

## **PRESERVING OLD AMERICAN-SLOVENIAN RECORDED MUSIC**

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### **Introduction**

The Slovenians that immigrated to America in the late 1800s and early 1900s retained their love for the music of their homeland. Phonographs and 78 RPM records were available in both Slovenia and America by the early 1900s. It is not clear where the first Slovenian music recordings that became available in America were produced, in Slovenia or America. The early selections included folk, choral, and instrumental music.

In addition to presenting background information on early recording technology and Slovenian performers the primary intent is to describe the authors' efforts at preserving the early recordings.

### **The acoustical recording process and early American-Slovenian recordings**

Until 1926, sound recordings were made by the acoustic process. The performing artists sang or played into horns; up to four were used, depending on the number of performers. The horns were connected via metal tubes to a sound box, to which was attached a mica diaphragm that was vibrated by the sound waves entering the box. The vibrating diaphragm moved a stylus which cut an undulating spiral groove in a revolving wax-coated disc. The process was marginally adequate for singers and a few accompanying instruments, but was not suitable for large orchestras. Virtually all of the Slovenian records made during the acoustic era were recorded by soloists or a handful of musicians.

The first Slovenian language records made in the United States, as far as we are able to determine, were recorded on 10 February 1913, for the Columbia label. Four selections were recorded on that date and three more four days later. The performing artist was the contralto Milka Polancer Schneid, a Croatian immigrant, who between 1912 and 1921 made recordings in several languages including Slovenian, Romanian, Slovak, Serbo-Croatian, and Bulgarian.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard K. Spottswood, *Ethnic Music on Records; A Discography of Ethnic Recordings Produced in the United States, 1893 to 1942*, vol. 5 (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 2958–62. Most of the recording dates in this article are taken from this source, from vol. 2, 1021–43; vol. 5, 2958–62.

The production of sound recordings by Slovenian artists expanded rapidly during the early 1900s as the two major recording companies, Columbia and Victor, recognized the substantial ethnic market. Milka Polancer Schneid, as Mila Polančeva, accompanied soprano Augusta Danilova on the first of Augusta's recordings, made in January 1917. Six folk songs were recorded at the session. Augusta was a stage actress, well-known in her native Slovenia. When public interest in stage acting declined due to the introduction of silent movies, she sought temporary employment in America, leaving in Europe her husband (also an actor) and five of her six children. Her adult son Ralph Danilo accompanied her to New York in 1913. Among her acquaintances in America was the Ljubljana-born opera singer Rudolf Trošt. He had made recordings for Columbia and, since Augusta had also trained as a singer, helped her obtain a contract. She made several recordings for Columbia and later Victor. Some of her recordings, such as "Vsi so prihajali" (They all gathered), "Regiment po cesti gre" (A regiment is going down the road), and "Na planinah solnce sije" (The sun is shining over the mountains) were well-known folk songs. Others, like "Moj mili kraj" (My sweet country) and "Na tujih tleh" (In a foreign land) expressed her longing for the old country. Some of her spoken recordings humorously described life in the new country: "Kranjica v Ameriki" (A Slovenian girl in America) and "Micka na šrauf v Coney Island" (Micka on the wheel in Coney Island). All of these no doubt had a strong appeal to other Slovenian immigrants.

The other Slovenian recording artists at that time were somewhat less prolific. Among them was the button accordionist Frank Lovšin, who usually recorded solo, but also accompanied Augusta Danilova on a few of her recordings. Rudolph Perdan and Jeanette Perdan, a father-and-daughter team from Cleveland, Ohio, recorded eight Slovenian Christmas carols in 1924, which were reported to have enjoyed large sales.<sup>2</sup>

The introduction of radio broadcasting in the years following World War I spelled disaster for the record companies as the public taste moved away from disc recordings. Beginning in 1923, Columbia went through a series of sales, mergers, and bankruptcies before being acquired in 1938 by the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Victor was acquired by the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) in 1929. In spite of their problems, both companies continued to produce ethnic recordings.

