

## **The Future of European Ethnic Folk Music-and Particularly Polkas-in America: Research Perspectives**

**Richard A. Terselic and Charles F. Debevec**

### **Introduction**

European ethnic folk music probably arrived in the New World with the arrival of seafaring crew members and other early travelers. Each successive wave of ethnic groups from Europe added their own distinctive folk music.

Some European folk music being performed in the North America remains substantially true to authentic versions brought over by early immigrants. Musicologists have combed the countryside of North America in search of such music, which in some cases, has been better preserved here than in its country of origin. Occasionally, music forms that have “morphed” have been restored by dedicated individuals who were generations removed from initial arrival of the music. Clete (Cletus) Bellin is an example of such a dedicated individual.

Bellin, who recently died, was of Belgian Walloon heritage and grew up in eastern Wisconsin, adjacent to a Czech heritage community. In the 1980s, he attended performances of touring musical groups from the Czech Republic that performed authentic folk music. He was greatly impressed, and observed that it differed from the music played by Bohemian bands in his area. Bellin, committed to authentically reproducing the music, formed an orchestra and even learned the Czech language well enough to sing in it at his performances.<sup>1</sup>

Performance of European folk music in America, as in the Bellin example, has been subject to evolution and “morphing” as a consequence of artistic, situational and commercial influences.

Artistically inspired changes can occur as both a reflection of freedom of expression and of creativity. Among situational factors are the dynamics associated with the mixing of ethnic groups living in close proximity to one another. Thus the violin, common in Finnish music, was included in upper Midwestern German music where Finnish and German immigrants lived in mixed communities. The influence of commercial factors also played a role. Performers focused their music on what would

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard March, “Polka: Wisconsin’s State Dance,” [www.pbs.org/riverofsong/music/e1-polka.html](http://www.pbs.org/riverofsong/music/e1-polka.html); accessed 28 June 2011.

attract attendees willing to pay to attend their performances and purchase their recordings.

From a commercial standpoint, an important question is to what extent there is a market for performances of authentic European folk music in North America today. Both preserved and modified European ethnic music from North America has had an impact in Europe. Cleveland-style Slovenian style polka music was brought to Slovenia in the 1970s and enjoyed considerable commercial success. Tamburitza music had substantially died out in Croatia by the end of World War II, but was reinvigorated there by Americans and Canadians, in whose countries the music had been preserved and further developed.

What follows represents the authors' personal perspective and projection on the possible future of this category of European-origin music.

### **Narrowing the genre of musical interest**

The term European folk music could encompass, for example, the flute music played by Basque shepherds living in Idaho and klezmer music performed in Jewish communities. We will narrow our coverage to address the specific area of interest to the authors to what is generally referred to as "polka" music, specifically early twentieth-century American-Slovenian. However, within "polka" we will include waltzes, related specialty tempo music found in Polish, German, Czech, and Slovak music, and associated novelty music. We will exclude classical and choral music.

Technically, the term "polka" defines a style of dance that probably originated as a simplified adaptation of the Polish *krakowiak* by unknown Czechs. The music associated with the dance was referred to as polka music. It was introduced in Prague in the 1830s, reached Paris in 1840s, and quickly spread throughout Europe and other parts of the world, reaching the U.S. by 1850.<sup>2</sup> The dance grew rapidly in popularity and national variations developed of both the style of dancing and related music.

The waltz, which probably developed from the *laendler*, a German folk dance, predated the polka by a few years, and became prominent before the end of the eighteenth century. The waltz became very popular (and scandalous) in Europe in the following century, with many being written by the Viennese composers Joseph Lanner, Johann Strauss I, and Johann Strauss II.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Keil, Angeliki V. Keil, and Dick Blau, *Polka happiness* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992), 10–11.

<sup>3</sup> Percy A. Scholes, *The concise Oxford dictionary of music*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 617; also see: Keil (1992), 13.

### Slovenian folk and polka music

Slovenia is a country with a population of about two million. It was first geographically defined as a political entity as a republic within Yugoslavia following World War I, and achieved nationhood in 1991.

Musicologists have identified distinctly Slovenian folk music with origins dating back hundreds of years, including polka-like tunes. Other types of music, namely, choral and classical, have existed and were highly developed. No doubt, as the Bohemian-origin polka swept throughout Europe, it left its mark on folk music in Slovenia.

Substantial numbers of immigrants from Slovenia began arriving in America during the middle of the nineteenth century. They brought with them both musical performance skills and a familiarity with old melodies. Important among the instruments they played at taverns and social gatherings was the diatonic button accordion.

By the 1910s, phonograph records and reproduction equipment were available and affordable to the general public. Among the first Slovenian folk music phonograph records available in America were those recorded in February 1913, and performed as they would have been in the old country, by Milka Polancer Schneid,<sup>4</sup> a Croatian immigrant.

Matija Arko immigrated to Cleveland, Ohio in 1904. He played the chromatic button accordion with considerable skill and a unique style, featuring polkas, waltzes, and folk dances. He formed a trio that played at social gatherings in the Cleveland and surrounding areas. Recognizing the growing market for phonograph records during the 1920s and the growing size of the Slovenian immigrant community, he made his first recordings for the Victor Talking Machine Company in 1924. Initially, his recordings drew upon a repertoire of folk songs he recalled from his boyhood. Given the popularity of jazz music in America, Arko (who used the professional name Hoyer) began to adapt the authentic folk music style to reflect the jazz influence. He and others also composed new selections evidencing that influence. Their modernized style was accepted by fans and was commercially successful.

