

The History of Slovene Music In Winnipeg and the Zvon Singers

By Dennis Dekleva

Slovenian history is rich in music culture. Early Byzantine historic sources referred to the Slovenes as people who were more familiar in making musical instruments than of instruments of war. This holds true in a country that boasts more musicians per capita than most countries in the world.

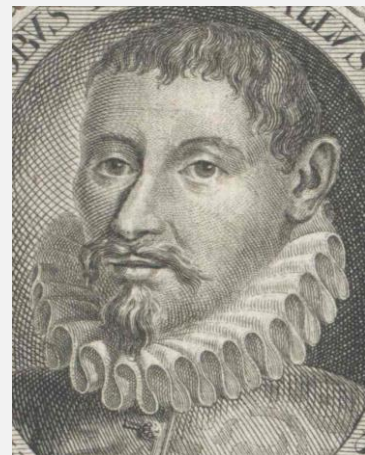
The history of modern Slovenian music can be traced back to the 5th century when Christianity spread throughout Slovenia. As Slovenes were converted to the Catholic Church, so too came a rich tradition of sacred music from Renaissance period featuring the most famous Slovene composer, Jacobus Gallus (1540-? Jakob Petelin). Secular music was becoming a popular alternative to the sacred music culture of villages in rural Slovenia with the practice of folksong harmony singing rich in culture and uniqueness with traditional songs learned and passed on from generation to generation as well as the introduction of the first diatonic accordions to accompany voices in minstrel style. Music in Slovenia is rich in many genres today.

Folksong Singing

Harmonic singing is a deep-rooted tradition in Slovenia, and is at least three-part singing (four voices), while in some regions even up to eight-part singing featuring many vocal ensembles throughout Slovenia. Slovenian folk songs, thus, usually resounds soft and harmonious, and are very seldom in minor.



Veseli Prijatelji at 2013 Folklorama. Last appearance of Vlado Smrekar before his passing in 2017. Andy Slejko and his two children Erica (guitar) and Evan (trombone). Also Dennis Dekleva (baritone), Mark Lebar (clarinet) and Stan Časar (accordion)



Jacobus Gallus



Slovene Style Button Box Accordion



Our Lady of Lourdes R.C. Church

Musical tradition was carried over to Winnipeg by our early immigrants to Winnipeg. Leading this passion were people like **Tony Pikel** and **Slavko Slejko** who grew up singing in the Catholic churches.

The opening of our Slovenian church, Our Lady of Lourdes in 1963, now brought the need of

presenting a music liturgy in the Slovene vernacular with these two men leading the way. As in their villages they were our first leaders in Our Lady of Lourdes church choir.

Traditional folk singing was a normal occurrence at most social gatherings. From here starts our passionate journey to the origins of the Zvon Singers.

According to Byzantine sources, Slovenians knew more of musical instruments than of instruments of war.



Picture of first Folklorama group in 1970?
1st Row: Lojze Stegne, Alojz Lesica, Miha Zobarič
2nd row: Bernarda Stegne, Andrej Kostanjevič, Zalka Čekada, Vlado Smrekar, Margaret Slejko, Tony Pikel, Brigita Babič, Joe Košmrlj, Ivanka Remic, Lojska Slejko, and Slavko Slejko



About 1970?
Lojska Slejko, Ivanka Remic, Brigita Babič, Alojz Lesica, Margaret Slejko, Zalka Čekada, Bernarda Stegne

The early years of Slovenian Pavilion in Winnipeg



In the 1970's
1st row: Lojska Slejko, Ivanka Remic, Lojska Rakar, Zalka Čekada, Margaret Slejko, Vladka Mohorič
2nd row: Vlado Smrekar, Slavko Slejko, Tony Pikel, Miha Zobarič, and Father Joseph Mejač

The opening years of the Slovenian Folklorama Festival Pavilion in Winnipeg first brought a variety of music vocal ensemble settings in order to present our musical culture and traditions to our new country. At first a mixed chorus of men and women contributed to sharing our Slovene folksongs. This was encouraged by our pastor, **Father Joseph Mejač** who became our biggest supporter and the first mayor of our Slovenian pavilion for Folklorama (see pictures). In the 1970's instrumental accompaniment was first provided by another immigrant adept at playing the Slovene button box accordion, **Alojz Lesica**, who enjoyed accompanying our folk singers during this time. The importance of the button box should not be understated in the presentation of Slovene polka and waltz dance styles. It was an important addition to the texture of the Slovene folksong.



