. “Cingel-congel,” “Treba ni moje ljub’ce plavšati,” “Imam dekle v Tirolah,” “Kadar boš ti vandrat šu,” “Kaj mi nuca planinca,” and “Ta marelá” (Židana marelá) are examples.

The duet’s last recordings were made in 1942 at the Cleveland Recording Company studios, accompanied by the Lausche Trio which included William on piano and Johnny Pecon on accordion. Three tunes—one instrumental and two with vocals—were recorded at the session. They were released on the Continental label in 1948.

With his compositions and arrangements, Dr. Lausche contributed greatly to the acceptance of Slovenian music by other nationalities, as the following quotation by Victor Greene attests:

The single group that did the most by far to alter Old World music to make it more palatable not only for their own group in America but for Americans in general was the Slovenes [...] One Slovenian individual stands out in terms of leadership that helped establish Cleveland as a leading American old-time ethnic music center: the composer William Lausche. (Greene 1992: 173)

Greene also makes the point that whereas popular music influenced the development of ethnic music among the various nationalities, so also did ethnic folk music influence the development of American popular music, and may in fact have been the major factor in that process (Greene 1992: 9). Analysis of the degree to which Slovenian music contributed is beyond the scope of this paper, however considering Dr. Lausche’s influence and the later popularity of Frank Yankovic, there is bound to have been some impact.

Dr. Lausche’s influence extended far beyond his own time to later prominent polka artists like Frank Yankovic (who was a patient of his), Johnny Pecon (who grew up in a house owned by the Lausche family and received music lessons from Dr. Lausche), Eddie Habat, Kenny Bass, Johnny Vadnal, and others including present day artists, all of whom made use of Lausche’s compositions and/or style.

THE HOYER TRIO

Matija Arko (1891–1960) immigrated to America in 1904. Like Mervar, he studied the art of accordion-making in Europe. As a young man in America, he played the accordion at his family’s

⁷ This was the same session at which Augusta Danilova made her last recordings in America.

Figure 6. The Hoyer Trio
(Z., F. 1986).



tavern in Cleveland. It was there that a patron recognized his talent and taught him some songs, which Matija proceeded to embellish in his own unique style. He and his two half-brothers, Frank and Ed Simončič, formed an instrumental trio. Frank played banjo (an instrument used by jazz bands) and Ed played chromatic accordion and guitar. Matija, known as Matt, used his Slovenian house-name Hojer; the Simončič brothers Anglicized their name to Simms. Calling themselves the Hoyer Trio, they became very popular as they travelled throughout the Midwest playing polka music. They were affiliated with Anton Mervar and were recommended to the Victor label by him. Their first recordings were made acoustically at the November 1924 session in Cleveland. From 1924 until 1929 they made recordings for all three of the major labels—Columbia, Victor, and Okeh.⁸ In addition to their own, they accompanied Chicago's Adrija Singers on some of their recordings. In all, they released 100 selections. (Bricel 1985; Polka News 1988; Z., F. 1986)

Many of the selections they recorded were derived from Slovenian folk songs and dances, however a number of others were adapted from polkas, waltzes, and marches of other

⁸ Their earliest Okeh recordings were made by the acoustic process in 1925 under the artist name Simoncic Brater.

nationalities. Some examples include “Dunaj ostane Dunaj” from the Austrian march “Wien bleibt Wien” (Vienna Forever) by Johann Schrammel; “Kar imam to ti dam” from the Czech polka “Baruška” (Barbara) by F. Kovarik; “Šebelska koračnica” from the German “Bienenhaus Marsch” by Hermann Josef Schneider; and “Po valovik,” from “Over the Waves Waltz” by the Mexican composer Juventino Rosas. Many of Hoyer’s tunes in turn were adapted, retitled, and recorded by other polka bands in the post-war years. Some of these include “Coklarska koračnica,” recorded by Johnny Pecon as “Zip Polka;” “Pečlarska polka,” recorded by Frank Yankovic as “Strabane Polka;” “Ribenska polka,” recorded by Eddie Habat as “Strawberry Hill Polka;” and “Šebelska koračnica,” recorded by Johnny Vadnal as “Swing Shift Polka.”¹⁰

By 1930, the musician’s union was beginning to show its influence in the recording industry. Unwilling to join, Hoyer made no more recordings. Nevertheless, he continued to perform, with different sidemen, into the 1950’s.

