

“A Critique of Criticism”: An Attempt to Outline “More Appropriate” Sociopolitical Guidelines in Post-World War II Slovenian Music Criticism¹

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The socialist respectively communist period in Yugoslavia – which lasted from the end of the Second World War until the country’s break-up in 1991 – was not characterised by a uniform attitude towards the arts on the part of the authorities. In the immediate aftermath of the war, Yugoslav politics and, consequently, culture were strongly based on the Soviet model. It was effectively a direct importation of an ideological programme, the responsibility for which lay with the Department for Agitation and Propaganda (Agitprop), founded in 1945 with the primary function of ensuring the ideological and political education of the masses along the lines of the Soviet cultural doctrine of Zhdanovism. As early as 1948, however, following the split between Tito and Stalin, there was a break with the Soviet Cominform, and consequently a greater political reliance on the West.

Following the dissolution of Agitprop in 1952, the direct influence of politics on culture in Slovenia was much smaller than it was in the Soviet Union. With the exception of the phenomenon of the “*mass song*”, one cannot talk about a uniform model of socialist realist art in Slovenia. For

1 The paper was presented in a shorter version entitled “Vprašanje avtonomnosti glasbene kritike v slovenskem dnevnem časopisju ob praznovanju kantate ‘Stara pravda’ Matije Tomca: med estetsko sodbo in političnim konstruktom” [Functional and autonomous in music at the premiere of Matija Tomc’s cantata *Stara pravda*] at the international musicological symposium “Functional and autonomous in music: images and meanings” (19–20 October 2006, Musicological Institute at the ZRC SAZU) and published in *De musica disserenda* 3, no. 1 (2007): 101–15, <https://doi.org/10.3986/dmdo3.1.09>.

example, Niall O'Loughlin, the author of a comprehensive historical overview of 20th century Slovenian music, does not use the term "socialist art" in his description of the post-1945 period, unlike some other authors.² Lojze Lebič speaks of "*normative aesthetics*",³ while Ivan Klemenčič speaks of the "*prescribed model*".⁴ The latter is supposed to mean primarily the abandonment of autonomous aesthetics and the developmental discontinuity of Slovenian music. Although socialist realism prescribed things on a formal level, the model of this ideologically conditioned art was never clearly defined in Slovenia or anywhere else. Indeed, as Marina Frolova-Walker demonstrated at the recent online conference organised by the University of Leipzig and the University of Cambridge,⁵ a uniform model of socialist realism cannot even be detected in the Soviet Union of that period.

Slovenian policy with regard to cultural questions was almost entirely autonomous, even with respect to the Yugoslav authorities, and politics did not involve itself in concrete musical or aesthetic issues. Composers and musical institutions in Slovenia were, of course, dependent on certain apparatchiks in the institutional hierarchy who were responsible for distributing money. The regime did not prohibit contacts between Slovenian composers and their foreign counterparts, although in practice it was extremely difficult for Slovenian composers to systematically establish personal contacts with the West, since financial assistance for trips abroad was limited and carefully allocated. During the first decade after the war, cooperation with some Western European musical cultures was virtually impossible. More or less carefully selected delegations of Yugoslav composers were sent to contemporary music festivals.⁶ In a similar way, in the difficult conditions following the Second World War, Slovenian choral creativity as well

2 Niall O'Loughlin, *Novejša glasba v Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 2000).

3 Lojze Lebič, "Glasovi časov (II). O slovenski glasbeni ustvarjalnosti," *Naši zbori* 45, no. 5–6 (1993): 114.

4 Ivan Klemenčič, "Glasba in totalitarna država na Slovenskem," in *Temna stran me-seca: kratka zgodovina totalitarizma v Sloveniji 1945–1990*, ed. Drago Jančar (Ljubljana: Nova revija, 1998), 325.

5 Marina Frolova-Walker, "Socialist Realism in Music, Globally," (a Royal Musical Association-affiliated one-day conference hosted by the University of Cambridge and Universität Leipzig, July 1, 2022, virtual).

