Musical Life of Pensioners in the Slovenian Carinthia

The main purpose of this doctoral dissertation was to research and present musical life of pensioners in Slovenian Carinthia and to suggest new strategies and improvements of the analyzed state, based on the fundamentals of applied ethnomusicology. The dissertation on 355 pages is organised into five chapters and includes 80 attachments (graphs, tables, photographs). The introductory chapter presents theoretical and methodological fundamentals of the dissertation. The following three chapters address the pensioners and music in general (second chapter), in Slovenia (third chapter) and in the Slovenian Carinthia (fourth chapter). Between the second and the forth chapter, the emphasis on the findings of other researchers is proportionally decreasing and the significance of the author’s empirical research is increasing. In the foreground of the fifth chapter is the potential of applied ethnomusicology in improving the situation identified in the previous chapters. An example of efficient application of the research findings concludes this chapter. The dissertation ends with a Conclusion and References.

This dissertation is the first extensive scientific study concerning the musical life of people in their third life period in the Slovenian realm. The study is based on field research over several years and the critical insights into the relevant studies of other authors, who have conducted research in various parts of the world. The results suggest that Slovenia lags behind not only in the organized use of music for the welfare of the elderly, but on the whole scale of social geriatrics, gerontology and gerontagogy; that indicates the need for a strategic systematic improvement.

In the foreground of the research of musical activities and practices of Carinthian pensioners in the present and recent past, is a person in his or her wide socio-cultural context, with special emphasis on music-related interactions, rather than music as a product. In terms of research from global to local, the dissertation presents several examples of good practice, pointing to individual cases from abroad, from Slovenia and from Slovenian Carinthia.

Pensioners organize their activities within the frameworks of the Association of Pensioners of Slovenia and other organizations, institutions and associations. Their musical activities are most intense on the local level, either solely pensioners or in mixed-age groups. Most common are vocal groups, followed by folklore groups and brass bands. The choice is mostly a privilege of those pensioners who live “at home”, while the ones who live “in the home” (a retirement home) are in most cases dependent on what their institution offers. This research provides evidence of a vivid musical life in retirement homes, which is comparable all over Slovenia. Singing predominates, the residents identify usually with folk and folklorized songs, and the accordion is the preferred musical instrument.

In the main part of the dissertation, musical activities of Carinthian pensioners are discussed in terms of listening, performance, aesthetic appreciation, and the uses...
and functions of music. The elderly in Carinthia are mostly active in choirs (male, female, or mixed), which in some cases of exclusively pensioner groups, due to problems of aging and losing members, transform to small vocal groups. Although many of the interviewed seniors used to be actively involved in the performance of folk-pop music, such ensembles composed solely of pensioners do not exist. Exceptions are smaller occasional groups of this type (e.g. a trio or quartet) and groups of folk musicians or singers. In the field of folklore dancing, the only exclusively senior group is KD Prežihov Voranc from Ravne and to an extent (with some younger members) the folklore group Majstrski from Mislinja. Among the twelve active Carinthian brass bands, not a single one is composed exclusively of pensioners.

In their youth, Carinthian pensioners were influenced by traditional folk music more than by any other music, thus it remained the core, around which they have built both their passive and active repertoires. The latter differs according to their working field and specific groups, but in present time folk and folklorized songs in different renditions for choirs or vocal groups predominate. The specific notion of aesthetic interpretation of these songs is in the thesis named “Carinthian sense.”

Special attention in the dissertation is paid to functions and the uses of music, since they are the key to understanding the meanings, roles, impacts and power of music among Carinthian pensioners. The results of the research show that the aim of their musical activities is not merely entertainment, but also education, expression of feelings, impact on the individual (behavior, well-being, mood, health), and contribution to culture. Analysis of the researched parameters enabled an understanding of their attitudes towards music, as well as their need for it. Music means relaxation, often comfort, mental exercise, a way of expression and for some even a way of life.

The study finds that most women, mainly due to family obligations, became musically active in their third life period, when the musical activities of their partners have started to decline or even to cease. The study also shows that music today has lost the powerful connecting function that it had during their youth, for which technological development is partly responsible.

The dissertation is marked by two specific characteristics. In terms of methodology, it features experimental ethnography based on a conscious relationship between the two roles embodied by the author; the role of a musician, who has been an integral part of some life stories of Carinthian pensioners, and the role of a researcher, who explores these life stories and interprets them in a broader context, taking into account the connections between music and the people of the third life period. The last part of the dissertation stands out in terms of the organizational and the ideological view. Based on the theoretical foundations of applied ethnomusicology, it upgrades ordinary goals of research work and demonstrates the use of the gained knowledge and understanding for the benefit of the population concerned.

Such an example is a one year lasting project called “Let’s Give Them a Song”, which was dedicated mainly to the elderly in Carinthian retirement homes. Its primary purpose was to achieve, through musical interaction of two different generations, the mutual benefit for both groups. Based on previous research, a repertoire has been established, with which most of the seniors could identify. “The Singing Society Alenčice”, a
female vocal group, managed to establish effective inter-generational communication through their performances under the guidance of the author. Although the long-term consequences of the project have not yet been measured, it exceeded the score of the basic objectives and purpose. With different presentations, including those at conferences, it played an important role in raising public awareness and spreading into new, international dimensions.

The field research for this dissertation is based on the participant observation methodology. In the collecting of information, the qualitative approach was predominant, most commonly in the form of interviews. In them, photographs of the past musical activities of the interviewees proved to be an excellent communicational tool that enabled them to remember past experiences. The whole process was documented with video, audio, and photo equipment. The dissertation, supervised by Prof. Dr. Svanibor Pettan, reveals the musical and everyday life of pensioners in Slovenian Carinthia in the present and in the recent past.

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