Besides being musicians, the Simms brothers were professional boxers and Eddie was an actor as well. He had small parts in several motion pictures, usually portraying a boxer or gangster (Koch 1995).

ANTON SCHUBEL

Anton Schubel (Šubelj) (1899–1965) devoted his entire life to music. He was born in the small village of Rodice in Slovenia, began humming in tune to his mother’s singing before he could talk, and by age fourteen was directing a local choir. Because of his family’s poor financial circumstances, he was forced to leave school for employment after completing his primary education. However, because of his great talent he was, after passing entrance examinations, admitted to the Ljubljana Conservatory of Music in spite of his lack of secondary education. Beginning at age 24, he sang in the Slovenian National Opera of Ljubljana for four years. His desire was to make a trip to America for a concert tour, but lacking



Figure 7. Anton Schubel (Glasbena ... 1969).

⁹ Besides its music, the Slovenian language also became Americanized to a degree, as illustrated in this example by the word “pečlar,” which was derived from the English word “bachelor,” and used in place of the Slovenian word “samec.”

¹⁰ In most cases, the adaptations utilized a different interlude (second part) than the original, either newly composed or borrowed from another song.



Figure 8. Joe Perush, Rudy Deichman, and Tony Deichman (Victor ... 1929).

the funds, he entered state lotteries, and on his third attempt won enough to finance a trip. (Gobetz and Fugger 1968: 1–8)

Within a month of his arrival in 1928, he began giving a series of very successful concerts in New York and other cities across the country. He recorded 29 selections for Columbia between April 1928 and September 1929. He went back to Europe soon after but returned to America in July 1930, this time to stay. His next—and final—recording session for Columbia was in September 1930, at which he recorded four selections, among them one of his most popular, “Mamica moja.” From 1931 to 1945, Schubel sang with the Metropolitan Opera, but had no leading roles. After that, he worked as a talent scout for Carnegie Hall, served as director of the International Ballet in New York and as music director of many Slovenian and other singing societies. In 1940, he reorganized the Cleveland chorus Samostojna Zarja to become Glasbena Matica, which he directed until he retired in March 1965. He died on 6 June 1965. (Gobetz and Fugger 1968: 9–18, 36, 38, 39, 56–59)

DEICHMAN BROTHERS

Rudy Deichman (Dajčman) (1901–1997) was born in Joliet, Illinois, of immigrant parents. His first accordion was a diatonic button box, purchased with rent money owed to his parents, which he surreptitiously collected. When confronted, he threatened to throw himself into the river if he didn’t get an accordion, and his parents relented. He later showed his appreciation by paying off the mortgage on their house. At first, he played for immigrants’ parties, in bars,

and for weddings, sometimes not getting home for several days. He next played with a group known as the “Jolly Boys” for six years; other members of the band included his brother Tony (1905–1985) on banjo and Joe Perush (1886–1958) on clarinet and saxophone. Other ventures included teaching accordion, a music store, and a tavern business which he operated in partnership with Perush. The Deichman Brothers’ polka band made recordings from 1927 to 1934 for Victor and Columbia, and accompanied the Adrija Singers on a few of their recordings. They recorded several more numbers on the Victor label at their final session in 1940. Most of their recordings were of tunes that they and Perush composed. (Odorizzi 1990: 28–29)

OTHER ARTISTS

The Adrija Chorus of St. Stephen’s church in south Chicago, led by prof. Ivan Račić, sang in church and performed at many concerts (Saint ... ca. 1998). They made recordings on the Columbia, Victor, and Electra labels from 1927–1929. Many of their selections had religious, comic, or sentimental themes which included dialogue and singing. The Franciscan priest Fr. Odilo Hanjšek was involved with the choir and joined them on several of their religious recordings on the Electra¹¹ and Victor labels. Several of their recordings were accompanied by the Račić-Foys Orchestra.

The Jadran Male Quartet—three Croatians and a Slovenian—recorded folk songs, comic sketches, and re-enactments in the Slovenian and Croatian languages. The quartet recorded for Columbia and Victor from 1924 to 1929. Ivan Mladineo (second tenor) was the publisher of a Croatian weekly and an author who wrote on immigrant issues (Miller 1987). Rainer Hlacha (bass) was director of the Yugoslav Information Bureau (Claims ... 1918) and served as vice-chairman of the Americans of Jugo-Slav Lineage Executive Committee (The book ... ca. 1921). He also did some stage acting (Slokan 1978). Emilio Blažević (baritone), a music teacher, sang and recorded in various Slavic languages as a soloist and with other singers. For most of his Slovenian recordings he used the pseudonym Franjo Potočnik. Josip Batistić (first tenor) recorded as a soloist a large number of songs in Croatian, as well as a few in Italian.

