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# The End of the “Grand Narrative”? Understanding Slovenian Church Music of the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

## Konec »velike pripovedi«? K razumevanju slovenske cerkvene glasbe poznega 19. in zgodnjega 20. stoletja

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### IZVLEČEK

### ABSTRACT

Cerkvena glasba 19. in 20. stoletja je bila do sedaj v glasbenem zgodovinopisju opazovana le s pomočjo umeščanja v »velike pripovedi«. Ta metoda nujno zabrisuje ali celo potvarja velik del podrobnosti o tem zgodovinskem pojavu. Zdi se, da je edina pot za odkritje primernejše interpretacije uporaba metod mikro-zgodovinskega raziskovanja.

Observation of the late 19th and early 20th century religious music in Slovenia was so far incorporated into different historiographical “grand narratives”. These attempts have in general led to selective use and distortion of information about historical reality. It seems that the only feasible method left is the micro-historical observation.

Historians of all periods in human history have attempted to solve the same basic problem: to spin a multidimensional and complex array of historical facts into the thread of a linear historical narrative. Myths and legends were the first tool to accomplish this task. They crystallised historical events around the reel of fictitious heroes or social groups. Hence, a focus on historical protagonists was the basic methodological point of departure of ancient Greek and Roman historiography.

A profoundly new approach was introduced in the Middle Ages. Christian historiography, with its teleological view of human history, stretching between creation and final glorification, introduced the first truly “grand narrative”. Its fundamental theological suppositions were discarded in later centuries. However, it still inspired ever new “grand narratives”, such as the idea of continuous progress towards perfection, the notion of national self-fulfilment, the Marxist-style idea of history resulting from changing socio-economical relations and many others. The conviction that there was some sort of purposefulness to history remained one of the basic traits of western historiography.

Music historiography developed in a similar way, though at times diachronically. A variety of “grand narratives” was proposed in the last two centuries in order to bring to light the putative purposefulness of music history: the idea of continuous progress (Forkel), the development of formal and stylistic traits on the basis of physical, physiological and psychological laws (Riemann), the notions of *Zeitgeist* and organic development (Ambros), a focus on cycles of growth, maturity and demise (Fetis), the history of style (Adler) and others. Thus, the criticism with regard to the epistemological value of such “grand narratives” as noted by Jean-Francois Lyotard<sup>1</sup> can also be applied to the basic suppositions of modern music historiography. We will try to reassess the validity of such suppositions relative to late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Slovenian church music and reconsider their usefulness in an endeavour to answer the fundamental question of *why* history happened as it did.

The subject of Slovenian church music has not been chosen randomly. It lies in the nexus of several meta-narratives that have thoroughly determined 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>- century discourse in the humanities: firstly the idea of national self-fulfilment, secondly the rise of liberalism as opposed to conservatism and thirdly the idea of stylistic progress as driven by „*Zeitgeist*“ in contrast to simple historicism.

Unfortunately, I must test the readers' patience and outline some basic facts concerning the development of mid- and late-19<sup>th</sup>- century church music in the territory of the Austrian „*Erbländer*“, inhabited by a predominantly Slovene-speaking population. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the basic traits of this music included a clear distinction between urban and rural environments. In the former, modest remains of the solemn music of the 18<sup>th</sup> century still lingered, since the Napoleonic wars bereft it of sufficient financial means for artistically adequate performance.<sup>2</sup> In the countryside, the focus of musical activities was on the parish organist. He had to train a handful of local amateur performers and gather or mostly create his own repertoire, the sources of which were usually secular songs with sometimes only slightly changed texts.<sup>3</sup> In many cases only the pet names of adored young damsels were interchanged with name of Virgin Mary or one of the saints.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Introduction”, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), XXIII–XXV.

<sup>2</sup> Janez Höfler, “Glasbena kapela ljubljanske stolnice 1800-1810”, *Muzikološki zbornik* 17, nr. 2 (1981): 7–21.

<sup>3</sup> Matija Japelj, “Prosto mnenje o cerkveni godbi”, *Učiteljski tovariš* 2, nr. 20 (1862): 321. - Anton M. Slomšek, “Cerkveno petje nekdanjo in sedanjo po Štajerskem”, *Drobtinice* 12 (1857): 216, 293, 298–9.

