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Serbian choral societies in Tuzla and Bijeljina until 1914

Abstract

During the Austria-Hungarian government, choral societies played a very important role in the cultural life of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In contrast to that, there were no such registered societies during the former Turkish ruling. There were two reasons for their absence - a lack of social conditions and the fact that the Turkish government banned all gatherings and social organizing.

Key words

Serbian choral societies, Tuzla, Bijeljina, Serbian Orthodox Church, National repertoire

During the Austro-Hungarian Empire, choral societies played an important role in the cultural life of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Before that period, there were no such registered choral societies during Turkish rule, due to different circumstances. Namely, two reasons were critical for their absence: a lack of social conditions and the banning of gathering and social organizing by the Turks.¹

From 1879, the "Saint Sava Celebrations" were initiated with vocal groups performances in Tuzla.² Thus, such celebrations brought about the idea of organizing choral societies for singing in church services and celebrations. At the same time, in practicing the secular program, societies were able to perform for music nights and concerts. On March 1, 1886, a permanent choral society was founded and named "*Donjotuzlansko srpsko crkveno pjevačko društvo*" (*The Lower Tuzla Serbian Church Choral Society*).³

On that occasion, the regulations of the society were announced and then sent to the Land Administration in Sarajevo for approval. The first assembly of the society was held on March 8, 1886, only seven days after its founding, during which period the society gathered as many as twenty two singers.

According to evidence presented by Risto Besarović in his book "From the Cultural Past of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (*Iz Kulturne Prošlosti Bosne i Hercegovine*, Sarajevo: 1987, p. 60, 61) the magazine *Bosanska Vila* gave an account of the society's activities during the following years. Since this was the first founded and registered choral society in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the magazine was harshly critical of other cities' communities for their lack of initiative - especially Sarajevo.

¹ According to some records, there were secret gatherings of singers in the last period under the Turks. The Church Choir in Mostar was founded and worked secretly, since the Turkish rulers did not allow the creating of "Kosača", a Croatian singing association, in 1873. Only four years later, in 1877, the new Serbian Orthodox Church choir was founded in Gračanica, near Tuzla. The choir gathered and practiced in secrecy. (Verunica, Zdravko: *First Singing Societies in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Prva pjevačka Društva u Bosni i Hercegovini)*, papers published by the Music Academy in Sarajevo, 1991, p. 29, 30).

² The name Lower Tuzla was used in that historic period for the town called Tuzla today. Upper Tuzla was a smaller place and it also exists today.

³ Documents and pictures of this society can be found in the Archives of Tuzla.

Thirteen years later, in nearby Bijeljina, sixty kilometers from Tuzla, another Serbian choral society was founded and named “*Srbadija*”. The founding assembly of the society - with a program proposal and elections of board members, a name and flag adoption, took place at the beginning of September 1899. It was held in a coffee house called “*Zvijezda*”, not far from the Orthodox Church.⁴ In the last decade of the nineteenth century there was a noticeable economic growth in Bijeljina, producing conditions for founding a choral society. The idea for such a society came at first from two priests of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the very reverend Jovan Novaković and Dragomir Ostojić. In the process of organizing, on the other hand, the young landowner and tradesman Živko Ivković was very instrumental in the realization, considered to be the founding member and first president.

It might be of interest that the founder of the choral society in Tuzla, Risto Jovanović, was also from a tradesmen family. Both societies’ activities were supported by the Serbian Orthodox Church, and this is probably why the author of the book “*Korzo Stare Bijeljine*” uses the name “The Serbian Church Choral Society *Srbadija*”, even though the word ‘church’ was not included in the invitation for the society’s celebration.

It is certain that the first choirmaster in Tuzla was Dragutin Hruza, while the choirmaster in Bijeljina was most likely Dragomir Ostojić, a priest. In the Tuzla Choir Archives, precise records are kept about the choirmasters in this period, while for “*Srbadija*”, the choir from Bijeljina, the records are unreliable until 1911. In that year, the newly appointed choir leader was Stevan Krnić (1885-1975), who was educated at the Teacher’s College in Pakrac, and kept notes about singing practices as well as public performances and members. His handwritten notes can be found in the *Semberija Museum* in Bijeljina and they give the best insight into the choir’s activities from 1911 onwards.

And yet the choir in Tuzla had many difficulties with choirmasters. After Dragutin Hruza, Emil Muža led the choir from March 6 1887, until September 1890, though with shorter pauses.