Additional performers, composers and arrangers joined Hoyer during the 1920s and 1930s, such as Dr. William J. Lausche, whose jazz-influenced music contributed to the continued evolution of American-Slovenian polka music from that brought from Slovenia to one having a

---

<sup>4</sup> Richard K. Spottswood, *Ethnic music on records; A discography of ethnic recordings produced in the United States, 1893 to 1942* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 2958.

distinct American character.<sup>5</sup> The piano accordion progressively replaced the diatonic button-box as the choice of performers. A similar evolution occurred in the polka music of other ethnic groups in America.

For example, while the polka had reached urban areas of Poland, as interest spread throughout Europe in the mid-1800s, it had not caught on among the large numbers of the immigrants in America who came from rural areas. Notwithstanding, by the 1930s, a distinctly Polish polka style was evident in immigrant population centers in New England and westward to the Chicago area. Early artists performing such music included Edward Krolkowski, Ignacy Podgorski, and Brunon Kryger.<sup>6</sup> A similar evolution of a distinctly American polka style could also be found among other groups, such as German, Czech and Slovak. Other folk music similarly subject to evolution in America included Italian, Irish, and Scandinavian.

Polka music among the various European ethnic groups grew dramatically in popularity through the 1940s-50s, and became commercially successful for those performing it. However, as observed by Bellin,<sup>7</sup> the styles diverged greatly from the authentic forms first brought to this country.

Immigration from Europe was drastically restricted in the late 1920s, and by the 1960s, European heritage Americans were generations removed from the forms of folk music first brought to this country by their ancestors. With the help of performers such as Frankie Yankovic, American-Slovenian style music played a leading role in the commercial polka music field. However, from a numbers standpoint, many more German, Polish, and other European immigrants lived in North America who could be called upon for support.

Beginning in the late 1950s, polka music began to suffer a decline in interest as the music of Elvis Presley and other contemporary American performers captured the interest of the public.

Ironically, two artists in Slovenia helped to spark a revival of interest in polka music in America beginning in the late 1960s. The first was Slavko Avsenik, leader of a five-piece brass band who, with his brother Vilko composed many beautiful and sophisticated melodies that were subsequently performed in the U.S. by Slovenian and other polka bands. The band's recordings enjoyed even greater popularity in Europe, and by

---

<sup>5</sup> Tony Petkovsek and Joey Tomsick, "Dr. William J. Lausche," *The Polka News*, 20 December 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Victor Greene, *A passion for polka: Old-Time ethnic music in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 192-97.

<sup>7</sup> March, *ibid.*

1983 had sold in excess of thirty million copies.<sup>8</sup> The other artist, Lojze Slak, reintroduced the diatonic button accordion and performed compositions with music and lyrics that emulated folk songs.<sup>9</sup> His recordings sold well in Slovenia and also in America. At the same time, his American counterpart, Frank Novak, began composing Cleveland-style polkas and waltzes for the button accordion, issuing records, and taking on students<sup>10</sup>. Numerous instruments were sold and several “button box” clubs were formed.<sup>11</sup> Established polka bands added the button accordion and included at least a few performances on it in their repertoires. Polka festivals, polka tours, and dance clubs followed.

A high level of interest in polka music persisted through the 1980s but has since declined as the audiences, consisting mainly of second- and third-generation Americans, aged or died. On the other hand, regional pockets of keen interest and activity remain today. There has also been new support for polka music in the growing Hispanic communities where a distinctive “Tex-Mex” polka style developed, probably influenced by contact with Czechs and Germans in the Southwest.

While the authors are unaware of surveys or other measurements of current interest in polka music in America, there is evidence suggesting that it continues to decline overall, but, as noted above, remaining pockets of continued interest and support exist in:

- Polish heritage settlements in New England, Pennsylvania, and Illinois.
- German heritage settlements in Pennsylvania, southern Minnesota, and Wisconsin.
- Slovenian heritage settlements in western Pennsylvania, northern Ohio (particularly Cleveland), Illinois, Wisconsin, and northern Minnesota.
- Czech heritage settlements in Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Texas.

---

<sup>8</sup> “The Avsenik story—30 years of music,” *Ameriška domovina*, 12 August 1983; also see: Tony Petkovsek, “The Remarkable Story of Slavko Avsenik,” *Ameriška domovina*, 28 November 1996.

<sup>9</sup> “Lojze Slak—The man and his music,” *Ameriška domovina*, 5 August 1970.

<sup>10</sup> Cecilia Dolgan, “Button box clubs in the United States,” *Slovenski koledar 1986*, 193–98.

<sup>11</sup> Cecilia Dolgan, *Slovenian national directory*, 1st ed. (Cleveland, OH: United Slovenian Society, 1984). The first edition lists thirty-six button box clubs throughout the United States. The second edition (1990) lists 40.

**Conclusion**

A question of interest to those with interest in European folk music in America involves its prospects for continued commercial success. Given the overall decline in commercial interest in such music, it is the conclusion of the authors that the prospects are low, though not zero. For example, the Duquesne University Tamburitzans, whose music and dance performances cannot be categorized as “polka” but draw primarily upon eastern and southern European themes, have remained popular over more than seventy years. Similarly, variations on traditional European-origin styles have experienced considerable commercial success, as evidenced by the Tex-Mex genre.

The future level of popularity of European folk music in North America cannot be predicted. As with other types of music, it could benefit from renewed interest from persons seeking entertaining alternatives to what the commercial music industry offers. On analogy with the current popularity of family genealogy research, a renewed interest could develop in this and future generations in the music of their ethnic ancestors.