

# Choral Music in the Church

## Choral Music in the Church[1]

*By Tomaž Faganel, conductor, musicologist, lecturer, juror, singer*

At least until the mid-nineteenth century, church music and singing held a central place in Slovenia's music development: for instance, from the Middle Ages to the Reformation in the sixteenth century, when Slovenes received the first church songs in Slovenian; and Renaissance motets and masses by the famous composer Handl-Gallus in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century churches, monasteries, chapels, schools, and centers for music, and after 1597 through the Ljubljana Jesuits whose influence can be traced up to the end of the eighteenth century. Church music at the time was in Latin and included new baroque works, echoes of classicism, and all the customary performance features of the time.

Truly 'Slovenian' church choral music has only existed since the mid-nineteenth century, when Gregor Rihar – the first composer to compose to Slovenian lyrics – proved its vitality through his own compositions. At the end of the nineteenth century, Caecilian influences slowed this trend, so earlier Slovenian church music trends still prevailed.

At the end of the nineteenth century, church choirs often played a pivotal role in lay musical and choral life and in its local development. In 1877, church musicians joined the Slovenian Caecilian Society. That same year, a school for church musicians was founded in Ljubljana, and the journal *Cerkveni glasbenik* (Church Musician) was launched in 1878. Up until World War II, church organists and choirmasters, who were graduates of the school, were normally employed in – and were the main cultural figures of – their local areas. Church

choirs took part in liturgical services and rarely had any opportunities for concert activity. They performed sacred music by Slovenian and other composers, both *a cappella* and with organ accompaniment. This music included masses and motets in Latin (and later, Slovenian), but the composers remained within the traditional church framework and rarely responded to other European musical developments.

Church choral music disappeared from public culture after WWII due to the cultural-political situation of the time. The education of church musicians was terminated in 1944, and *Church Musician* was no longer published after 1945. Church choirs still took part in liturgies but less intensively, and they were excluded from the hierarchical pyramid of national singing, thus relegating choirmasters to volunteer work. In the late 1970s, the cultural-political climate began to change. Church music and choirs gradually re-entered the national musical culture, especially after 1991. The Ljubljana organ school was reactivated in 1970, other dioceses followed, and *Church Musician* was published again from 1976 onward. The Department for Sacred Music in the Ljubljana Academy of Music has offered a European-like professional profile for church musicians since 1992, and two publishers now issue church music.

Church choral music lives on in each of the 786 parishes, from community singing to quality choral reproductions to semi-professional level choirs. The Slovenian repertoire of liturgical music from the Renaissance up to the present serves as a foundation centered on the post-Caecilian style and post-Romantic musical language. Some conductors present modern sacred compositions, and there is currently the relatively strong phenomenon of sacred pop music, as well. An estimated one thousand church choirs are active in the field. Their cultural makeup is mostly mixed[2], with around 15,000 singers, and they are led by amateur and professional conductors (often organists too), mostly working on an

honorary basis. Church choirs, some occupying the very summit of the Slovenian choral field, participate in liturgies and perform at church concerts and Slovenian church music festivals.

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[1] The content of this article refers to the church music of the Catholic majority. The music of the fourteen Slovenian Protestant church communities, the Serbian Orthodox church community, and other Christian churches would require additional analysis.

[2] This includes people in Slovenia as well as Slovenian ethnic minorities in Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Croatia.

*Edited by Steve Lansford, USA*