

»POPOVICH BROTHERS«: TAMBURITZA IN THE LIFE OF SERBIAN COMMUNITY IN CHICAGO

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»Popovich Brothers« is the best known and the most recognized Serbian tamburitza orchestra in America. Having in view its rich history, this paper will analyze the cultural and social significance of tamburitza as an ethnic symbol in preservation and demonstration of Serbian cultural heritage and ethnic identity of our emigrants in their own ethnic community as well as in the society in broader terms.

Serbian emigrants appear in Chicago, as in other American cities at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, when they established their first colonies. One of them sprang in South Chicago, small industrial town, nine miles from the center where a lot of foundries, steel-works and other plants were situated. Today, the South Chicago is the industrial part of the city. In 1898, the colony was inhabited mostly by people from Lika and then by emigrants from Bania, Bosnia, Banat and Boka.¹ It was situated in the vicinity of Carnegie Steel Co. where most of the emigrants worked, and along the Green Bay Street. The Serbian orthodox parish was established there in 1904, followed by numerous emigrants' organizations: benefit lodges, singing societies, folklore groups and other cultural societies, sports clubs and political organizations.

Today, it is a »community of 1100 families in South Chicago who call themselves Serbian-Americans. They work in steel-mills, drive trucks, teach school, play tennis and golf, watch television and go to church on Sunday. But what connects them to their family, church and community and provides the deepest expression of their identity is their traditional Serbian music and the Popovich Brothers have been constant source of that music for the past 50 years.«² That's why I analyze the significance and importance of tamburitza in the life of Serbian ethnic group in America, based on the rich history of Serbian tamburitza orchestra »Popovich Brothers« and its activities mainly in Serbian colony in South Chicago.

It is very difficult to determine the date of the first appearance of tamburitza in America. There is very little evidence that it was played before 1900. First known written evidence is a catalogue of its manufacture dating from 1895.³ Although the immigrants from South-slave countries from the end of 19th century already had their established ethnic communities, represented by the national and religious organizations in a lot of places in America, the tambura music still wasn't heard. At that time,

¹ L. Pejović, The survey of our emigrants, Chicago 1939, 18-22.

² From the prospectus for the film »The Popovich Brothers of South Chicago« (1977).

³ W. Kolar, A History of the tambura II, The Tambura in America, Pittsburgh 1975, I.

people sang without music at celebrations, festivities and in special occasions, or with music produced by »gusle«, flute or »dvojke«. But at the beginning of the 20th century we already find much more scattered evidence about the existence of tambura players. The data mostly refer to the big cities and urban centers as Chicago, Pittsburgh, New York, Youngstown and others.⁴ With time, the tambura groups became the obligatory part of regular activities in all Serbian halls and homes, in ethnic organizations and groups. The tambura players were everywhere where there were our emigrants. That's how tenths of tambura orchestras originated. Some of them existed just for the short time while the others existed for decades.

It should be stressed here that tamburitza is popular as instrument not only among Serbs but among other South-slave peoples as well, for example among Croats, but in America it is primarily related to immigrants by origin from the areas under the Austro-Hungarian authority.

The development of tambura in America had its ups and downs with its culmination during seventies, when America searches for roots and discovers ethnicity. At that time the popularity of the »Popovich Brothers« also reaches its culmination.

Eli, Adam, Tad, Peter and Marko Popovich belong to the first generation of Serbs born in America, their parents being the immigrants from Lika. They grew up in little Serbian communities around the mines of Colorado and Nevada, without any Serbian churches or organizations. Even then, the children were brought up in Serbian spirit. Their mother about Serbian customs taught them and holidays, as well as to read and write, while their father, although illiterate, discovered to them the beautiful music he learned as a child in the »old country«. Although he himself wasn't very prone to music, he played »samica« or »danguba« a little. The simple beauty of these instruments' sound completed the old melodies he sang.