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<sup>2</sup> "Columbia reports large sales of Slovenian folk songs just made by Rudolph Jeanette Perdan (sic), who resides at East 185th Street, Cleveland." Presto, 24 January 1925; [www.arcade-museum.com/presto/PRESTO-1925-2009/index.php?page\\_no=04&frame=PRESTO-1925-2009-04.pdf](http://www.arcade-museum.com/presto/PRESTO-1925-2009/index.php?page_no=04&frame=PRESTO-1925-2009-04.pdf).

### **The electric process**

In 1925, Western Electric introduced the so-called “electric process,” which allowed for the use of microphones, electronic amplification, and electromagnetic recording heads, resulting in a much-improved product and the ability to successfully record large orchestras. With the new process came a new generation of Slovenian-American recording artists, among which are numbered many of the most popular and best-remembered.

The vocal duet of Mary Udovich and Josephine Lausche had its origins in Cleveland. Josephine, born in 1893, was a member of the now-famous Lausche family. Blessed with a great talent and encouraged by her mother, she took up singing at an early age. In 1913, she met Mary Udovich and they began singing together, Josephine as the soprano lead and Mary on alto. The duo was joined by Josephine’s brother William, who provided accompaniment on piano as well as compositions and arrangements for the duet’s repertoire. His arrangements included elements of classical music and contemporary jazz, which modernized the tunes and broadened their public appeal. A dentist by profession, he was very prolific as a composer of Slovenian polkas and waltzes, many of which were (and continue to be) recorded by other musicians. He is considered the father of the “Cleveland style” of polka music. The three made their first two records late in 1924 for the Victor label. Three years later the Udovich-Lausche duet began recording for Columbia. Between December 1927 and August 1931 they produced twenty-eight singles, accompanied by William on piano and the Columbia studio orchestra.

Matt Hoyer, born Matija Arko in Sodražica, Slovenia in 1891, emigrated to America in 1904. The name Hojer was his family’s Slovenian house-name. In 1919 Matt and his brothers Frank and Ed Simončič, with their names Americanized to Hoyer and Simms, formed the Hoyer Trio. The group became very popular in the Midwest. Anton Mervar, the Cleveland accordion maker and music shop proprietor with whom they were affiliated, convinced Victor Records to record the trio. Their first single was recorded in 1924. Additional recordings were made until 1929 on the Victor, Columbia, and Okeh labels. Many of Hoyer’s melodies have been performed and recorded by other bands. His most popular was perhaps “Dunaj ostane Dunaj” (Vienna forever), adapted from a German march.

Selected singers of the Adrija Choir from St. Stephen’s Church, Chicago, made recordings for Columbia and Victor between 1927 and 1929, and a series of self-produced twelve-inch discs on the Electra label, c. 1928. Their recordings covered religious, comic, and sentimental themes and most included dialogue. The Hoyer Trio provided musical accompaniment on some of their recordings. The Jadran Male Quartet recorded folk songs and comic sketches in the Slovenian and Croatian

languages. Anton Schubel (Šubelj), who later sang with the Metropolitan Opera, worked as a talent scout for Carnegie Hall, and served as a music director of several singing societies, recorded Slovenian folk and art songs for Columbia between 1928 and 1930.

Very few new recordings of Slovenian music were made by the record companies between 1931 and 1938. Frank Yankovic, at the beginning of his long and amazingly successful career, approached Columbia and Victor in 1938 seeking a recording contract, but was turned down by both companies. Undaunted, he self-produced several successful recordings between 1938 and 1944 before acquiring a contract with Columbia Records in 1946. His story has been thoroughly documented elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning in the early 1940s, the diatonic button accordionist Joe Kusar made recordings for Continental Records with his trio. The selections he recorded, and was successful in selling, were folk songs with vocals by a female duet and instrumental polkas and waltzes that he composed. His music may be considered the bridge between the folk music of the twenties and the danceable polka music of the forties and after.