Louis Špehek (1882–1966) emigrated from Slovenia in 1902 and settled in Cleveland in 1905. He was the owner of a fence-building company. His proficiency on the button accordion was noticed by Anton Mervar, who recommended him to Victor Records. His first recordings were made at the November 1924 session in Cleveland; his only other session was for Columbia in September 1926. Both of his sons, Louis Jr. and Frank, were accordionists; they joined him in playing for weddings, baptisms, and at lodges. (Spehek ... s.a.)

Louis Belle (tenor) and Frank Plut (baritone), both of Cleveland, performed in several operas under the direction of John Ivanush (Gobetz 1980: 414, 421–424). They recorded several songs as soloists and in duets for Columbia at a single session, ca. January 1931.

Some of the other artists who made recordings in that period, as listed in Spottswood’s discography, include John Germ, a tenor and accordionist; the “Domovina” mixed choir; Anton

¹¹ The group recorded six 12-inch 78 RPM records on the Electra label in 1928, all of them with religious themes. Spottswood lists only one of the six records.

Štrukelj's trio, consisting of accordion, violin, and banjo; Joža Podkluka and Nace Žgajnar, who recorded comic monologues and dialogues; and the Račič-Foys Orchestra.

CROSSING ETHNIC LINES

A practice engaged in by all three of the major record companies involved re-issuing recordings from one ethnic series in other ethnic series, usually with the song titles changed and a generic artist name substituted for the original. Thus, for example, a reissue entitled "Na adriatske bregu" by Kranjski harmonika duet in the Slovenian series on Columbia 25052-F was originally recorded and released as "Siljans Vagor" by Ragnar Sundquist and Eric Olson in the Scandinavian series on Columbia 22043-F. The ethnic line was crossed in the other direction as well. For example, "Slovenska polka" by the Hoyer Trio on OKeh 24056 was reissued as "Warszawska polka" by Orkiestra Harmonji in OKeh's Polish series; as "Knäpparpolka" by Svenska Kapellet in its Scandinavian series; and as "Vstuvij" by Armonika ir Gitara in its Lithuanian series. In other cases, recordings made by studio or European orchestras were issued simultaneously in several different ethnic series. The record companies benefitted from this practice in that they were able to increase the size of their ethnic catalogs at minimal cost, and in the process sell more records. That they were successful can be deduced from the fact that at least 60 of those records were issued in Slovenian series alone.

POLKA MUSIC TAKES OVER

A Bohemian tune composed in 1927 by Jaromir Vejvoda and originally entitled "Modranska polka" was recorded in Germany by Will Glahé and released in the United States on the Victor label in 1938 as the "Beer Barrel Polka." The same tune, with English lyrics added, was recorded on the Decca label in 1939 by the Andrews Sisters, who were popular music artists. Each of the two versions enjoyed enormous popularity and each sold in excess of a million records. Polka music had become acceptable outside ethnic circles.

FRANK YANKOVIC

In the mid to late 1920's, the record companies were experiencing a severe loss of sales revenue due to competition from radio broadcasts. Their problems were further compounded by the depression which began in 1929, a musician's strike which began in 1942, and material shortages which accompanied the United States' involvement in World War II. As a result, hardly any new Slovenian recordings were made by the major companies from 1930 until 1946. Frank Yankovic (1915–1998) had a polka band in the 1930's which appeared on radio shows in Cleveland. In 1937 or 1938, seeing a market for new recordings and with encouragement from Cleveland radio broadcaster Martin Antoncic, he approached the Columbia and Victor record companies in hopes of obtaining a contract, but was turned down by both. He decided to finance the recordings himself and produced two singles on his Yankee label. Still undecided



Figure 9. Frank Yankovic's 1944 recording band: Joe Miklavac, John Hokovar, Albert Naglitch, Yankovic (Barna 2001).