This is how Adam Popovich describes those moments:

During the fall and winter evening, and after a hard day's work at the mines my father would gather us – children to his bedside where by the light of a coal oil lamp, he sang beautiful songs to us. »Tiho noći« was the first song we learned from him.⁵

In 1924 Eli, Adam and Marko start to learn playing tambura with famous tambura player George Kacher and than became members of the tambura group, of about fifty children who were taught beside by Kacher, also by Milan Vurdelja.⁶ At that time they were all ready experienced and very esteemed tambura players. This group soon fell apart and brothers established their »Tambura Orchestra«. They had a special national costume for the performance, the one that resembled the Montenegrin national costume and their repertoire included, besides the Serbian music, marches, overtures and popular songs.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ From the interview with Adam Popovich in Hamilton, 1985.

⁶ W. Kolar, op. cit.

»Popovich Brothers« organized their first tour across the western part of America in 1928, together with Milan Vurdelja. They played in towns, which were near mines and in camps where »our people« didn't hear tambura's music since they left the old country. Four months later, the tour stopped in Chicago which brothers came to like so much that they decided to bring the rest of the family there. Since then, the orchestra performs in South Chicago and its vicinity. Eli, Mark and Pete were iron-workers while Adam and Tad worked in the steel mills. During their time off, they played on numerous family gatherings (weddings, christenings, patron saint's days and anniversaries). But they were also the inevitable part of festivities and informal gatherings (picnics, barbecue parties, sports tournaments) as well as the formal ones, immigrants' (»Vidovdan«, Serbian Festival of South Chicago, etc.) and American's (Fourth of July, Thanksgiving Day, Labor Day etc.), which were organized in Serbian ethnic community in Chicago.

In 1940, the Popovich Brothers who by that time had become quite popular and respected among the tamburitza devotees throughout the United States undertook a six months second nation-wide tour. The tour lasted six months and finished in Pennsylvania.⁷ On return, Orchestra continued its work up to the beginning of the Second World War, which prompted Eli to say, and other brothers still like to quote him: »It took a World War to break up the Popovich Brothers«. Out of five brothers, only Adam and Ted stayed at home, while the rest of them took their part in the war. But the successful performances of the Orchestra went on even during that time, owing to the help of other Chicago tamburitza players.

After the war, brothers decided to establish a business and open a night bar-tavern by the name »Club Selo« (Club Village). The interior of that bar was decorated with pictures bearing the rural scenes from the »Old country« and the menu included »sarma« and other Serbian specialties. Of course, entertainment was entrusted to the »Popovich Brothers« orchestra, although some other groups guest-performed, like »Šar planina«, »Balkan« and so on. In spite of the fact that some older immigrants still remember beautiful parties, evenings and even some carousing in that bar, it was soon closed and Popovich brothers had also to search for a replacement for Eli who, being an army employee, had to leave Chicago and orchestra. So, for the first time in 26 years, someone out of the family joins the orchestra. The new tamburitza player is Pete Mestrovic. Since then, he performs regularly with the orchestra, »as their own brother«.

In late sixties and early seventies, »Popovich Brothers« devote themselves to recording their songs and release five LP's and eight sound tapes. In the following years, the Orchestra perform less, mostly on official celebrations organized by the church and its organizations in South Chicago.

For its successful work, The »Popovich Brothers« tamburitza orchestra has received a numerous acknowledgements from different Serbian immigrants' organiza-

⁷ Spomenica: Popovich Brothers, Tamburitza orchestra, 50 years, 1975.



The »Popovich Brothers« Tamburitza Orchestra at the Serbian Festival in South Chicago, 8. 18. 1985.

tions and individuals in America. But it also had a very big role and importance in representing the Serbian immigrant community and its cultural heritage to American society. The orchestra took part in Chicago World's Fair 1933, where Adam was one of the most prominent persons, among the organizers as among the performers.⁸ They also played at the festival organized for the inauguration of the President Eisenhower in 1957, as at the President Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993, more than thirty-five years later.⁹ The special recognition came in 1973 when the Smithsonian Institution invited the Orchestra to participate in the »Festival of American Folk-life« in Washington D.C., 1973. There they had the opportunity to listen to and to meet the best tamburitza players from Yugoslavia (The Janika Balaš Orchestra and the Tamburitza Orchestra of the Radio Novi Sad). »After performing at that prestigious affair, the Popovich Brothers were officially induced into 'Tamburitza Hall of Fame'.¹⁰

The special acknowledgement represents the fact that the first ethnic film released in America, directed by Gill Godmilow, is made in 1977 about them and in the

⁸ M. Opacich, »A Century of Progress« and »Yugoslav Day«, *Serb World U.S.A.*, Vol. XIV, No. 6, Jul/Aug 1998, 30-31.

