Early Symphonic Music in Slovenia

The extant manuscripts and prints of early symphonic music preserved in various archives throughout Slovenia and in the border town of Gorizia confirm that during the eighteenth and early nineteenth century this territory followed broader European symphonic currents and was acquainted with contemporary examples of the genre. Throughout the eighteenth century the symphonic repertoire of the Slovenian territory was significantly influenced by the preferences of the Habsburg Empire to which it belonged politically. The characteristics of the symphonies preserved in the Slovenian historical lands are comparable to those of other collections in the Habsburg monarchy.

The symphonies held by the Historical Archive of Gorizia from the period between the 1740s and 1760s are the earliest examples of the symphonic genre preserved in this territory, and are mainly works by the pioneers of the genre. The symphonic repertoire of this period had an international orientation, which was also characteristic of other European collections; the works of these composers were in general very well known and disseminated throughout Europe. Among the composers are Antonio Brioschi, Giovanni Battista Sammartini, Georg Christoph Wagenseil, Ignaz Holzbauer, Johann Stamitz, Johann Christian Bach and Carl Joseph Toeschi.

Among the important patrons of the symphonic repertoire in the eighteenth century were religious institutions, where symphonies were used for liturgical and devotional purposes as well as during festivities. The Franciscan monastery in Novo Mesto holds one symphony by Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf, one by Leopold Mozart, one by Antonin Kammel and one by Johann Baptist Vanhal, as well as the popular edition of Sei sinfonie a grande orchestra by Joseph Haydn and a collection of twelve symphonies by Lambert Kraus. The works of this type in these religious establishments were acquired between the 1750s and the 1780s, the period when Austrian monasteries also obtained most of their symphonic repertoire. The Josephine reforms of the 1780s not only closed several monasteries but also curtailed the musical accompaniment to the liturgy, thereby automatically reducing the Church’s demand for symphonies.

By the end of the century the symphonic repertoire in the Habsburg monarchy had become oriented almost exclusively towards local production. This is characteristic of the Gorizian region and of the repertoire of the Philharmonic Society in Ljubljana, founded in 1794. In the Gorizian collection works by popular composers such as Adalbert Gyrowetz and Ignaz Pleyel predominate. There are only two symphonies by J. Haydn, the first and third symphonies by Beethoven and none at all by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. There is also a collection of six symphonies by the Venetian Angelo Baldan and two symphonies by German Otto Carl Erdmann von Kospoth.

Certain parallels can be drawn between the Gorizian repertoire and that of the Philharmonic Society, since the latter also favoured local repertoire (by composers born and/or active within the monarchy). Moreover, works by the same composers – primarily the most prolific and popular composers of the day – are found in both collections,
including some absolutely identical works. Unlike the Gorizians, however, the Society
acquired works by Dittersdorf and Paul Wranitzky, plus – in contrast – several Mozart
symphonies. Not surprisingly, the predominant composer listed in the Society’s cata-
logue of works drawn up in 1804 was clearly Haydn. Among the composers of sympho-
pies held by the Society, only Franz Christoph Neubauer and Louis Massoneau were
non-Austrian; their works were, however, available for purchase in Vienna.

In the first decade of the nineteenth century the repertoire of the Philharmonic So-
ciety was still focused local composers from the Habsburg Monarchy. However, from
1816 onwards the new symphonies that were acquired were mainly works by German
composers. The symphonies were being programmed less frequently and not in their
entirety. There are practically no more symphonies found on the Society’s programs
from 1830 onwards. They were substituted with overtures and concertos.

The printed editions preserved in Slovenian archives are generally first editions. This
proves that the Society and the Gorizian music enthusiasts were keen to acquire
the most recently composed symphonies. This was definitely true of the Philharmonic
Society, whose catalogue citing works acquired by June 1804 includes the sinfonia to
an opera that had been premiered in January 1804 as well as Beethoven’s Second
Symphony, which first became available in print that same year.

It is difficult to write about the Slovenian symphonic repertoire in the eighteenth
century, because Slovenia as such at this time did not exist. The vast majority of the
population regarded themselves as belonging first and foremost to a certain duchy,
and in consequence to the Habsburg monarchy. We cannot, therefore, properly speak
of an expressly Slovenian symphonic repertoire and Slovenian composers; however,
we may in compensation regard Austrian creativity legitimately as “local” creativity.
In this light, the modern Slovenian territory was a peripheral but integral component
of a large and culturally rich state. Although there were no (truly rich) patrons in this
periphery capable of commissioning vast numbers of symphonies, there were at least
consumers who in their more modest way contributed to the cultivation and growth of
the symphonic repertoire, whereby new symphonies continued to be written so long as
there was a continued demand for them.

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