<sup>4</sup> Especially drastic example was song in honour of Virgin Mary, which was sung on tune ‘Naša mačka mlade mela’ (Our Cat has delivered Little Kittens). Cf. Ferdinand Vigele, “O cerkveni glasbi”, *Učiteljski tovariš* 8, nr. 8 (1868): 121–124.

The first attempt to improve the state of church music was made by a group of clergy gathered around the parish priest Blaž Potočnik. He contributed new, dogmatically impeccable texts, which were then set to music mostly by Gregor Rihar, *regens chori* at the Ljubljana cathedral. The songs were published in several sets during the 1840s and 1850s and were widely disseminated. They enjoyed a high popularity at the time and have been an integral part of many church celebrations ever since.<sup>5</sup>

The next major initiative began in 1868 with the arrival of the Czech musician Anton Foerster. He moved to Ljubljana following an invitation from Slovenian nationalist cultural societies, however, they weren't able to provide the previously agreed-upon fee. Hence, shortly afterwards he accepted an offer to become *regens chori* at the Ljubljana cathedral. The invitation wasn't coincidental. While it was a sign of an effort to retain the gifted composer in Ljubljana, where musicians of his stature were scarce, it also appears to have involved some other considerations. The invitation was mediated by Janez Zlatousti Pogačar, the provost of the cathedral chapter and one of the cleric intellectuals who promoted the reform of church music along the guidelines established through the German Caecilian movement. We can also assume that the *spiritus agens* behind the idea was the prelate Josip Smrekar, a sympathiser with and one of the first members of *Allgemeiner Cäcilien-Verband für Deutschland*.<sup>6</sup>

The result of their endeavour was a program of reform, which was published in the periodical *Triglav* in 1868.<sup>7</sup> It comprised the establishment of a new, numerically superior choir, with boy singers instead of women, and above all the performance of stylistically appropriate music with liturgically correct texts. Foerster's efforts were only partly successful. It proved impossible to maintain boy singers, so he changed to female singers shortly thereafter.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, in a few months he was able to establish a body of very decent repertoire, comprised of Gregorian chant, 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century vocal polyphony and modern Caecilian music. He proudly reported his achievements in the chief Caecilian magazine *Musica sacra*<sup>9</sup> but incentivised very few imitators in the Slovenian part of the „Erbländer“.

The reform gained ground in the mid-70s. In 1876 the regular biannual general meeting of *Allgemeiner Cäcilien-Verband* was held in Graz. Some participants from the Slovenian part of the „Erbländer“ promptly formed an initiative committee to found a Caecilian Society for the diocese of Ljubljana.<sup>10</sup> The statutes were attested a year later.<sup>11</sup> Caecilian Societies for the dioceses of Gorica (Gorizia) and Lavant followed in 1884 and 1887, respectively. Nevertheless, the members of the Caecilian Society of the diocese of Ljubljana were the most industrious. They established the *Orglarska šola* (School for Organists) in 1877 in order to educate a new breed of church musicians, well trained musically and with an impeccable taste for proper church music. They also initiated the publication of the journal *Cerkveni glasbenik* (The Church Musician), which promoted

<sup>5</sup> Francišek Lampe, "Blaž Potočnik, župnik šentviški", *Dom in svet* 4, nr. 11 (1891): 481–4.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Fran Ferjančič, "Poživimo iznova naše Cecilijino društvo", *Cerkveni glasbenik* 32, nr. 2 (1909): 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Triglav* 4, nr. 60 (1869): 4 and attachment p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Andrej Karlin, *Spominska knjižica* (Ljubljana, 1902), 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Musica sacra* 9, nr. 11 (1876): 101–102.

<sup>10</sup> Karlin, *Spominska knjižica*, 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Učiteljski tovariš* 17 (1877): 123–125.

the Caecilian cause through articles with programmatic and practical content, musical criticism, and exemplary musical compositions. Complementing these efforts were regular meetings and courses for earlier-employed church musicians. The Caecilian societies prospered until the end of Second World War, being then suppressed by the new communist government.

The first, and for decades only valid and partially still accepted, historiographical interpretation of the Caecilian movement was formulated by Dragotin Cvetko in his magistral work *Zgodovina glasbene umetnosti na Slovenskem* (History of Art Music in the Slovenian Territory), published in late '50s.<sup>12</sup> His historical narrative was based on the three aforementioned meta-narratives, which were very common in western historiography. He made no attempt to explain his methodological premises, but took them to be self-evident or even occurring by nature.