6 Leon Stefanija, "Totalitarnost režima in glasba," in *In memoriam Danilo Pokorn*, eds. Nataša Cigoj Krstulović, Tomaž Faganel and Metoda Kokole (Ljubljana: Muzikološki inštitut ZRC SAZU, 2004), 139.

as publications, and with them also music criticism, failed to reach the level they had attained at the beginning of the century.⁷

The decline of church music after the Second World War

Alongside operetta and jazz, the most marginalised musical genre was, without a doubt, church music, which before the Second World War had enjoyed what could even be called a dominant role in Slovenia. As part of the bourgeois tradition of the recent past, church music had already seen its presence in Slovenia greatly limited by the dissolution of the Glasbena Matica, the principal Slovenian music society at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. Contributing to its almost total marginalisation in the most oppressive Agitprop years immediately after the end of the Second World War were the abolition of what was then the country's only school of church music – the Organ School in Ljubljana – and the closure of the oldest music periodical in the Slovenian language, *Cerkveni glasbenik* ("The Church Musician").⁸ Performing artists also only exceptionally performed church compositions. Among notable such events we find a concert in support of the Red Cross held on 4 November 1946, when the violinist Zlatko Baloković played Schubert's *Ave Maria* as a supplement; *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day 1692* by Purcell, played by the Ljubljana Radio Orchestra at the concert on 11 February 1947, conducted by Alan Bush at the Union Hall; a concert dedicated to J. S. Bach on 30 March 1950, where the conductor Danilo Švara performed two of the composer's airs with the Academy of Music orchestra (one was from *St. Matthew Passion*), and solemn concerts dedicated to Jacobus Handl Gallus, held from 7 to 12 November 1950, where the some of his motets were performed.⁹

Evidence that the presence not only of church music but, more broadly, of a Catholic mentality was indeed undesirable in public life is provid-

7 For example, the editorial board of one of the central music magazines of the time, *Naši zbori* ("Our Choirs") was deeply concerned about the state of Slovenian music culture after the Second World War, as neither the production nor the quality of post-war choral creativity reached the pre-war level. Two of the main composers at the time, Karol Pahor and Janko Ravnik, saw the causes of this in the lack of compositional training and the shift towards instrumental music. However, it seems likely that the causes may also lie in the ideological exposure of the genre in question, which is most unambiguous in the text. Karol Pahor, "Kriza v naši zborovski glasbi," *Naši zbori* 7, no. 3 (1952): 6–8. See also: Janko Ravnik, "Še nekaj besed o krizi v zborovski glasbi," *Naši zbori* 8, no. 1–2 (1953): 2–3.

8 The Church Musician began to be published again only in 1976.

9 Stefanija, "Totalitarnost režima in glasba," 140.

ed not only by the statements of political leaders of the time, among them Boris Kidrič, the first prime minister of the National Government of Slovenia, who at a meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovenia spoke of the “*renewed petit bourgeois pressure from the clergy*,”¹⁰ but also by an incident involving one of the leading Slovenian composers of sacred music of the 20th century, Matija Tomc,¹¹ who was himself a clergyman. The latter served as a warning to all contemporary composers of sacred music, and also to critics.

Cantata Stara pravda (“The Old Rights”) from Matija Tomc

In 1956 the Tone Tomšič Academic Choir decided to mark the 10th anniversary¹² of its activity under conductor Radovan Gobec with a jubilee concert. As director of the choir, Gobec decided that the choir should, if possible, perform an original Slovenian full-length choral composition at this concert, so in as early as October 1954 he contacted Tomc, an “*old friend of the Tone Tomšič Academic Choir*,” with a request for him to compose a work.¹³ He had also contacted other composers, but failed to persuade any of them to get involved.¹⁴ Despite certain reservations, Tomc, who was an

10 At this meeting Kidrič identified the principal problem of the Slovenian cultural environment facing the communist authorities at that time as “*petit bourgeois pressure from the clergy*.” Darinka Drnovšek, *Zapisniki politbiroja CK ZPS/ZKS 1945–1954* (Ljubljana: Arhivsko društvo Slovenije, 2000), 257.

11 The composer Marijan Lipovšek wrote in *Slovenska glasbena revija* (“Slovenian Music Review”) in 1957: “*Undoubtedly, after Adamič, he is our first choral composer*.” Marijan Lipovšek, “Koncertna sezona 1955/56,” *Slovenska glasbena revija* 4, no. 1 (1957): 15.

12 It was the 10th anniversary of the academic choir, which was directed by Radovan Gobec during this period. The Slovenian daily newspapers seem to believe that the choir was formed after the war, as they do not mention the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the choir’s male section, which was led by France Marolt between 1926 and 1941. Shortly after the Second World War, Gobec continued the tradition of Marolt’s choir, but he mostly included new singers and also reclassified the group as a mixed choir. In the autumn of 1953, it was decided at the general assembly that Gobec’s academic choir would take over the name of Marolt’s choir, and then change it slightly to the Tone Tomšič Academic Choir. Simona Moličnik Šivic, *Mladi že 80 let: Akademski pevski zbor »Tone Tomšič«* (Ljubljana: Narodna in univerzitetna knjižnica, 2006), 28.

