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# Serbian-Slovak ties in the field of musicology through the prism of musicological conferences “Slovak Music in Vojvodina”

**Abstract:** The paper is dedicated to the presentation of the scientific and research conferences entitled “Slovak Music in Vojvodina” which have been held in Novi Sad since 2005, i.e., to the Serbian-Slovak ties in the field of musicology as documented in the proceedings of the eponymous conference. The paper maps two main directions. The first refers to the cultural interpenetrations and influences on the conservation and improvement of original folk songs of Slovaks in Vojvodina. The second part presents interesting facts about the activities of Slovak music composers in Serbia. The most important results include the contribution of the musicological conferences during their twenty-year existence and the need to continue these activities in the future period. Namely, this study also shows that Slovak-Serbian ties in the field of musicology have not been sufficiently explored so far.

**Keywords:** Slovak Music in Vojvodina, Slovak folk songs, Mikuláš Schneider-Trnavský, Viliam Figuš-Bystrý, Martin Kmeč

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## Introduction

Music fulfils a number of functions in the life of an individual, community, or nation within its perception, apperception, and reception. Together with

the aesthetic understanding based on experience and personal attitude towards aesthetic value of a piece of music, our paper will also find significant those functions of music referring to collective identities and cultural interpenetrations. Although

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its forms have changed through time and geographic latitudes, which in itself brings an infinite number of music narratives and interpretations, the author strives to include those facts and forms that connect Serbian and Slovak musical tradition and culture. Namely, the paper presents the results of some musicological research on the community of Vojvodina Slovaks, while the backbone of the paper is the expert analysis of a total of twenty musicological conferences held in Novi Sad in the period 2005–2024.

Musicological conferences entitled “Slovak Music in Vojvodina” were initiated with the aim of researching insufficiently explored or totally unexplored and documented topics, and of contributing to the creation of new qualities in the cultural life of Slovaks in Serbia. Musicological conferences have been held every year and their actual and tangible results include the following: in the course of 20 years, these conferences have gathered a total of 104 authors who wrote 164 scientific, expert, research, documentation and essayist papers. Along with the authors from Serbia, the authors from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Croatia have also published their studies. The proceedings from the conferences have been published in Slovak (as well as in Serbian, when their authors made presentations in Serbian), with the abstracts in Slovak and in Serbian. Today, these proceedings, as direct results of these conferences, constitute frequently cited sources of scientific and research papers with various cultural topics. The conferences and proceedings became thematical in 2006m and their active participants addressed the following topics: “Questions of documenting folk art of Slovaks in Vojvodina” (2006), “Research

into traditional music of Vojvodina Slovaks” (2007), “Slovak music-folklore festivals – the present and the future” (2008), „Sixty years of Slovak music art on Novi Sad Radio” (2009), “Innovative methods in music pedagogy” (2010), “Choir singing of Vojvodina Slovaks ” (2011), “Church music of Vojvodina Slovaks ” (2012), “Slovak Vojvodina music and its visibility in Slovakia” (2013), “Musical art in human life” (2014), “Dramaturgy and management of music events” (2015), “Life and work of Martin Kmeć” (2016), “Slovak music composers acting in Vojvodina” (2017), “The contribution of Juraj Ferik Sr. and Juraj Ferik Jr. to the music life of Vojvodina Slovaks” (2018), “Research, documentation and presentation of the music of Vojvodina Slovaks” (2019), “Jubilees in the field of music and current matters in the music life of Vojvodina Slovaks” (2020), “Life and Work of Kvetoslava Čániová Benková” (2021), “Collections of Slovak folk songs from the so-called Lower Land” (2022), “To Petrovac music pedagogues and conductors Ana Medveď Sr. and Mariena Stanković-Krivak on the occasion of their life jubilees” (2023) and “Performers of vocal and instrumental classical music from the community of Vojvodina Slovaks” (2024). In addition to a large number of people from the sphere of musicology, this enterprise has also been supported by different institutions such as the Institute of Musicology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (Ústav hudobnej vedy SAV), the Literary-Music Museum of the Slovak National Library, the People’s Educational Centre from Bratislava, the Department of Aesthetics of Comenius University from Bratislava, as well as many institutions and the academic community.