The first of the three meta-narratives concerns national self-fulfillment. Contrary to the concept one would assume from the title he chose, his interpretation of music in Slovenian lands was clearly nationalistically motivated. He regards the Slovenian nation as an indisputable historical entity, defined by unique biological and cultural characteristics. It is considered constant, unchangeable in time and independent of a political structure. It also manifests itself in his view of genuine Slovenian music being characterised by a "national spirit" and closed to all foreign influences. With that notion he silently accepted the aesthetic norms of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Slovenian nationalism, so pointedly expressed in a line from a typical nationalistic song (in my feeble translation): "foreign customs, foreign people / are just friends and never brethren".<sup>13</sup>

The second meta-narrative, also crucial for the Cvetko's interpretation of Slovenian church music in late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was the conflict between liberalism and conservatism. As did almost all Slovenian historians of his time, he projected quite without thought this basic European political dichotomy onto that part of the Austrian „Erbländer“ that was predominantly Slovene-speaking. The complex patchwork of different and interrelated individuals, social groups and institutions, each with its own system of values and symbols, was thus dismembered and rearranged into two dialectically opposed blocks of conservatives and liberals. He constituted the former to include the ruling dynasty, state apparatus, right-wing political parties, aristocracy, ethnically conscious German minority, ethnically indifferent part of the Slovene or German speaking population, rural population altogether, and certainly not least, the Roman Catholic Church. This vast agglomeration of forces was viewed as opposed only by the liberal faction of the ethnically conscious Slovenian middle class and its political representatives.

The third meta-narrative intertwined in Cvetko's interpretation is his belief in the necessity of progress in music. It is somewhat fused with the *Zeitgeist* idea, but still the notion of progress dominated. His criticism expressed the conviction that only modern innovative music can gain true aesthetic validity and lasting artistic value. The history of music in the Slovenian territory as written by Cvetko is thus forcefully one-dimensional. It becomes a description of a constant race to catch contemporary developments in

<sup>12</sup> Dragotin Cvetko, *Zgodovina glasbene umetnosti na Slovenskem* (Ljubljana, 1960), Vol. 3, 231–262.

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin Ipavec, "Domovini", besedilo Radoslav Razlag, *Glasbena matica, Zv. 4, Zbirka slovenskih napevov ubranih za čvetero ali petero moških glasov* (Ljubljana: Glasbena matica, 1877), 15–16.

alleged “European music”, which is nothing less than the complete canon of European art music as was *post festum* defined by music historiography.

Cvetko’s strained efforts to preserve the validity and internal coherence of the meta-narratives led to a harsh verdict with regard to the Slovenian Caecilian movement, whose basic principles were clearly opposed to all three. The most controversial was the movement’s proclaimed universality. Cvetko recognised the anti-nationalistic character of the Caecilian movement in its efforts to replace liturgically improper Slovene songs with Latin Church music. Moreover, he sharply criticised their opposition to the expression of “national spirit” in church music, which was in his view fundamental for any true art. He stressed the reproach voiced by contemporary opponents that the Caecilian movement was a tool of Germanization.

The Caecilian movement was also politically suspect. Cvetko presupposed an organized involvement of conservative political and cultural institutions in the Caecilian reform. The activity of the Church in the movement was in his view evident due to the leading role played by some high-ranking clerics, such as Janez Z. Pogačar, Josip Smerkar, Andrej Karlin and Frančišek B. Sedej. On the other side, the liberal intelligentsia was represented as the sole bastion of progress and national liberation. In his interpretation, the divide between supporters and opponents of the Caecilian reform was almost identical to the divide between conservatives and liberals.

Last but not least, the Caecilian reform was considered anachronistic and thus irreconcilable with idea of progress in music. The restoration of Gregorian chant and 16<sup>th</sup> century vocal polyphony or even the introduction of their compositional elements in modern compositions was regarded by Cvetko to be an irreparable breach with the “natural” flow of music development and therefore with the fundamentals of art itself.

If we try to observe the historical facts independently of Cvetko’s three meta-narratives, a very different and, above all, multi-layered picture emerges. The replacement of liturgically improper Slovene songs with Latin church music wasn’t characteristic for the Slovenian Caecilian movement. It was part of the reform in all Catholic European lands – German-speaking lands included – where church songs had been tolerated in solemn liturgy since Council of Trent. The number of occasions for which the change was necessary was so small that no significant decline of church music with Slovenian texts would have been noticeable.