13 Gobec is said to have addressed his request for the setting to “*an old friend of the APZ and Marolt’s colleague and their honorary member, the composer Matija Tomc*.” Anon., “Akademski pevski zbor v jubilejnem letu,” *Slovenski poročevalec* 16, no. 226 (27 September 1955): 4, <http://www.dlib.si/?URN=URN:NBN:SI:doc-KZVEQZGV>.

14 Edo Škulj, “Tomčeve kantate,” *Tomčev zbornik*, ed. Edo Škulj (Ljubljana: Družina, 1997), 19.

honorary member of the choir and had a particular fondness for it, accepted Gobec's invitation. Since the choir's jubilee coincided with the centenary of the birth of the poet-priest Anton Aškerc, the composer, prompted by Gobec, decided to set Aškerc's epic poem *Stara pravda* ("The Old Rights") to music.

Before beginning the process of composition, Tomc foresaw a number of difficulties connected with the great length¹⁵ of the poem, the number of performers required and, in particular, the frequent metrical shifts¹⁶ in Aškerc's text – all problems which had discouraged composers from attempting to set this monumental work in the almost 70 years since its publication.

In order to be able to use the full text of the poem, Tomc (following the example of Honegger's famous oratorio *Le Roi David*) added a reciter to the vocal sections, as this was the only way the full text could be delivered in a relatively short time. As there are several places in the text that also require soloists, he used two soloists, adding a piano where necessary to support them.¹⁷

The second problem Tomc faced was whether the piece should be purely vocal or vocal-instrumental, as is usual for cantatas. Tomc preferred an exclusively vocal composition, as the Academic Choir Tone Tomšič was only a vocal ensemble. The planned concerts in Zagreb, Celje, Trbovlje, Maribor and Belgrade finally dissuaded the composer from orchestrating

15 In 1980, on the occasion of the second performance of *Stara pravda* at the concert of Consortium Musicum on 16 May 1980, Tomc wrote in the concert programme: "First the length of the poem itself. Art has nothing to do with mathematics, but in this case it comes in handy. *Stara pravda* has 835 verses. In contrast, Prešeren's *Sonetni venec* ("A Wreath of Sonnets"), set by Lucijan Marija Škerjanc, has only 210 verses, i.e. around a quarter the number in *Stara pravda*. If *Stara pravda* was set in a similar way to *Sonetni venec*, it could have needed four full-length concerts. But of course only one was desired." Matija Tomc, *Uglasbitev Stare pravde. Koncert ob osemdesetletnici skladatelja Matije Tomca*, Ljubljana, 16 May 1980 [a concert programme of the Consortium musicum Society].

16 Aškerc would often suddenly change the rhythm in *Stara pravda*, as if something had broken. For the composer, who often found it difficult to adapt the rhythm of the composition to the poem, a new difficulty arose, as this change in the poem lasts only one or two verses. It must therefore have taken considerable effort for the composer to adapt these metrical changes in the poem to the composition's rhythmic progression. Ibid.

17 This was a deliberate move, as evidenced by the report in the *Slovenski poročevalec* in 1956 (signed "bp"), which says that the dramatised recitative had an excellent effect and in no way disturbed the musical harmony of the concert. BP, "Pojó, pojó, da še nikdar tako ...," *Slovenski poročevalec* 17, no. 62 (14 March 1956): 5, <http://www.dlib.si/?URN=URN:NBN:SI:doc-PI7QG7B7>.

the work, as “no choir, even if it were financially well off, could take an orchestra with it on tours to other cities, least of all a student choir.”¹⁸

The ten-part poem symbolises the heroic epic of the Slovenian and Croatian peasant revolts, which reached their tragic culmination with the “coronation” of Matija Gubec in Zagreb. Gubec was the leader of a peasant revolt that united Slovenian and Croatian peasants and was violently suppressed in 1573. On 15 February of that year, Gubec was crowned with a red-hot iron crown in a mock coronation – a gesture intended to ridicule the rebels – and then quartered like a common brigand in Zagreb’s St Mark’s Square.