Figure 10. A copy of a Continental reissue from the 1944 session bearing Yankovic's autograph (author's archives).

about making a career of music, he had not joined the musician's union so, to avoid trouble, he left his name off the record labels, using instead Slovene Folk Orchestra. The records were taken to Mervar's music store; all 4,000 were sold in a matter of a few weeks. (Dolgan 1977: 47; Smodic 1991)

Yankovic recorded ten or twelve more selections for the Continental Record Company

in 1942, only eight of which were released, and not until 1947. Two more singles were self-produced by Yankovic in 1943 on his Joliet label under the name Joliet Jolly Jugoslavs.

And in February 1944, while on leave from the service during World War II, Yankovic and his band recorded 32 polkas and waltzes at the Cleveland Recording studio. They were released on his Jolly label. By now Yankovic had apparently joined the union, for his name appeared on his records for the first time. Shellac, which was used in the production of 78 RPM records, was in short supply during the war years. Unable to press more records and with Yankovic serving overseas, his manager sold all rights to the recordings to Don Gabor, owner of the Continental label. Gabor reissued the recordings on his label and was able to capitalize on Yankovic's later success by reissuing them again as 45 RPM singles and on LPs. Recordings from the 1943 session were also acquired and reissued by Gabor. (Dolgan 1977: 67–68) After the war ended, Yankovic was offered a contract with Columbia, the company that had earlier rejected him, and he began the most successful career of any Slovenian-American recording artist. Taking his lead from Dr. Lausche, he further modernized the Slovenian sound, changed his instrumentation to include two Solovoxes,¹² and developed a sound that would appeal to all ethnic groups and to fans of popular music as well.¹³

JOE KUSAR

Joe Kusar (1914–1985), a native of Euclid, Ohio, first picked up the button accordion at the age of five, took lessons from an older brother whose ability he quickly surpassed, and at age 12 began performing and composing (Kajzer 1980: 33). He formed a trio which performed on the radio in the 1930's (National ... s.a.). Beginning in 1942, he made recordings for the Continental Record Company. His ensemble, consisting of an instrumental trio and a female vocal duet, combined the styles of two earlier groups: the Hoyer Trio and the Udovich-Lausche duet. The ensemble's recordings were of Slovenian folk songs done in polka or waltz tempo with vocals by the duet, and instrumental polkas and waltzes composed by Kusar. His most popular release was the folk song "Pod mojem okencem," on Continental C-404.

CONCLUSIONS

To the early immigrants, recordings were a source of entertainment, a nostalgic reminder of homes and family members left far behind, a means to preserve their folk music and customs, and a medium for the performances of their talented artists. Their recordings are of great

¹² The Solovox is an electronic keyboard instrument which was manufactured by the Hammond Organ Co. from 1940 to 1948. It was capable of sounding only one note at a time. Yankovic's band had two: one for melody and one for harmony.

¹³ Yankovic had two hits which qualified as million-sellers: "Just Because" in 1948 and "Blue Skirt Waltz" in 1949. He travelled to Hollywood and recorded with popular music artist and movie star Doris Day in 1950.

historical value to the present and future generations, and therefore worthy of documentation and preservation.

Today, most of the early 78 RPM discs that are still extant are to be found in a few museums, libraries, Slovenian organizations, and private collections. These are not usually accessible to the general public. In 2003, the author and his collaborator, Richard Terselic, began collecting Slovenian 78 RPM records, not only those described in this paper, but imports and post-World War II issues as well. Our current estimate is that we have obtained copies of 82% of all that were available in the United States.

Although our project was started on an informal basis and mainly for our own amusement, we presently came to realize that what we were collecting was in danger of being lost. The vast majority of what we had obtained was from elderly people who were in the process of “downsizing,” or from their descendants who lacked interest, equipment to play the records, or adequate storage space for heavy and fragile items. In some cases, had we not accepted the records, they would have been discarded. With that situation in mind, our focus shifted to preservation. (Terselic and Debevec 2009: 195–200)

As part of the process, the recordings we obtained were digitized and audio restoration software was used to remove or attenuate noise and other audible defects; they were then burned to CDs. A discographical database was constructed and relevant details about the records we had obtained, and those we hadn’t, were entered. The data included primary and accompanying artist names, label name, catalog number, matrix number, date and place recorded, and CD number, if applicable. Scans were made of the record labels and were included in the database.