The second argument in favour of the alleged Caecilian participation in a conservative Germanising scheme is its critical stance on traditional Slovenian church music, especially the works of Gregor Rihar. The replacement of his songs and their adaptation to standards of modern composition were interpreted as an attack on the very core of Slovenian musical culture. A thorough inspection of historical facts shows clearly that the contemporary reactions repeated by Cvetko were without doubt exaggerated. The Caecilian movement made an effort to continue the tradition of Slovenian church songs. This aim was clearly stated in the first Caecilian action programme in 1868.<sup>14</sup> The main Caecilian reproach against Rihar’s music wasn’t its “Slovenian spirit” but its compositional weaknesses. Many prominent Caecilian composers, especially Anton Foerster,

<sup>14</sup> *Učiteljski tovariš* 17 (1877): 123–125.

took great effort to correct them. Their adaptations of Rihar's songs were included in Caecilian songbooks in equal proportion with the new, Caecilian repertory. The relatively large number of its copies ensured an even broader than previous dissemination and permanent presence of Rihar's work.<sup>15</sup>

The other overwhelming argument against the validity of Cvetko's interpretation is the sheer number of compositions with Slovenian text that Caecilian composers produced in just a few decades. The new compositions on Latin texts were more or less an exception. We are faced with curious paradox: the alleged antinationalistic movement produced and published a many-times-greater volume of Slovenian church music than did its predecessors and opponents.

Cvetko overlooked another impact of Caecilian activities on the development of Slovenian musical culture. Their efforts to establish centres of church music produced additional unforeseen results. Numerous church musicians schooled in Caecilian institutions founded new church choirs in various parts of the territory inhabited by Slovenian populations. Many of those extended their activities beyond the church walls and thus founded the tradition of amateur choir singing, which remains one of the main segments of amateur musical culture in modern Slovenia. Their repertoire was for decades constituted of songs with Slovenian texts exclusively and was in many cases the only remnant of national identity among Slovenian emigrants and minorities in foreign lands.

Similarly weak is Cvetko's argumentation about conservative support of the Caecilian reform. In fact, the opposite is true. If we analyse the position of the Church, the emerging picture isn't simple. The bishops were honorary patrons of Caecilian societies, and some distinguished dignitaries were active supporters of the movement. However, local ecclesiastical authorities never openly endorsed the reform. Their decrees were always written in a non-obligatory manner. On the other side was the vast majority of parish priests who ignored or even resolutely opposed the Caecilian reform. Many of them stated their position openly in a series of attacks on leading Caecilians, especially on Anton Foerster. In 1879 and 1880 he was the target of a malicious and prolonged media campaign, launched by the conservative newspaper *Slovenec* and the conservative satirical magazine *Brencelj* (Horsefly). His defenders – though also clerics – weren't even able to present their responses in the conservative press. Astonishingly, they were given the opportunity in the liberal newspaper *Slovenski narod*.<sup>16</sup>

One of Cvetko's primary pieces of evidence for political influence in the Caecilian movement was the conflict between the Caecilian society and *Glasbena matica*, which was the central musical institution of the Slovenian nationalistic movement. The main issue of contention was whether or not *Glasbena matica* should also publish church music. The Caecilians feared that a rival publisher would have easily enabled composers of inappropriate church music to disseminate their works. *Glasbena matica*, on the other hand, tried to broaden its circle of customers and members to clerics and church musicians. Nevertheless, the Caecilians did prevail and *Glasbena matica* refrained from publishing any church music. A thorough investigation of the conflict and its circumstances revealed that the key cause had been the economic crisis of the late 1880s. Given

<sup>15</sup> Aleš Nagode, "Starejše slovensko cecilijanstvo in Gregor Rihar", *Muzikološki zbornik* 34 (1998): 89–99.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Aleš Nagode, "Foerster – cecilijanec", *Foersterjev zbornik*, ed. Edo Škulj (Ljubljana, 1998), 49–56.

the situation, with their membership shrinking, both societies tried to attract as many of financially independent clerics as possible.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, we must reconsider Cvetko's assessment of Caecilian musical creativity. He clearly overlooked the variety of creative concepts the Slovenian Caecilian movement was able to incorporate in its work. There were compositions in which some traits of earlier historical styles were revived, mostly written by Anton Foerster, who was the only composer skilled enough to attempt such a task. Another group of composers, most prominently f. Hugolin Sattner and Danilo Fajgelj, produced rather utilitarian works not much different from the repertoire produced in mass by some German Caecilian authors. The third layer of Caecilian productivity was comprised of works with Slovenian texts that partly incorporated some elements of the pre-Caecilian Slovenian tradition.