Regarding his chosen form of musical expression, the composer wrote that he wished to “combine Aškerc’s healthy realism with a form of musical expression that is modern, but not exaggeratedly so.”¹⁹ The work, in fact, contains no radically modern approaches to compositional technique. Tomc commented as follows:

Surely it would not be a good idea to go back seventy years to the time when the poem *Stara pravda* was written, that is to the age of reading societies. However, it was not appropriate to set a composition intended for the widest possible audience in the confines of a contemporary extreme – let’s call it atonality.²⁰

From a musical point of view, then, it could not have excited controversy even among the keenest advocates of the popular and simple in music. Not only that, but in its magnificent choral passages the work is occasionally reminiscent of the mass songs from Partisan celebrations that could be heard everywhere in that period. The work received numerous plaudits from Tomc’s fellow composers. Marijan Lipovšek, for example, ranked it among “by far the most important vocal-instrumental works we have, alongside Škerjanc and Lajovic.”²¹

The view of the critics before the concert

How, then, did the critics or journalists of the day view the preparations for the jubilee concert, in a period that was hardly well-disposed towards the Catholic cultural community? Before the event, a number of critics (includ-

18 Tomc, *Uglasbitev stare pravde*.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Lipovšek, “Koncertna sezona 1955/56,” 15.

ing the composer Jože Gregorc, then head of the music department at Radio Maribor), announced a "*mighty cantata*"²² for choir, soloists, reciter and piano "to mark the 10th anniversary of successful work by the Tone Tomšič Academic Choir".²³ The work was said to have made a "*rich contribution to Slovenian choral literature*,"²⁴ and was among the composer's "*most important creations*."²⁵

With the exception of an encomium to Aškerc's freethinking mentality, which had apparently led this conscious liberal to "*courageously renounce his vocation – the priesthood*,"²⁶ no ideological positions of any kind can be detected in the writings of contemporary critics, who limited themselves to announcing a cultural event that in terms of the quality not only of the performance, but also of the work itself, as an artistic creation, in many respects transcended the provincial parameters of the Slovenian vocal-instrumental music of the period.

The "incident in the Union Hall"

The "*countless rehearsals before the first performance*,"²⁷ as they are described by Matjaž Kmecl, a member of the choir at the time, were followed on 12 March 1956 by the premiere in the Union Hall (the concert hall of Ljubljana's Grand Hotel Union). Like a number of party dignitaries,²⁸ headed

22 J. P., "Pred jubilejnim koncertom," *Ljubljanski dnevnik* 6, no. 58 (8 March 1956): 4.

23 Ibid.

24 Jože Gregorc, "Jubilejni koncert ob desetletnici Akademskega pevskega zbora," *Ljubljanski dnevnik* 6, no. 67 (1956): 4.

25 Bogdan Pogačnik, "Pred jubilejnim koncertom Akademskega pevskega zbora," *Teledenska tribuna* 4, no. 10 (8 March 1956): 9.

26 Due to disputes with the Bishop of Lavant, who allegedly accused Aškerc of interpreting Church matters in his own way, Aškerc asked for retirement in 1898 after seventeen years of priestly service. Aškerc, a staunch liberal, is said to have come under fierce attack from the clerical camp. The daily newspapers claimed that some intellectuals decided to study theology due to the poor financial situation the nation was facing, which was said to have "*destroyed the life goals of young, capable Slovenian intellectuals and brought them to the seminary*." J. P., "Pred jubilejnim koncertom," 4.

27 Matjaž Kmecl, "In memoriam Radovan Gobec (1. 6. 1909–14. 4. 1995)," *Naši zbori* 47, no. 1–3 (1995): 1.

28 The most prominent representatives of social life present at the premiere of Tomc's cantata included: the Vice-Chairman of the Assembly of the People's Republic of Slovenia, Ferdo Kozak; the Vice-Chairman of the Executive Council of the Republic of Slovenia, Marijan Brecelj; Member of the Executive Council Boris Kocjančič; and the Rector of the University of Ljubljana, Anton Kuhelj. Anon., "Jubilejni koncert APZ," *Slovenski poročevalec* 17, no. 61 (13 March 1956): 8, <http://www.dlib.si/?URN=URN:NBN:SI:DOC-75WMOAJR>.

by Boris Zihlerl, the patron of the concert, the composer Tomc attended the first performance of his cantata “*in plain clothes and sat unobtrusively in the third row*.”²⁹ We should mention that Boris Zihlerl was at the time a senior Communist Party functionary, better known in this context as the former director of Agitprop. Less well known is the fact that in 1955 and 1956 Zihlerl was also occasionally active as a reporter for the two principal Slovenian newspapers, *Slovenski poročevalec* (“The Slovenian Reporter”) and *Ljubljanski dnevnik* (“The Ljubljana Daily”), and thus had good connections with both. Otherwise, as pointed out by Aleš Gabrič, one of the leading experts on cultural-political conditions in Slovenia after the Second World War, Zihlerl was apparently

the most orthodox of all [in the party leadership at the time], someone who at every step saw risks of divergence from the party line in artistic works and in people who, for whatever reason, deviated from the declared political orientation.³⁰