Other polka bands that followed Yankovic's lead and produced Slovenian recordings on major labels include Johnny Pecon, Georgie Cook, Kenny Bass, Eddie Habat, Johnny Vadnal, and Frank Zeitz. Significantly, all began their careers in Cleveland.

#### **Addressing the task of preserving early American-Slovenian recorded music**

The early 78 RPM records were a composite, including a high percentage of shellac, quite brittle and subject to wear through use of heavy tone arms and metal playback needles. The records became increasingly brittle with age. Unless care was exercised in cleaning the discs and using only sharp needles, the quality of sound reproduction degraded rapidly with use. Columbia introduced the more durable vinyl 33 1/3 RPM LP record in 1948 and RCA Victor introduced the 45 RPM disc the following year. Lighter tone arms and higher quality gem stone needles reduced the wear problem. Thus began the gradual phase-out of the 78 RPM record, production of which ceased in 1958.

In the 1990s the authors independently arrived at personal concerns that the earliest Slovenian music recorded in America might be

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Dolgan, *The Polka King: The life of Frankie Yankovic* (Cleveland: Dillon-Liederbach, 1977); and Bob Dolgan, *America's Polka King: The real story of Frankie Yankovic and his music* (Cleveland: Gray & Company, 2006) are two examples.

lost, based upon the fragile nature of the discs, changing musical tastes and aging of the generations that had acquired the records. In 2004, the authors began communicating about their shared interest in preservation and initiated a collaborative effort to expand their personal collections of the oldest records and preserve them by transfer to the more durable compact disc (CD) format. Spottswood suggests there were at least 600 among the oldest Slovenian selections recorded on 78 rpm discs.<sup>4</sup>

The authors prepared articles for American-Slovenian publications noting their interest in receiving donations or purchasing records for transfer to the CD format. Their ultimate goal was to develop a collection that could be shared (without charge) with museums, universities, and Slovenian memorabilia collections that would agree to preserve the recordings and make them available to interested persons. While the effort has been quite successful in accumulating an extensive collection, a crucial problem was confronted related to sharing CDs beyond their personal collections, namely American and international copyright laws.

Copyrights (abbreviated as “rights”), like patents, provide to a creator of a musical selection a measure of artistic and economic protection. Copyright laws have changed from the early 1900s to the present, a discussion of which is referenced.<sup>5</sup> Copyrights can be granted to the composer of an original musical work, an arranger of such a work, and the performing artist of the initial recording in a mechanical or electronic format. Copyright laws exist at both federal and state levels in America. As a result, it is difficult to establish the degree to which a given work retains protection.

While rights applying to some of the older musical works have expired or are simply unable to be confirmed as remaining in force, others—particularly those associated with the most popular artists such as Yankovic—can be ascertained. Rights to the latter were acquired by commercial organizations. A complex problem exists related to the existence of rights; the authors have sought the help of American-Slovenian members of the U.S. Congress in seeking means to permit sharing CD copies of recordings for preservation purposes. The same copyright problem is shared among preservation-oriented persons dealing with types of old music other than ethnic, including early American-origin jazz.

Beyond that of the authors, other preservation-oriented collections exist of old Slovenian music including: that of the Cleveland Slovenian-Style Polka Hall of Fame, SNPJ (Slovenian National Benefit Society) Heritage Center, and Slovenian Women’s Union of America Museum.

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<sup>4</sup> Spottswood 1990, vol. 2, 1021–43; vol. 5, 2958–62.

<sup>5</sup> Tony Kent, *Sound Recordings and Copyright*, [www.btinternet.com](http://www.btinternet.com).

While the National Library in Slovenia may also share an interest in such preservation, a program to do so does not appear to have been established.

There are also large record collections containing old Slovenian selections in private hands.

In addition to working toward securing a favorable ruling or change in the U.S. copyright laws that would permit sharing copies of our private collections (in CD format) with the types of institutions mentioned earlier, the authors continue efforts at acquiring additional selections.

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