We can observe similar variety in the repertory of reformed church choirs. On one hand, Anton Foerster made an effort to write the note „Sonatine für kleine Kinder!“ on the performance parts of Mozart's C-major mass, K. 317.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, board members of the Caecilian society organized a solemn mass during which Mozart's „Krönungsmesse“ was performed.<sup>19</sup> In historical reality the Slovenian Caecilian movement was at the same time universalist and nationalist, conservative and liberal, historicist and contemporary.

Cvetko's inability to find a satisfactory explanation for the extreme variety of Caecilian musical activities shows most clearly the collapse of the historiographical concept that involved the three concurrent meta-narratives. In an attempt to save his methodological concept his historical narrative became more and more one-dimensional and thus more and more removed from historical reality. He silently assumed that history is a bundle of autonomous processes that determine the actions of individuals, institutions and social groups who unknowingly comply with them. In the end his historiographical narrative had to be uniform. Any process determining the development of human history as a whole would also have to determine the development of its parts. Thus, not only the history of music in the Slovenian lands but also the actions of any of its participants must have been determined by the same processes as also determined the course of western European history as a whole. The task of the historian would be, in his case, to put the historical facts in a prefabricated dialectical grid of the three intertwined meta-narratives.

Cvetko's failure lies in his ignorance of the fact that musical history is made by humans and not the other way around. Although their decisions are always to some extent predetermined by a number of different parameters, it is impossible to predict the outcome. Individual decisions are that which weave the fabric of history. In this view, the diversity of Caecilian activities becomes understandable. Anton Foerster composed his music in historic styles, because he thought it was proper to do so, because he was able to, and because he hoped to achieve some reputation in the circles of German Caecilian movement. Ignacij Hladnik composed a totally different sort of music, because he

<sup>17</sup> Aleš Nagode, "Prvih dvajset let Glasbene matice", *130 let Glasbene matice*, ed. Aleš Nagode (Ljubljana: Glasbena matica, 2005), 25–33.

<sup>18</sup> Arhiv Stolnega kora Ljubljana, A M 195 [Ljubljana Cathedral Musical Archive, A M 195].

<sup>19</sup> Miroslav [Tomec], "Dopis", *Cerkveni glasbenik* 7, nr. 8 (1884): 69–70.



thought it was proper to do so, because he wasn't able to compose in any other way, and because he wanted to achieve some reputation in provincial town of Novo mesto, where he lived.

This example demonstrates that answers to historians' persisting question of *why* something happened the way it did lie not only in all-encompassing meta-narratives but also and above all in micro-historical research. He must always keep in mind that every person is a referential system of himself. His decisions are the result of his abilities and ambitions, and only through his active participation can the environment influence his deeds. The historian must keep in mind that his craving for a broad synthesis can lead him away from historical reality. On the way, he traverses the borders of different referential systems and the validity of his analytical results thus diminishes. He must – as all the historians of the past – find his own way in the open field, spanned between seemingly chaotic reality and the neat historical “grand-narrative”.

## POVZETEK

Opazovanje cerkvene glasbe poznega 19. in zgodnjega 20. stoletja v Sloveniji je dobra priložnost za ponovno epistemološke ovrednotenje nekaterih v preteklosti uporabljenih glasbeno-zgodovinskih metod. Cerkevna glasba je bila zaradi ključne vloge Katoliške cerkve v Slovenskem nacionalnem gibanju nenavadno pomemben del vzpostavljanja se nacionalne culture. Dejstvo, da je delovanje cerkve zajelo vse družbene sloje, je pred glasbe-

nike soočalo z različnimi okolji in specifičnimi referenčnimi sistemi. Dosedanje zgodovinske interpretacije, vključno z historističnimi, so bile zato nepopolne ali cello zavajajoče. Poskusi, da bi zgodovinska dejstva umestili v zgodovinsko »veliko pripoved«, so po pravilu vodila k potrebi po selekcioniranju in popačitvi znanih dejstev o zgodovinski stvarnosti. Zdi se, da ustrezne rezultate daje le mikro-zgodovinsko opazovanje, ki zmora prikazati večino podrobnosti tega kompleksnega zgodovinskega pojava.