A determination of the number of Slovenian selections that were recorded in each of the first two periods described herein was made from information in our database. Since there are doubtlessly some recordings that have escaped notice, all of the numbers given here should be considered approximations. In the acoustic period (1923–1924), 221 selections by 26 primary and 3 accompanying artists were recorded, of which 194 were released. In addition, there were 28 studio recordings or recordings reissued from other ethnic series. In the second period (1925–1942), there were 428 selections recorded by 35 primary and 11 accompanying artists, of which 413 were released. In addition, there were 62 studio recordings and recordings reissued from other ethnic series. In both periods combined, there were 138 imported selections, some of which were reissued from other ethnic series. Most of those were acoustic recordings. There were 9 additional selections for which the origin could not be determined.

Slovenian music, even to the present time, has enjoyed popularity far out of proportion to the Slovenes’ share of the population. This phenomenon can be attributed to the talent and innovation of its leading artists, who combined elements of the old with elements of the contemporary to create an updated musical style—Slovenian music with an American accent—which appealed across ethnic lines. Just as the Slovenian people assimilated into the American culture without abandoning their ethnicity, so also did their music.¹⁴

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SLOVENSKI POSNETKI IZ AMERIKE PRED 2. SVETOVNO VOJNO

Glasba je imela v življenju slovenskih izseljencev v Združenih državah Amerike v začetku 20. stoletja pomembno vlogo. Priseljenci so iz domovine prinesli svoje tradicionalne pesmi in glasbila, med letoma 1913 in 1925 pa so se posnetki njihove glasbe ohranili na akustično posnetih gramofonskih ploščah slovenskih izvajalcev. Prva, ki je snemala slovenske pesmi v ZDA, je bila najverjetneje Milka Polancer Schneid, priseljenka s Hrvaške. Avgusta Danilova, brezposelna poklicna igralka iz Ljubljane, ki je prišla v ZDA iskat začasno zaposlitev, je v času svojega bivanja v ZDA posnela kar 54 pesmi in skečev. John Ivanush, »oče slovenske opere v

Ameriki,« pa je poleg komponiranja, orkestriranja in prirejanja glasbe vodil pevske skupine in pihalno godbo.

Naslednja generacija slovenskih izseljencev v ZDA je imela večjo željo po asimilaciji; na glasbo te generacije so vplivale različne oblike ameriške popularne glasbe, še posebej jazz. Glasbene elemente in inštrumentalizacijo omenjenih žanrov so predstavili izvajalci in skladatelji tako v novih priredbah tradicionalne glasbe kakor tudi v avtorskih skladbah; pri tem sta imela največji vpliv pianist in skladatelj dr. William J. Lausche ter harmonikar in vodja glasbene zasedbe Matt Hoyer. Rezultat je bila amerikanizirana oblika slovenske glasbe, ki je zaradi privlačnosti prestopila etnične meje. Vokalni duet Mary Udovich in Josephine Lausche ter inštrumentalna zasedba Hoyer trio sodijo med tiste izvajalce, ki so imeli z novim glasbenim slogom največji uspeh. Njihovi posnetki, ki so nastali tudi z novim, »električnim« načinom snemanja, niso bili v tistem času le zelo priljubljeni, ampak so vplivali tudi na prihodnje generacije slovenskih izvajalcev. Omenjene izvajalce je snemalnim podjetjem poleg drugih slovenskih glasbenikov priporočil Anton Mervar, izdelovalec harmonik in lastnik glasbene trgovine iz Clevelanda.

Čeprav so se slovenski posnetki, ki so nastali v tem obdobju, precej dobro prodajali, so nastanek in razvoj radijskih postaj in nekateri drugi dejavniki povzročili finančne težave velikih snemalnih podjetij; zato je bilo med letoma 1930 in 1946 posnetih zelo malo slovenskih plošč.

Uspeh skladbe »Beer Barrel Polka«, ki so prodali v milijonski nakladi, popularnost plesov v dvoranah, nastopi Franka Yankovica v radijskih oddajah in priljubljenost njegovih plošč, izdanih v samozaložbi, so bili ključni dejavniki za naraščajočo popularnost »polka glasbe« v poznih tridesetih letih 20. stoletja. Yankovic je po 2. svetovni vojni proces amerikanizacije slovenske glasbe še nadgradil, saj je razvil slog, ki ni bil privlačen le za druge etnične skupine, ampak za ljubitelje popularne glasbe nasploh.

Zaradi velike zgodovinske vrednosti navedenih posnetkov se avtor prispevka s svojim sodelavcem trudi za zbiranje, dokumentiranje in zaščito slovenskih plošč iz omenjenega obdobja.

Charles F. Debevec, Rush City, Minnesota, USA, cfdebevec@live.com