In the period from January 1891 until September 1892, the choirmasters were Nikola Kus and Leopold Mikula, who were succeeded by Lazar Bordjoški, who remained choirmaster for the next two years (1892-1894). After Bordjoški, Kosta Lazarević took the position and conducted for a short time and yet, regrettably, the choral society encountered this problem once more. But shortly after, Ferdinand Grudak was appointed choirmaster, also directing the Miners’ Music Band of Tuzla. Until August of 1900 there were two other choirmasters besides Grudak - Dušan Nikolić and Kamenko Tomić, and from August 1900 till June 1904, Risto Misita filled this position.

Considering the problem of the frequent turnover of choirmasters, this last period was the first time the singers worked under the same conductor for several years. Logically, it made an impact on numerous

⁴ Petrović, Slobodan: *Korzo Stare Bijeljine* (collected material for a monography), Bijeljina: 2002, National Library “Filip Višnjić” Bijeljina, p. 118.

public appearances and important activities.⁵ When Rista Misita left Tuzla, Prokopije Derikladić replaced him for a short time, but soon after, in 1905, Stevan Milčić replaced Derikladić. Following Milčić's leave for military duty in September 1906, Jovan Travanj became the next successor for two more years. With the return of Stevan Milčić from the army in December 1908, the choir finally got a permanent conductor. It is an obvious fact that choirmasters in Tuzla and Bijeljina, with the exception of Jovan Travanj, were music amateurs.⁶

The number of members in choral societies had varied. More specifically, in Tuzla they were only twenty-two members, although according to the photographs from that period, there appears to be thirty members. The society in Bijeljina, on the other hand, had a significantly larger number of members. In his biography, Stevan Krnić writes that in 1911, the time of his appointment as a choirmaster, the choir numbered as many as eighty members. In both societies the songs-compositions were rehearsed with a violin and when enough money was collected in the Tuzla society by volunteering members, a harmonium was bought. In Bijeljina Stevan Krnić will be remembered by his violin which he carried with him at all times, which was a gift from Stevan's father who bought it for his son when he started his studies at the Teachers' College and which can be seen today in the *Muzej Semberije* (Semberia Museum) in Bijeljina.

In addition to male and mixed choirs, there were also active drama workshops in both societies. At the beginning of the 'drama workshops' activities in Tuzla (1894), there was a lot of interest in its work, which impacted the reducing of the number of singers in the choir for some time.⁷ Along with choirs and drama workshops, an instrumental ensemble - a tambura orchestra, was founded in 1897.

The choirs sang not only in church but for various secular celebrations in the towns. Moreover, the Tuzla choir, along with singing in Tuzla, went on tours to some other towns in the area, to Sarajevo, Doboј, Brčko, Zavidovići, Maglaj, and in 1910 the choir was also a guest performer in Loznica and Banja Koviljača in Serbia. Considering the political atmosphere of the time, there was an undeniable significance in these performances as well as many difficulties involving the concert tours. However, the society from Bijeljina

⁵ Funding for the choral society also changed in this period. In 1902 the fund was made up of voluntary contributions to help the society's work. In 1903 the mother of founder Risto Jovanović passed away, bequeathing her property to the church, the Serbian Orthodox school fund, and the choral society. The assets bequeathed to the society consisted of several houses in the center of the town with stores, which is how the society came to have considerable and regular funding.

⁶ There are some inconsistencies in the records about choirmasters. Specifically, in the *Music Encyclopedia* volume I (Jugoslovenski leksikografski zavod Zagreb: 1973-Bosnia and Herzegovina section), there is a mention of the Tuzla choir, and choirmasters Robert Tolinger and Jovan Travanj. However, the researching of the society's records by this paper's author did not find any mention of Tolinger. Finally, we know from the archives that there was a recital by Tolinger in Tuzla (1887), in which the choir took part. It is possible that there were two songs sung by the choir conducted by R. Tolinger. We also know that Tolinger worked with "Gusle" choir in Kikinda during the same period.

⁷ The significance of drama workshops in Tuzla lays in the fact that they were the core of the first professional theater in the town. Mihajlo Crnogorčević (1865-1918) was the founder of the theater. Prior to that, he was a drama workshop organizer. Their first show was in April 1898, in the *Grand* hotel (Trifković, Dragiša: Tuzlanski vremenoplov I, Pres kliping, Beograd: 1981, str. 79).

had even more appearances in Serbia (including Loznica, Banja Koviljača, Sremska Mitrovica, Šabac, Zemun) and even had an appearance in Belgrade in 1913.