Starting from top left corner clockwise: Miha Zobarič, Vlado Smrekar, Slavko Slejko, Joe Pinter, Tony Pikel, Joe Košmrj]

The early years of Slovenian Pavilion in Winnipeg

Soon after additional members were added, Joe Košmrj and Joe Pinter. Alojz soon left Winnipeg and moved away to Ontario leaving the need for a new accordion player. The group looked to Yugoslav descendant, Frank Muller, to accompany them and added guitar player Skeeter Dyck to round out the group. Truly the pure sound of 4-part harmonies characteristic of this group was awesome. With the sweet 1st tenor voice of Vlado Smrekar to the deep lush bass voice of Slavko. This was an authentic and very traditional representation of the Slovenian harmony singing.

Each member had arrived to Canada years earlier bringing with them their own "hometown" experience to the group, uniquely contributing to the overall success of Zvon.



First performances of Zvon in the mid 70's?

With Frank Muller on the button box

Our Beloved Zvon Singing Together Again



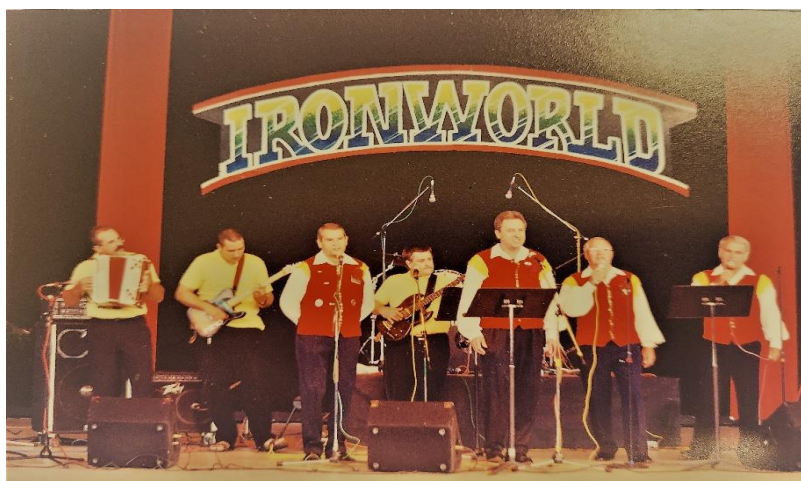
Zvon in the 1970's?

The advent of the 1980's

The start of the 1980's saw the addition of 3 new members, namely home-grown instrumental talent. These three young boys joined and solidified the Zvon group. Andy Slejko was just 16 years old, but could he play the button box! Dennis Dekleva was just beginning his education at the School of Music, University of Manitoba, having grown up singing in church and playing the baritone and participating in varieties of music in high school. With the encouragement of his father Miha, Richard Zobarič was taken by the guitar and at young age of 13 years old was providing the percussive harmonic backbeat of Slovenian dance music to the group. It was the purpose of these three to provide that "Lojze Slak" sound that Zvon would emulate. (cont'd on the right)

Feature solo songs demonstrated the talent of Zvon such as: **Čebelar** sung by Vlado's beautiful tenor voice; **Raj Pod Triglavom** sung by Miha still reminiscing of his homeland and **Sezidal Sem** sung by Slavko. All their voices alone were very polished and mature voices with years of experience. With the addition of our three new instrumentalists, the Zvon group matured to greater musical polish.

Some highlights, clearly, was having privilege of participating in the folklorama festivals yearly. The trip in 1999 to Eveleth, Minnesota (IronWorld Festival) to share their music with our Slovene neighbors was certainly a memorable trip which included the excitement of witnessing a Catholic mass Father John Perkovic, very instrumental in the first compositions of the **polka mass** incorporating Slovene hymns in the polka/waltz style excitedly witnessed by singers.



From left to right: Andy Slejko (acc.), Richard Zobarič (guitar), Vlado Smrekar, Dennis Dekleva (bass), Miha Zobarič, Slavko Slejko, and Joe Pinter



Our Zvon Singers were coming of age now and it was important to leave a legacy which became the production of the first and only authentically recorded CD entitled, "**Imigrantovo Domotožje**". The CD included favorite songs sung by the group over the years and included the CD title track of a collection of folksong melodies with lyrics arranged by Miha vocalizing, "**how, sadly, they miss their homeland of Slovenian, but Canada has captured them and their hearts with new love for their new homeland**".

Sadly, only one member survives of the singing group, with Joe Pinter the last surviving member. There was never a Slovenian group like this represented in Canada and we're not certain there will ever be again. On a positive note, their influence on the next generation of musicians is evident with new groups arising like the Triglav Ensemble and Veseli Prijatelji.

D.D.