As the initiator of the conferences and the author of many contributions about the music life

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Collected proceedings from the musicology conferences

Photo: Vojvodina Slovak Cultural Institute

of Vojvodina Slovaks, I will allow myself to express the belief that these conferences have quite positively influenced not only the social reflection at the given moment, but also a large number of cultural-artistic societies and organizations cherishing the Slovak music tradition in Serbia. The Vojvodina Slovak Cultural Institute, which assumed the role of the organizer in the year of its foundation (2008), and previously the Cultural Committee of the National Council of the Slovak National Minority in Serbia, have contributed to the construction of a good-quality platform for the reflection of musicological topics. Owing to the institutional support, the documentation and research work of the older generation of music ex-

perts who are no longer among us was also encouraged – exactly the ones who left a deep mark and conserved many topics from falling into oblivion. However, there is a certain deficiency in the fact that we have not succeeded in creating a broader picture of the interpenetrations of cultures and actual music influences of the environment on the culture of Vojvodina Slovaks. The exception is the monograph about Stara Pazova, in which musicologist Kristina Lomen also includes Serbian songs from the repertoire of the Slovaks in Stara Pazova (Lomen, 2021, p. 192). This work can be the very first step towards researching Slovak-Serbian ties in the field of music through the prism of musicological conferences.

## Studying the impact of the environment on the preservation and conservation of Slovak folk songs in Vojvodina

108 | Within the first conference, the research text was published by the outstanding ethnomusicologist and professor at the Music Academy in Novi Sad, Nice Fracile, PhD, dealing with the topic of interpenetrations of music folklore of Vojvodina inhabitants (Fracile, 2005, p. 147). The author uses concrete examples to illustrate the musical tradition of multicultural Vojvodina and draws parallels between music elements of various minority communities and ethnic groups, as well as the majority Serbian population, in line with the diverse and specific musical tradition of Vojvodina. He states, *inter alia*, that “the musical tradition of Vojvodina is quite an inspirational and interesting folklore area for comparative research”; however, he also emphasizes that Vojvodina has never had and does not have a special institute for folklore research, and that is why “ethnomusicological research has been left to enthusiasts whose number is decreasing nowadays”. He finds parallels and interpenetrations of musical tradition primarily between Serbian tradition and the tradition of Romanians in Vojvodina (Fracile, 2005, p. 153), while he does not find any parallels with the Serbian song in Slovak musical tradition. This view can also be supported by the research results of the founder of Slovak ethnomusicology in Serbia, Martin Kmeč, MA (1925–2011), whose life work involved the preparation of the Register of Slovak folk songs sung by Slovaks in Vojvodina at the turn of the millennium. Analyzing this corpus, he classified the songs sung by Vojvodina Slovaks

into the following groups: the ones brought in migration and further imported from the territory of today’s Slovakia; the songs created in Vojvodina, and those taken from other nations and nationalities (Kmeč, 1974, p. 550). The fourth group is almost negligible and refers to Serbian or other melodies being accompanied by the text in Slovak.

Similar analyses were also performed by Slovak ethnomusicologists from the early 1960s, or the time of the systematic research of the musical tradition (songs, music and dances) by then-Yugoslav Slovaks of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (its Musicological and Ethnological Institute), as well as the Institute for Slovaks Living Abroad of Matica slovenská. In her study of the tradition of folk singing of Slovaks in Vojvodina, Hana Urbancova, an eminent Slovak musicologist and ethnomusicologist, provided a comprehensive review and thus defined the scientific frameworks for this topic from the perspective of Slovak musicology. In her work, she states that recent research (the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) began looking at the Slovak enclaves from yet another important aspect, i.e., understanding them as integral part of the Slovak cultural tradition of the specific type, containing several cultural levels. „ In traditional singing, we can observe three basic categories: a) repertoire originating from the homeland, b) influences from other surrounding ethnicities, and c) new creations that arise directly in the enclave” (Urbancová, 2014, p. 18). However, the folk song is primarily a living organism prone to changes. It is an indisputable fact that the lyrics of the songs changed and adapted to the new environment (the names of the original Slovak places were replaced by the current places of residence) and new true or fictional stories and experiences