⁹ M. Opacich, *Tamburitza Goes to Washington ... and Nashville*, *Serb World*, Vol. IX, No.4, Mar/Apr 1993, 24-25.

¹⁰ Spomenica op. cit.

colony where they live, by the title of »The Popovich Brothers of South Chicago«. Their music hold a very important place in another ethnic film, »Živeli! Medicine for the Heart«. ¹¹ Besides that, »in 1982 Adam received one of the most coveted and prestigious awards that America can bestow on one of its citizens, the National Heritage Fellowship Award. In the book »American Folk Masters« by Steve Siporin, Adam Popovich figures prominently as one of American's genuine folk masters.¹² The records and sound tapes with the »Popovich Brothers« can be found in the Congress library in Washington.

The »Popovich Brothers« Tamburitza orchestra repertoire includes, besides the so-called »old urban songs«, the authentic folk songs and dances as well as some »bećarac« – jocular songs, often lascivious in character (Bolujem ja, boluješ ti; 'Ajde Kato, 'ajde zlato; Marš na Drinu; Seoska sam lola ja, etc). Most of these songs are still played in mother country, where they are known, among people, as the old urban songs. With some exceptions, »Popovitch Brothers« sing exclusively on Serbian, which they also speak excellently, so that they are very familiar with the meaning of the text. But that is not the case with the others, especially younger amateur tamburitza orchestras, which function in Serbian community in Chicago. (For example, The Junior Tamburitza Orchestra of Sent Archangel Michael Church) Their members most often don't know Serbian language and thus play and sing mechanically, not understanding the contents of the songs, not to mention their meaning or their significance to the listeners.

I will not discuss here the musical quality or ethnomusicologist characteristics of the »Popovich Brothers« music. Instead, I will only stress that in Serbian community in America, as in musical environment and among so called »ordinary people«; it is considered original, traditional, Serbian, folk music, carried over in its original pattern from »the old country«. And I will examine here how the members of the Serbian community in South Chicago view, experience and interpret their own music, which is very well illustrated in the following examples:

»Popovich Brother' are guardians of Serbian sound and spirit; they are the personification of Serbian tradition; it is the best Serbian music or, they gave the biggest contribution 'to the preservation of Serbianism on American continent through the medium of music'. The 'Popovich Brothers' Tamburitza Orchestra is the immortalization of our great Serbian tradition, which is so dear to our hearts. They represent Serbian tradition; The greatest figures in the Serbian tamburitza world.«¹³ They are the kings of Serbian music.¹⁴

¹¹ Film is based on a ethnography work by professor A. Simic from University of California, and it is directed by Les Blanc. The consultant of the film was professor E.A. Hamel from the University of Berkley.

¹² M. Opacich, Playing Tamburitza into the New Century, The Popovich Brothers since 1925, Serb World U.S.A. Vol. XVI, No. 3, Jan/Feb 2000, 41.

¹³ M. Opacich, 60 years of Tamburitza, Serb World U.S. A. Vol. IV, No. 2., Nov./Dec 1987, 21.

¹⁴ Those examples are taken from the interviews with our emigrants during the field research in Chicago 1985 or from emigrants' newspapers and other publications.

To put it in simpler terms, the members of Serbian community in Chicago view and interpret the tamburitza of Popovich Brothers as a symbol of Serbian cultural heritage and of their ethnic identity. In that sense, it had a multiple importance for that community.