The concert was a triumphant success. The audience, which filled every last seat in the Union Hall, rewarded the performers and composer with tumultuous applause. Despite a few minor failings in the choir’s interpretation of the work, the critics reporting on the event agreed unanimously that, as Gregorc puts it, “*the choir was fully equal to the demands placed on the ensemble by Tomc’s setting*.”³¹ Writing in *Slovenski poročevalec*, Bogdan Pogačnik, who would later publish a monograph on one of Slovenia’s best known vocal ensembles, *Slovenski oktet* (Slovenian Octet), even referred to the “*fine-sounding intermezzos of sacred music*.”³² Zmaga Kumer, later to become one of Slovenia’s leading ethnomusicologists, noted enthusiastically in her review of the concert that

the creative power of Tomc’s artistic personality, his original musical expression and his tireless activity place him among the most prominent contemporary Slovenian composers and it appears likely that his name will feature in many more concert programmes in the future.³³

29 Matjaž Kmecl, “Vrtičkarjevi zimski dnevi,” *Sobotna priloga, Delo* 42, no. 12 (2000): 38.

30 Aleš Gabrič, “Zajčeva Požgana trava v očeh partijskih ideologov,” *Nova revija* 13, no. 147–148 (1994): 168.

31 Gregorc, *Jubilejni koncert ob desetletnici Akademskega pevskega zbora*, 4.

32 BP, “Pojó, pojó, da še nikdar tako ...,” 5.

33 Zmaga Kumer, *Matija Tomc. Koncert ob desetletnici zbora in v počastitev stoletnice rojstva Antona Aškerca*, Ljubljana, 12 March 1956 [a concert programme of the choir APZ Tone Tomšič].

Nevertheless, what became known as "*the incident in the Union Hall*"³⁴ turned all these expectations on their head. The unfortunate occurrence met with a harsh response from certain orthodox party ideologues who resented above all the fact that at the end of the concert the choir chose to honour the compositional contribution of the Catholic intellectual Matija Tomc. Before the concert the choir's management had, in fact, been explicitly instructed that the cultural event must take place without any such tribute being paid to the composer. Despite this, the conductor Gobec presented Tomc with a gold laurel wreath and the composer gave two barely perceptible bows to the enthusiastic audience from his place in the third row. It appears that the success of a concert consisting of music incorporating sacred intermezzos³⁵ was too much for the authorities of the period and, as a consequence, the incident also required sanctions in the sphere of music criticism.

The choir director Radovan Gobec was forced to resign from the party the very next day, and was later summoned for "*re-education*"³⁶ because of his collaboration with Tomc. The pressure on the choir was so great that it also lost its conductor and almost broke up. According to Mitja Gobec, his father Radovan once told him that he had to report to the secretary of the OK ZKS Ljubljana (the local communist committee), Janez Vipotnik, the day after the premiere of *Stara pravda* because of the above-mentioned "*incident*". Vipotnik and Gobec are said to have known each other and been on good terms. Mitja Gobec writes that at the above-mentioned meeting Vipotnik asked Gobec: "*Radovan, do you have the Party book with you can you show it to me?*" Gobec allegedly showed him the book and Vipotnik then "*deposited*" it in a desk drawer, thus expelling Gobec from the Communist Party.³⁷

Gobec's resignation as conductor could not take immediate effect, as the choir was about to embark on a concert tour. After the last concert in Zagreb, Gobec stepped down as conductor of the choir. According to the account by Gobec's wife, Jožica Gobec, it seems he resigned mainly because

34 S. B., "Ven iz teme. Ob XII. občnem zboru Akademskega pevskega zbora 'Tone Tomšič,'" *Tribuna* 5, no. 16–17 (1957): 4.