and events describing the new environment quite soon appeared in songs. These changes are highlighted by Kristina Lomen in her research of folk songs (Lomen, 2023, p. 197).<sup>[2]</sup> The changes did not occur solely in the domain of the language; on the contrary, oral tradition led to the melodic parts of the songs as well (in comparison to their original form). The feature of the corpus, i.e., the spirit of the songs has been preserved, but even Martin Kmeč himself, when comparing the songs sung (recorded) in Slovakia with those sung by Slovaks in Vojvodina, divides the aforementioned Slovak Vojvodina corpus into nine subgroups. One group, for example, contains the same melodies and different lyrics, while another group contains the same lyrics and different melodies, various closer or less similar melodic or textual versions, while in some cases only the summary was identical.

This is exactly the reflection of the influence of the new environment on the authentic Slovak music culture that, according to ethnologist and professor Jan Bočík, PhD, has not been sufficiently explored, while the “level of interpretation and theoretical elaboration of the existing ethnological knowledge is still at an unsatisfactory level” (Botík, 2013, p. 10). Bočík emphasizes the syncretism and necessity of perceiving Slovak traditional culture as a cultural system in which facts of three-fold origin have been accumulated: 1. those acquired in the homeland, 2. those taken from the multiethnic and multicultural population of Vojvodina, particularly from the majority Serbian people, and 3. those created by the members of the Slovak community in the conditions of the newly-set-

tled population of Vojvodina. In that context, he refers us to the capital works from the field of ethnology, for example the book by ethnologist Mila Bosić, who described the traditional national costume of Slovaks in Vojvodina, and by linguist Jozef Štolc, who described the Slovak dialects in Vojvodina, thus “showing that in the Slovak environments in Vojvodina, a magnificent convergent process appeared in which the variety of dialects and national costumes brought by the settlers from their birthplaces in the so-called “Upper Land”, first merged and then developed into new local linguistic and costume variants with specific elements of the so-called “Lower Land” (Botík, 2013, p. 15). In this context it is also possible to observe the corpus of folk songs of Vojvodina Slovaks. From the cultural aspect of today’s Slovakia, this corpus may be seen as a separate Slovak region of the so-called “Lower Land”. From the perspective of Serbian musical tradition, this phenomenon should be observed as rich, unique and unrepeatably cultural heritage that is, thanks to the continued care for its preservation, deeply rooted, preserved and promoted in its original form.

### Slovak individuals from the world of music who lived and worked in the territory of Serbia

The conference “Slovak Music in Vojvodina” has brought a number of findings about the life and work of composers and music workers who enriched their environment with their work in the field of music. The most significant topics in that

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[2] The publication is available on: [https://www.sav.sk/journals/uploads/11270818Musicologica2\\_2023\\_03\\_Lomen.pdf](https://www.sav.sk/journals/uploads/11270818Musicologica2_2023_03_Lomen.pdf)

context include the texts related to Slovak composers Viliam Figuš-Bystrý (1875-1937) and Mikuláš Schneider-Trnavský (1881-1958) and their work in the territory of today's Vojvodina. These two members of the so-called older generation of Slovak composers, who deserve the credit for the creation of Slovak national artistic music, actually met in Veliki Bečkerek. The cultural public in Serbia first learnt about it owing to Assistant Professor Mihail Babjak, whose text "From a Padina organist to a famous composer" was published in the journal for culture and literature *Novi život* (Babiak, 2005, p. 119). Afterwards, our conferences presented a series of texts about both of these composers, with a special emphasis on the notes in which they described their life in the new environment (Sklabinski, 2020, p. 94). Namely, Viliam Figuš-Bystrý, the composer of the first Slovak folk opera *Detvan*, lived and worked in Slovak-inhabited Lájosfalva (today's Padina) in Banat (in the period 1903-1907). On the other hand, Mikuláš Schneider-Trnavský, the holder of the title of the national artist and the author of numerous compositions, primarily solo songs for voice and piano, got his first job in Veliki Bečkerek in 1906-1907. He arrived in Banat at the invitation by later well-known Serbian composer Petar Konjović (1883-1970), with whom he had studied at the Prague Conservatory.<sup>[3]</sup> For six months he was the leader of the Serbian Church Singing Society "Beseda" in Veliki Bečkerek and with this short but intensive activity he raised the cultural and artistic scene in this town to an enviable level. Although this does not refer to the long period of their ac-