In the first generations of emigrants, Popovich Brothers music didn't just evoke the nostalgic feelings about the old country, it also brought back the lost shelter in oppressive moments of adaptation to the new environment and with recognizable sounds offered security in symbolic revival of the homeland. »When I hear Popovich's Brothers 'bećarac', I know that I'm among my own people.«

The majority of Serbs in South Chicago and America are familiar with the words of the songs that Popovich Brothers sing, they like those songs. During numerous festivals and celebrations, the emigrants sing followed by their music, dance national dances, rejoice and even carouse, often exaggerating, with lots of food and drinks, breaking glasses, »decorating« the instruments (meaning putting money on them) or sticking the banknote on the performers' fronts. All these very often occur in the motherland too, like the inevitable part of the restaurant folklore in some segments of population.

That kind of mutual rejoicement and carousing by the music of tamburitza creates, among the later generations of our emigrants which are not acquainted with nostalgia, a feeling of equality, solidarity and togetherness. Abolishing, in a symbolic way, distinctions between the emigrants of different age and social status as members of the same cultural heritage, it augments the cohesion of their ethnic community.

»Popovich Brothers« Tamburitza orchestra had also an educative function. Many emigrants of the later generations learned their native tongue and acquired first knowledge about history and cultural heritage of their ancestors from its music and the words of their songs. On the other hand, that orchestra represented an enormous inspiration for numerous younger tamburitza orchestras throughout America. That role was specifically attributed to Adam and Ted Popovich who were also, since 1928, members of Serbian Singing Society »Sloboda«, while Adam was the manager of that Society, since 1936. He was also repeatedly the teacher and conductor of the Junior Tamburitza Orchestra of Sent Archangel Michael Church.

Besides all this, members of the Serbian community in Chicago experience numerous successes of the Popovich Brothers orchestra, in the broader society in which they appear like representatives of the Serbian ethnic culture, as their own achievement. Thus the Popovich Brothers music confirms also the group value and self-essentiality and the Orchestra itself, not only its music, becomes the symbol of Serbian ethnic community in Chicago which is clearly evidenced by the above mentioned first ethnic film made about that community which also bears its name.

At the end, let's point out that tamburitza is viewed as the symbol of cultural heritage and ethnicity most often by those Serbian immigrants whose ancestors came at the beginning of the 20th century from areas which were under the Austro-Hungarian authority. However, tamburitza is, as I mentioned earlier, like some other cultural

elements, common for both the Serb and Croat ethnic group in Chicago as in America. On the other hand, the Serbian immigrants from other areas and from the later periods of colonization feel this sort of attachment for other instruments and types of music, for example for accordion or for newly composed folk song. So, while one part of Serbian community in America cultivate the music which is characteristic for other ethnic groups as well, some segments of Serbian immigrants cultivate a different one. Therefore tamburitza as the symbol of Serbian ethnic identity can be seen as mark of their togetherness or differentiation, which depend of contexts.

POVZETEK

»BRATJE POPOVIĆ«:

TAMBURICA V ŽIVLJENJU SRBSKIH IZSELJENJCEV V CHICAGU

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»Bratje Popović« je, če ne najstarejši, pa zagotovo najslavnejši srbski tamburaški orkester v Ameriki. Delovati je začel 1925. leta v Koloradu. Orkester se je preselil 1929. leta v južni Chicago, kjer deluje še danes. V dolgem obdobju svojega delovanja je imel dve turneji v srbskih izseljenskih kolonijah v Ameriki (1928. in 1940. leta). Razen tega je nastopal na številnih koncertih, ki jih je organizirala srbska etnična skupnost (South Chicago Serbian Festival, Yugoslav Day in podobno). Igrali so tudi na porokah, rojstnih dnevih in podobnih družinskih svečanostih. Orkester je sodeloval na Ameriških etničnih slavlji in festivalih (Festival Of American Folklife, Washington, D.C. 1973. leta, itd.).

Cilj tega referata je analizirati, skozi predstavitev zgodovinskega ozadja orkestra, družbeni in kulturni pomen tamburice kot etničnega simbola, ter pokazati na pomen tamburice v procesu ohranjanja in predstavljanja srbske kulture in etničnosti v ameriški družbi. Obenem bo predstavljena njena vloga v vsakdanjem in prazničnem življenju Srbov v Ameriki.