35 BP, "Pojó, pojó, da še nikdar tako ...," 5.

36 Kmecl, "Vrtičkarjevi zimski dnevi," 38.

37 Mitja Gobec, email message to Jernej Weiss, April 13, 2007.

he disagreed with the repressive measures taken by the authorities, as he was extremely disappointed with their conduct, which he opposed.³⁸

“A Critique of Criticism”

On this occasion, political sanctions did not end at the personal level but also demanded a systematic response in the sphere of music criticism in general. The editor-in-chief of *Slovenski poročevalec*, Sergej Vošnjak, later an editor at some of Slovenia's most important media organisations, took advantage of the affair to attack critics who, in his view, judged art purely on the basis of artistic criteria without taking sociopolitical perspectives into account. In a lengthy article entitled “A Critique of Criticism” – which less than a month after the incident occupied more than half a page in the *Kulturni razgledi* (“Cultural perspectives”) section of the newspaper's 8 April 1956 issue – he wrote, among other things:

I believe that the essential weakness of our cultural criticism lies in the fact that it does not treat each individual work as a whole and review it in terms of its general social role but, instead, attempts to separate the “aesthetic” part, one might even say the craftsmanship, which is held to be the subject of art criticism, from the general social importance of the work, something which should be addressed (preferably as little as possible!) by “political” critics. [...] The Tone Tomšič Academic Choir celebrated its 10th anniversary with choral works. One would have expected the essential focus of criticism to have been on the fact that such a choir, given its character and its name, should have said something new, something progressive with its song. The critics, however, spoke only about the sound and the harmony of the voices. They also spoke in general terms of the problem of composing individual song cycles, while avoiding the idea that the battle for the old rights did not consist of petitions to heaven, but instead was difficult and cruel. Criticism of this kind is, of course, of no benefit to the Academic Choir, since it is not the job of critics merely to offer formal praise. Instead, criticism should help the choir take a better path, towards greater successes, for which the question of whether this movement will be more or less fortissimo is not the most important thing.³⁹

38 However, the critics back then “understood” the event in a slightly different way, linking his resignation with his acceptance of the position of director of the Ljubljana Festival. Gobec would therefore no longer have enough time to run the choir. S. B., “Pro et contra, Peti in peti,” *Tribuna* 5, no. 14 (1957): 4.

39 Sergej Vošnjak, “Kritika kritike,” *Slovenski poročevalec* 17, no. 83 (1956): 6.

This appeal seems to have found its mark, since the earlier professional reviews that were considered too favourable to Tomc now gave way to a "better" type of criticism, in other words criticism that was primarily concerned with sociopolitical reality. I should mention that the majority of the later critics remain anonymous, since their initials, which only appear in newspapers on a few occasions following Vošnjak's intervention, do not allow us to establish their identities. Thus it was that a work that had previously been described as Tomc's "*mighty cantata*"⁴⁰ was henceforth, in the articles that followed Vošnjak's appeal, deliberately painted with the colours of mediocrity.

In order to illustrate even more clearly what a significant change of attitude this was, I should quote a few extracts from news items published in the wake of Vošnjak's piece: "*Last November the choir counted ninety-four members. Today its numbers have fallen below seventy.*"⁴¹ The same author writes that "*Following this months-long crisis, the conductor Janez Bole has at last taken pity on the choir.*"⁴² The daily press included headlines such as "*Out of the Darkness,*"⁴³ reflecting the view that "*the culture of Slovenian choral singing is today greatly diminished despite receiving generous financial support.*"⁴⁴

The initial reviews of Tomc's work – too favourable and insufficiently socially engaged – thus had to make way for "*more appropriate*" criticism bemoaning the fact that such a revolutionary ensemble should have chosen to mark its 10th anniversary by singing "*chorales*" and "*petitions to heaven.*"⁴⁵

Tomc originally intended to reply, via the newspapers, that no more than eighteen bars of music in the entire two-hour work could be described as a "*chorale*", or, more accurately, as music of religious content, and that even this passage could only be characterised as sacred music by virtue of the nature of Aškerc's text. The passage in question appears in the fifth movement (passage 4), entitled *Tlaka* ("Serfdom").

40 J. P., "Pred jubilejnim koncertom," 4.

41 Signed by an anonymous writer with the initials S. B. whose identity remains unknown. S. B., "Ven iz teme," 4.

42 S. B., "Pro et contra," 4.

43 S. B., "Ven iz teme," 4.

44 BP, "Pojó, pojó, da še nikdar tako ...," 5.

45 Vošnjak, "Kritika kritike," 6.

4 Calmly but always ironically (not too slow)

p So, sure - ly you've said nine rose - ma - ries to - day, for

p So, sure - ly

you are a ho - ly man, long may you pray, *mf* now

our backs can feel the load, oh Lord, now our backs can

feel the load, oh Lord. And in church yes - ter - day how I did see you sigh, oh

subito pp *they imitate (not too fast)*

I beat them too lit - tle, you seemed to cry, kneel - ing there in the pew near the al - tar!

p *Rit.*

Example 1: Stara pravda, movement 5 ("Serfdom"), passage 4.