The society from Bijeljina had a flag with Saint Stephan of Dečani (Sveti Stefan Dečanski) as a protector's symbol. With the society in Tuzla, the situation was somewhat different. Their assembly had proposed, in December 1898, that their flag display the picture of Rade Njegoš, the poet, on one side and a lyre, the symbol of poetry, on the other.

Logically, the Austro-Hungarian Administration rejected the proposal, since the poet and "Vladika" Njegoš was also a statesman of another country. His appearance on the flag was considered a political statement. Eventually, permission for the flag was granted to the society but for strictly limited purposes.⁸

At the beginning of 1901 the choral society from Tuzla celebrated its fifteenth anniversary and the consecration of the society's flag. For that occasion, to the delight of the host and many citizens of Tuzla, *The First Belgrade Singing Society* was present, with its leader - conductor Stevan Mokranjac. Three choirs appeared at the celebration, the mixed choir from Tuzla, the mixed choir *Srbadija* from Bijeljina,⁹ and following them, the choir from Belgrade.

The repertoires of both societies had a wide diversity in music. They started with simple songs but, in the course of time, the repertoire changed, including more demanding compositions. Tuzla's society held their first concert on July 20, 1886, with nine performed compositions.¹⁰

In 1887, women started joining the choral society in Tuzla and thus, a mixed choir was formed and with it the repertoire was significantly enhanced. There were some demanding pieces on the new repertoire and, on August 6, 1887, *The Liturgy* by Stanković was performed.

Both choirs frequently performed *Rukoveti* (Garland Songs) by S. Mokranjac. The choir from Tuzla mostly performed the fifth and the tenth suite from *Rukoveti*, while the choir from Bijeljina performed Mokranjac during the entire evening in November of 1912. Mokranjac was invited by the board to attend the concert and the choir performed ten of his *Rukoveti*. Mokranjac conducted the first and the tenth *Rukovet* and the remaining eight were conducted by Stevan Krnić, choirmaster.

⁸ In Serbian literature, there are different details found about this choral society, which ought to be compared and clarified. Roksanda Pejović in her book *Serbian music of the nineteenth century*, published in 2001, notes a different founding year of the society's founding (1866) on page 110. Since the original records of the society note 1886 as the founding year, it is obvious an error has occurred. In another text by the same author entitled *The Music Life of Serbs in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1881-1914)* (Muzički život Srba u BiH) published in 1996 in *New Sound* magazine, it says: "...the Serbian choral society was founded in 1879 and after that the "Njeguš" choral society which began its work in 1886." Certainly, the same Serbian choral society existed in Tuzla continually but changed its name after World War I, in 1920, into the *Njeguš Serbian choral society*

⁹ The choir from Tuzla performed *Polka* and *Djurdjevdan* by Slavjanski and Dubek, the choir from Bijeljina performed *VI Rukovet* by S. Mokranjac, while both choirs jointly performed the songs "*U kolo*" (text by Šantić) and *Bolje naše* (by Jenko).

¹⁰ The program of the concert was: Zajc: *U boj*; Štos: *Majci na grobu*; Hruza: *Kad se sjetim*; *Tajna Ljubav*; (solista Jovan Djukić); Jenko: *Nek dušman vidi*; Horejssek: *Tija noći*; Riharijev: *Večernja*; Havlas: *Kolo*; I J. Zmaj: *Ko je lola*.

The Serbian choral societies in Tuzla and Bijeljina, as a number of other societies founded on a confessional basis, played a very significant role in the development of music life in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their music activity did not rely on foreigners who settled into the area, as their work was motivated and carried out by the local population's skills, was based on the enthusiasm of amateurs interwoven with deep national feelings, also characteristic for that period. They cultivated the national song, emphasizing their patriotic feelings and their cultural identity.

Translated by Svetlana Maksimović

Summary

During the Turkish rule in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there were no registered choral societies, except secret singers' gatherings. No sooner than the 19th century, during the Austria-Hungarian Empire, the first choral societies were founded under the auspices of the Serbian Orthodox Church. In March 1886, Donjo-tuzlansko srpsko crkveno pjevačko društvo (Lower Tuzla Serbian Church Choral Society) started its activity in Tuzla, while in 1899 the Srpsko crkveno pjevačko društvo *Srbadija* (Serbian Choral Society *Srbadija*) was founded in Bijeljina. Their repertoire included secular and sacred compositions, in which the works of Stevan Mokranjac, who visited Bijeljina in 1912, dominated. These amateur choral societies, as prominent propagators of a national and cultural identity, were of great importance for the music life of Bosnia and Herzegovina.