tivities in Banat, it was in Bečkerek that Mikuláš Schneider-Trnavský performed Figuš-Bystrý's *Ballad for voice, choir and orchestra, Mrs. Rakoczy's Op. 31* (Rákociné op. 31), the success of which is described by both composers in their memoirs. This topic was dealt with by many authors from Serbia and Slovakia, primarily by the first conductor of Vojvodina Slovaks, Juraj Ferik Jr. (1935-2018). For the purpose of the conference held in honour of composer M Mikuláš Schneider-Trnavský, the author of this text extended the research onto the institutions in Zrenjanin and, owing to the Archive of the Town of Zrenjanin, she provided the excerpts of the daily *Torontal*, translated into Serbian, which bear witness to the successful concert season of Mikuláš Schneider-Trnavský in Veliki Bečkerek (Sklabinski, 2020, p. 91).

Composer Tibor Andrašovan (1917-2001) also lived briefly in Novi Sad, where he arranged Slovak folk songs, practised them with the Radio Novi Sad Orchestra and, in that respect, gave a great contribution to the Slovak production of this important media house. The solo performer of Slovak folk songs Lyudmila Beređiova-Stupavska also cooperated with Tibor Andrašovan and recorded an extensive interview with the composer which was published exclusively at the conference and then in the proceedings of the conference (Beređiová-Stupavská, 2017, p. 45). From the interview, we learn about the composer's rich international career, as well as about his feelings on the first visit to Petrovac in 1937, and then to Novi Sad, at the end of the 1980s.

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[3] Also available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nJyexvdVRIMJh-m-ZhMzZ7qsEa2RPcl/view>, p. 91

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Participants of the 13th Slovak Music in Vojvodina Conference, 27.11.2017. Novi Sad

Photo: Vojvodina Slovak Cultural Institute

Within the conferences, we have also spoken about the composers from the ranks of Vojvodina Slovaks, such as Ján Podhradský (1891–1955), the author of the operetta *A beautiful, newly painted cradle*, one of the first works in this music genre of Slovak music literature. Podhradský was an important promoter of the Slovak music life in Vojvodina and, guided mainly by the model of the Serbian tradition of the time and the performance of plays with singing, he personally introduced musical numbers into theatre plays in a large number of Slovak communities (Stankovićová – Kriváková, 2017, p. 67).

With great pleasure we invited Mirko Šouc, an eminent composer from Zemun, who attended the conference at the age of 85. Mirko Šouc carefully listened to the lecture of his daughter and conductor Vesna Šouc, who explained the Slovak origin of this family and presented his broad creative and interpretative opus. The participants of the conference did not hide their delight after the reproduction and live performance of Mirko Šouc's compositions and thanks to this event he gained huge recognition by the members of the community from which he originated. As a reminder, Mirko Šouc is an academically educated composer and

performer who ranks among the founders of jazz music in the territory of ex-Yugoslavia. The first jazz theme “Contrasts” was composed by Mirko Šouc in 1948 and ever since his compositions can be found on the repertoires of the Radio-Television Belgrade Jazz Orchestra, the jazz orchestras of Ljubljana and Zagreb, as well as many other orchestras from whole Yugoslavia. With Mirko Šouc Orchestra he had several thousand concerts in the country and abroad. He dedicated significant part of his work to children, as a composer, arranger, conductor and performer (Šouc, 2017, p. 15). He was granted numerous awards and prizes, while his song “The Bumblebee Swore an Oath” is known by all generations from the territory of ex-Yugoslavia.