In this passage, Aškerc mentions how the lord of the manor oppresses his serfs by having them beaten. It is, of course, possible that one of the party grandees present at the concert saw an allusion to themselves in this section of the cantata. It should be pointed out that the memory of post-war revolutionary violence was still very much alive, particularly in Catholic circles.

In reply to Vošnjak's "*critique of criticism*", Tomc intended to write that the controversial passage, supposedly a "*manifestation of reactionary, anti-popular tendencies*," was actually marked in the score with the words "*ironically*" and "*mockingly*". In the last three bars of this passage, in fact, the choir – representing the peasants – sings a recitative in mocking imitation of the lord of the manor. Tomc later thought better of it, however, since writing such a letter, which in all likelihood would not have been published anyway, may only have made matters worse.⁴⁶ The view that Vošnjak's article was a milder version of Zhdanovite cultural-political score-settling was clearly expressed by the composer Marijan Lipovšek in his own reply in *Slovenska glasbena revija* ("Slovenian Music Review").⁴⁷ Lipovšek was the only member of the musical, Catholic and intellectual elite who dared pen a public condemnation of what he considered a questionable attempt at political interference in the daily press:

Critics failed to evaluate this work correctly. Those who reviewed it unfortunately included journalists who attempted, with amateurish observations, not only to belittle the composition but also to impute "religious" intentions to Tomc that he undoubtedly did not have. In doing so, they uttered such nonsense that it was, of course, clear as day to us musicians where all this was going. The general public, however, which has respect for the musical problems of composition but also, of course, for journalists, particularly when the journalist is the editor-in-chief of one of the country's two biggest newspapers, likes to believe that things are as the journalist says they are, especially when it is easier and safer to put one's tail between one's legs. And that is what the majority of our critics did.⁴⁸

In an earlier edition of *Slovenska glasbena revija*, Lipovšek wrote:

It is my understanding that Tomc is not employed in a position that corresponds to his talent, his industry and his past achievements

46 Kmecl, "Vrtičkarjevi zimski dnevi," 38.

47 Lipovšek, "Koncertna sezona 1955/56," 15.

48 Ibid.

as a composer. To banish such a composer to a lower gymnasium in Domžale is the very height of shortsightedness. This is not how culture is supported.⁴⁹

Open controversy was, of course, disagreeable to party apparatchiks, with the result that even Lipovšek soon had to stop speaking out on the matter. Despite the apparently softer positions with regard to the Catholic intelligentsia that had been adopted that same year at a meeting of the Executive Committee of the League of Communist of Slovenia,⁵⁰ the authorities interpreted the whole affair as an attempt at strengthening Catholic ideological influence. At a meeting of the executive committee of the Central Committee of the Slovenian Union of Communists on 29 October 1956, it was agreed that concessions could be made on some issues, and that certain rules on the religious press, monument protection, church buildings, etc., could be relaxed.

Decades later, in 1973, a year that saw numerous celebrations of the fourth centenary of the peasant revolts in Slovenia, Tomc wrote a letter to Radovan Gobec that appears to have been dictated by long-standing bitterness (following the incident at the premiere, *Stara pravda* was never again included in a concert programme). In it, he writes with some resignation:

That even this year there would be no performance of *Stara pravda* was immediately obvious to me as soon as I saw the composition of the commission responsible for organising all this year's celebrations.⁵¹

Decisions on the suitability of individual works and artists were taken by ideological commissions. In 1973 Tomc probably believed that the “*qualified public*” might have come to its senses by then, and that in the more liberal times that followed the government of Stane Kavčič, in the huge enthusiasm surrounding the celebrations of the peasant revolts, someone might have remembered his cantata. Yet it was not to be.

As a result of the affair Tomc was compelled to withdraw from public life, while the two key figures in the regime's cultural and political operation, Vošnjak as editor of Slovenia's main daily newspaper and Ziherl as president of the ideological commission of the Central Communist Com-

49 Marijan Lipovšek, “Iz našega glasbenega življenja. Edicije DZS,” *Slovenska glasbena revija* 3, no. 1–2 (1955): 41.

50 Aleš Gabrič, *Socialistična kulturna revolucija. Slovenska kulturna politika 1953–1962* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1995), 185.

51 A letter from Matija Tomc to Radovan Gobec (Domžale, 1973) is preserved by Gobec's wife, Jožica Gobec.

mittee, both went on to occupy key positions in the former regime. Vošnjak, for example, became the director of the Government Information Office, while Zihlerl became the Minister for Science and Culture of the Socialist Republic of Slovenia. The affair did not, of course, only involve these two individuals, but the entire broad spectrum of apparatchiks who controlled almost all the key positions in the former regime.

