Darja Koter

_Akademija za glasbo Univerze v Ljubljani – 80 let: 1939–2019_

_Academy of Music, University of Ljubljana – 80th Anniversary: 1939–2019_


The Slovene culture is quite young. It began with the enthusiasm of a few young intellectuals in the middle of the nineteenth century who proclaimed to be Slovenes (whatever that meant) while having a friendly chat in German. The Slovene culture was shaped during the day-to-day struggles with the reality of European nationalistic tendencies, while waiting for moments of weakness and distractions of its more important neighbors. Gradually it developed everything that was necessary to become a cultivated European nation: major cultural and educational institutions were established, initially at a slow pace, but more dynamically in the twentieth century while the great European powers were “licking the wounds” they inflicted on each other. The initial energy, however, was often followed by stagnation or even regression. The affirmation of Slovene culture was often a fight for survival, accompanied with efforts to attain the basic financial means for culture and the functioning of educational institutions – essentially pleading with foreign and domestic governmental bodies to support them with alms that would enable Slovenes a better education and elevate their arts.

During this struggle, reflection upon one’s own culture was perpetually put aside. An overview of the older literature about Slovene cultural history shows a distinct lack of scientific or scholarly works about such efforts. Every now and then, a commemorative publication was published that produced numerous lists and statistical data, usually with minimum scientific insight, which is why it was of limited use for the scientific institution to which it was dedicated. As a rule, this data was accompanied by some general text full of praise, which, befitting to such an occasion, highlighted aspects of the institution’s history that affirm the idealized vision of its importance for the Slovene culture. On the other hand, a text which would provide a critical analysis and also shed light on an institution’s shortcomings is rather hard to find.
In recent years when many of these institutions celebrated their centenaries, the scholarship has witnessed a change. One after another, monographies about the work of important cultural and educational institutions are published, with the field of music as no exception. The most recent among them is the monograph *Academy of Music of the University of Ljubljana – 80th Anniversary* written by Darja Koter. The book provides a valuable addition to the musicological literature as it represents the first thorough description of this for the Slovene culture such a significant institution. Previous annuals and commemorative publications were databases rather than comprehensive overviews of the Academy’s work, although perhaps useful in certain respects.

Koter’s narrative begins in the decades before the Academy of Music was founded in 1939 and thus places its foundation into a broader context in regards to the development of the Slovene system of music education. She briefly discusses the beginnings of music education in Slovenia and, although in slightly more detail, the work of the Ljubljana Music and Ballet Conservatory, which was the Academy’s immediate predecessor. However, the anniversary of both the Conservatory and Academy, which coincides with the hundredth anniversary of the University of Ljubljana, offers a wonderful opportunity to provide a more detailed insight into the close collaboration of both institutions in terms of organization and staff.

The book is divided into fifteen chapters based on changes in political and economic circumstances which – as is usually the case with state educational institutions – affected the functioning of the Academy in many aspects. The reason for such a structure lies in the fact that the Academy’s activities have often been predetermined by the government and its perception of the Academy’s mission of nurturing culture. Darja Koter provides, what is at times shocking narrative, about the decades of struggle of more or less competent and committed rectors and deans for a suitable space, instruments, jobs and salaries which that befit highly educated pedagogues.

The author analyses the changes in the study programs in different periods, such as the number of students enrolled in a certain study program, and takes a close look at the structure of the teaching staff. She focuses on those individuals whose pedagogical and artistic work was crucial for the Academy’s high reputation. The narrative is thus often enriched by some biographical information that complements the historical accounts. This helped the author cast light on the artistic but not the pedagogical work of the most prominent professors of the Academy of Music in recent decades. Yet, the lack of information about pedagogical work is, to some extent, compensated by an overview of the alumni that made significant contributions to the Slovene and European music culture throughout their careers. In any case, Koter’s book pays tribute to many bold and generous actions of certain individuals who selflessly helped many students on their way to the artistic self-accomplishment,
at the cost of their own success and despite the disapproval of their colleagues. Some resisted the banality of the established aesthetic norms, the Slovene national cultural chauvinism or Yugoslavian unitarism; others defied clerical, liberal, fascist, National Socialist and communist ideologies of musical creativity and reproduction of music (listed in chronological order); and some stood up against everyone and everything.

The author also points out some downsides, at least regarding the first decades of the Academy’s activities. She briefly discusses some personal faults of certain notable pedagogues who were the opposites of the aforementioned professors, and advanced in their careers due to the political and nepotistic alliances, preoccupied with their own parochial interests. The analysis of such phenomena is rather diplomatic and noticeably toned down, even more so when the reader comes to present times. However, this should not be considered a flaw but a rather inevitable consequence of a scientific approach to a topic that is still quite closely related to the present. On the one hand, many sources are not available yet, many parties involved have yet to muster the courage to speak up, and many have already passed away and descended into oblivion. Therefore, a scientific article about the (recent) past can never compete with a vivid picture of (recent) events painted by those who lived through them and helped shape history. This is also due to the fact that the latter leans on a wealth of small-town gossip that usually does not play a significant role in historical records.

For the very first time, the Academy of Music is presented through research using broad range of primary and secondary sources, as expected with such a task. The author studied the archives of the Academy of Music and other associated institutions. She also used personal archives of some staff members. As for secondary sources, she relied on a wide selection of specialized and scholarly texts which examine the cultural and historical backgrounds and different areas of the Academy’s activity. Regarding the content of the book, there is ultimately little to add until new research on the topic is conducted or additional personal archives and more personal stories become available.

Darja Koter’s monograph will probably present an important framework for understanding the history of the Academy of Music in Ljubljana for quite some time. It is a valuable source of information about the Academy’s work for the expert and scientific audience. However, there is more to the book than simply factual information. Koter’s account of the Academy’s history is a ground-breaking study that will inspire young researchers. Without prejudice and from new perspectives of younger generations, they will find it much easier to focus on specific research questions that will broaden the picture painted by Koter. They will have an opportunity to delve into the pedagogical profiles of certain teachers, examine their qualities and weaknesses, study their responses to aesthetic changes throughout the time and evaluate their efficiency, which
reflects in the artistic work and academic achievements of their students. Furthermore, Koter’s book allows them to explore the period in which the Academy was the driving force of progress in Slovene music and when both teachers and students opened new music horizons for the Slovene public. However, one should not forget those dark times when the Academy not only sunk in complacency but also experienced a dramatic decline in standards. Only research that considers all facets can result in a realistic portrayal of the Academy’s history. But Koter takes the crucial first step towards this objective, and for that her book is worthy of praise and recognition.

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