At the conference dedicated to the life and work of Kvetoslava Čániová Benková, our guest was Miroslav Duđik, an exceptional violin player, long-standing conductor of the Orchestra of Folk Art instruments of Slovak Radion in Bratislava. Among other things he recalled the fact that the music editor Kvetoslava Benková had invited him to perform with his newly-founded orchestra at the Yugoslav festival “Hey, Blue Danube” in Novi Sad in 1978. He remembered how this orchestra, founded only two years earlier, gained its first international experience and on that occasion also visited the Slovak communities in Kisač, Petrovac and Stara Pazova.

The already mentioned first conductor from the ranks of Vojvodina Slovaks Juraj Ferik Jr., gave a significant contribution to the development of the music life in Niš with his ten-year engagement as the conductor of the Niš Symphony Orchestra. At the conference, this was spoken about by Nebojša Todorović, Serbian musicologist and full professor

at the Faculty of Arts in Niš. Todorović analyzes in detail the rich concert activity of Juraj Ferik Jr. who was the chief conductor of the Niš Symphony Orchestra, the teacher in the Music School “Doctor Vojislav Vučković”, organizer and social worker (Todorović, 2023, p. 152). Juraj Ferik Jr. worked in Niš for ten years (1970-1980), performing the last concert with this orchestra on 9<sup>th</sup> January 1980, and then transferred to the Novi Sad Opera where he continued his conductor career. In 1975, Juraj Ferik Jr. was also one of the founders of the Niš Music Festival of classical music, which has been held to date.

A great connoisseur of Slovak folk songs in Vojvodina, as well as a teacher, composer and the founder of the musicology of Slovaks in this territory, Martin Kmeć, MA, also worked at the Pedagogical Academy in Negotin, and then at the Pedagogical Academy in Novi Sad. Martin Kmeć will be remembered primarily for his extensive opus of the works with the topic of Slovak folk songs in Vojvodina. His extraordinary activity is also visible in the work of professional organizations such as the Folklorists’ Association of Yugoslavia, which he joined in 1960 and performed the function of its president in the period 1989-1991. As of 1987, scientific conferences were also organized by the Folklorists’ Association of Vojvodina, which publishes the proceedings entitled *Folklore in Vojvodina*, in which Martin Kmeć also publishes his expert papers on a regular basis. Martin Kmeć has shown his immense knowledge of Slovak folk songs in the texts published by the association “Spring on the Čenej Farmsteads”, which organizes symposiums with the participation of experts with different scientific specializations.

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The above-listed fragments about Slovak music figures confirm that numerous places in Serbia were not merely temporary places of residence for Slovak authors, but the space for mutual cultivation. Their presence has left a unique mark in Serbian institutions and cities, and that mark constitutes the basis of rich music heritage that still defines the identity of Vojvodina Slovaks today. On the one hand, it is a contribution to the Serbian cultural environment while, on the other hand, it is the enrichment of the artistic sensibility of the people creating in this area.

## Conclusion

This short and succinct excursion into the issue of Slovak-Serbian cultural ties in the field of music may be an inspiration for more intensive research and the creation of new cooperations. In the future, further systematic research should also be dedicated to the in-depth musicological analysis, but also

to the processing of archive sources, particularly the press and personal correspondence that may reveal so far unknown details about the reception of Slovak music in the Serbian environment. Finally, it seems necessary to use more intensively the method of oral history, i.e., recording the testimonies of live witnesses and selfless music workers, whose personal experience forms an irreplaceable bridge between the past and the present of our music culture. Exactly this research method has proved quite efficient with the passage of time.

It would not have been possible to cover all the aforementioned fragments if it had not been for the organized approach and twenty gatherings of enthusiasts and professionals who with their selfless work contributed to the research, documentation and promotion of one of the widest-spread fields of culture and art – the field of music. It will entail new ideas, needs and enthusiasm to make a brave step into a new twenty-year chapter of the conference “Slovak Music in Vojvodina”.

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