Tomc's artistic liquidation was, in the first place, about settling scores with the clergy,⁵² which, with its criticism of communist ideology, was a thorn in the side of every socialist regime. It was also about imposing discipline on the critical sphere by presenting "*more appropriate*" sociopolitical guidelines for critical writing. The critics who announced the premiere of *Stara pravda* were considered incapable of showing sufficient insight into the social uselessness of merely "*aesthetic*" writing and, consequently, unable to offer an adequate political condemnation of "*deviant*" social phenomena. As a result, these critics, who before the premiere came for the most part from professional circles, were forced to give way to anonymous "*sociopolitical workers*"⁵³ otherwise second-class critics who, taking into account above all the "*social usefulness of the work*", gave a "*more correct*" assessment of the event in question. In this case, then, effective agitation also required the setting of new, more appropriate evaluation criteria.

It should be stressed that the main music critics at the time (including Danilo Švara, Pavel Šivic, Uroš Prevorsek and Valens Vodusek), who covered concert and opera performance extensively in the daily newspapers *Slovenski poročevalec* and *Ljubljanski dnevnik*, did not cover the above incident and thus did not tread on the slippery surface of socialist-realist social demands.

On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that the treatment of Tomc represents one of the rare examples of direct, public interventions by the socialist regime in the sphere of music. For the most part, the authorities preferred to avoid public controversy in this regard. Maintaining its quasi-Western appearance of democratic socialism, the regime gave the outward impression that the decisions of artists, including musicians, were entirely autonomous, while at the same time ensuring via various mechanisms – including ideological commissions, the allocation of funds, the

52 At least two of his peers found themselves in a similarly unenviable situation as Tomc soon after the end of the Second World War: Stanko Premrl and Alojzij Mav. Stefanija, "Totalitarnost režima in glasba," 141–2.

53 Journalists were perceived by the socialist regime as being primarily cultural and political workers.

granting of travel permits and more or less emphatic warnings – that artists exercised a sufficient degree of self-censorship. Accordingly, it did not take much, in a small and provincial environment like Slovenia, to imprint a fear of sanctions in the minds of the vast majority of the population. Not even artists, performers and in some cases critics were immune to this fear, and all were careful not to cross the various red lines.

Although the socialist reality of Slovenia at that time did not see artistic liquidations, deportations or censorship such as those endured by artists in the most brutal dictatorial regimes of the period, especially in the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, the tendencies were essentially identical – the subjection of all segments of society, including music criticism, which with its broader social role, as one of the more important influencers of public opinion, was evidently seen by the regime as not insignificant.

It seems that Tomc and Aškerc were thus less disreputable in a musical or literary context for the authorities of the time than Shostakovich and Leskov (the author of the powerful and brutal novel *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*) were in Russia. In the second half of the 1950s, the new authorities in Slovenia managed to give the impression that musicians took quite autonomous decisions. This “*soft regime*” deliberately used more or less covert methods. This was a deliberate accommodation to preserve power and ensure stronger support from the West. Ostensibly, the authorities thus washed their hands and, at the same time, strengthened their faultless self-image. The scope of society’s ideological supervision was thus seemingly withdrawn from the directly creative sphere, although it remained everywhere else, both at the institutional level in culture and education and, of course, in the policy towards individuals.

It is worth emphasising that Tomc certainly had no intention of using coded language, as Shostakovich did in some of his symphonies, to subtly draw attention to evident injustices and repression on the part of the regime. As part of a cantata lasting more than two hours, the controversial section of the *Tlaka* movement passes practically unnoticed and cannot have been a reason for anyone to feel genuinely scandalised. However this seemed enough for the incident to have consequences in the field of music criticism. Following its notorious premiere, Tomc’s *Stara pravda* would not be performed again until 1980,⁵⁴ when it was sung by the choir

54 The cantata was not performed again until 16 May 1980 at a concert given by Consortium musicum under the baton of Mirko Cuderman, (*Concert for the 80th birthday of the composer Matija Tomc*, 16 May 1980, Ljubljana, Consortium musicum Society) and then on 14 May 2006 as part of the Slovenian Philharmonic’s Vocal cycle.

Consortium musicum, in a period that saw the first stirrings of the winds of change that in 1991 would eventually lead Slovenia to independence. The latter event, of course, brought with it different, more liberal views of music criticism. Along with freedom, however, certain other challenges appeared which both musical culture and music criticism continue to face today.

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