

The Folk Ballad in Slovenia

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Slovenia is the western most republic of the Yugoslav federation, bordered by Austria to the north, Italy to the west, and Croatia to the south and southeast. Slovenes are South Slavs and the Slovene language, one of the most archaic Slav languages, is divided into many dialects. Although a small country, Slovenia is geographically very diverse, with high mountainous regions, low hills, valleys and lowlands, a section of the Adriatic coastline, lakes, and the limestone karst. An adequate rural economy influenced the life of the people, and this is reflected in their customs and folk songs. Folk-song content has also been influenced by the lot of Slovenes throughout their history.

A relatively large proportion of Slovene folk songs are of decidedly narrative character but belong to the ballad genre rather than to epic poetry (Kumer 1978a:137). So far, more than three hundred types of ballads have been discovered, several of which have many variants. Although the Slovene people have their own expressions for some genres of song, no special words for ballad exist, except in one region where ballads are known as *žalostne*, meaning "sad songs." This term reflects the fact that many ballads end tragically and are (or were) sung during the deathwatch (Kumer 1981:50). Some ballads have survived until now precisely because of this.

Ballads can be found in all Slovene regions and are sung by nearly all folk singers. Ballad singers as specialists do not exist. The repertoire of a folk singer is a result of his or her own personality as formed by the circumstances affecting his or her life, heritage, education, and so forth (Kumer 1981:50-53), or is influenced by incidental events. Possibly, some singers prefer a certain genre of songs because of their own temperament and mental disposition. As an example, let me cite here a singer from a village near Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. A small frail person of seventy-eight, she told us that in her youth, beneath her paternal roof, they were not used to singing frivolous songs. Hence she continued to sing folk songs of serious content and her repertoire consisted almost exclusively of ballads, legends, and similar songs (Vodušek and Kumer 1958:188-89). Ballad singers are not always old women. We also have recorded ballads

sung by girls, boys, and men (Kumer 1975:115-23). These may be sung with one voice when performed by a single person, or with many voices like other Slovene folk songs when a group of singers come together.

Up until the Second World War, Slovenia was a predominantly agricultural country with much of the work still done by hand, in groups, with neighbors assisting one another. Such collective work consisted, for example, of the shucking of corn cobs, harvesting of grapes, and spinning. If the workers were able to sing, the songs provided a regular accompaniment to their work. In the past, a similar occasion for singing was the visit of a cobbler or a seamstress to someone's home. The stranger was the bearer of news and for many days the house became a meeting place for young people; some ballads would also have been sung.

Another important, special occasion for the singing of ballads is the deathwatch. Until recently, in nearly every Slovene region it was customary for the deceased to remain at home until the actual funeral. Relatives and friends came together in the evening to pray and sing throughout the night. The repertoire for these occasions included not only songs with appropriate themes but also religious songs and ballads, for example, *The Death of a Bride*, *The Holy Virgin and the Ferryman*, *The Widower with Child at His Wife's Grave*, *The Death of the Robber's Wife*, and *The Condemned Soul*.

A ballad may be added to a customary song or may replace it. Examples of the ballad exist as the middle part of an Epiphany (January 6) carol, or as a substitute for a carol on St. Stephen's Day (December 26) and on St. Florian's Day (May 4). In a village in the Bela Krajina region, the usual carol for the eve of Midsummer Day (June 23) is replaced by the ballad *The Three Sinful Souls* whenever a member of the household has died during the current year. Exceptionally, an ancient ballad was recorded in the nineteenth century as a lullaby. A further exception is the ballad as a dance song, performed in the village of Predgrad in Bela Krajina as an accompaniment to the ritual St John's Day Dance on December 27.¹

The majority of Slovene ballads have either legendary themes (42%) or family themes (24%). Love ballads are also numerous (14%) and so are ballads about preternatural forces or beings (12%). By theme Slovene ballads belong to the Western European ballad tradition; some are related to the Slavic tradition and others are particularly Slovene in origin. Ballads of international themes include, for example, *The Warrior Girl*, *The Husband's Return*, *Heer Halewijn*, *The Musician at the Gates of Hell* (the so-called Orpheus motif), *The Apparent Death*, and *The Cruel Mother*.

¹ Ramovš 1979; Boškovič-Stulli 1968; Kumer 1977; Seemann 1959a; *SLP* 1970: No. 23.

Not all of these ballads underwent complete transfer, some of them belonging only by their themes to the international tradition, with their details treated according to Slovene tradition (Kumer 1987). There are also examples in which a foreign ballad was, in essence, transformed by time. An excellent instance of this phenomenon is the ballad *Heer Halewijn*, which came to Slovenia through German folk poetry. In German, Heer Halewijn has the name Ulinger and in Slovene this became Jélengar. The oldest Slovene version is very close to the German versions, but by the first half of the nineteenth century it was already designated a transformed version. Here the “hero” is never a noble minstrel but a Gypsy singer, and his victim is not a princess but the daughter of an innkeeper. In the most recent version from the beginning of the twentieth century, the Gypsy seduces the girl by drinking to her three times (Kumer 1978b:46-47).

The adaptation of international ballad themes is evident in various motifs and details. In the ballad with the “Orpheus motif,” the musician’s mother must be in hell because, as an innkeeper, she adds water to the wine, something considered fraudulent, a crime in Slovene folk tradition. A further indication of adaptation is the use of indigenous geographical or personal names. The Slovene version of *The Warrior Girl* is set in Slovene villages, her father is a Slovene peasant, and people maintain that the story is a true one.²

Some Slovene ballads have parallels in the Slavic tradition, owing either to the ancient, common heritage or to later borrowing from one of the Slavic nations. One example of this is the ballad *The Death of the Robber’s Wife*, known to all Slavs everywhere in regional variants. *Three Sorceresses Paring the Shepherd’s Heart* and *The Waterman’s Wife* also originated in Slavic tradition (Kumer 1968b). A number of ballads with no counterparts in other languages can be taken to be originally Slovene. Examples are *The Tenth Daughter*, *Bloody Revenge*, *The Girl Dancer Abducted by the Devil*, *Two Seminarists and the Sinful Waitress*, *The Miller Driving Away Death*, and *The Galley-Slave*.

In addition to legendary ballads or versions of European balladry belonging to medieval traditions, we have recent ballads originating in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and based upon real events. Such is the case with an infanticide executed in Ljubljana in 1766 (Kumer forthcoming). Some ballads reflect historical circumstances rather than actual historical reality. The ballad *The Robber Matjon* is such a case (Kumer 1984).

In the region of Styria, the practice of composing a narrative poem with a melody when someone was killed or had an accident existed right up

² Seemann 1959b; Makarovič 1963-64; *SLP* 1970: Nos. 7 and 8.

to the twentieth century. Several of these songs spread to other regions to be included by folk singers in their ballad repertoires. Obviously the text was altered, the real names omitted or another melody substituted as is usual in folk music tradition. A classical example of this type is the ballad about a girl killed by her jealous lover after dancing with another boy (Kumer 1963-64).

The uniqueness of Slovene ballads is expressed more in the motifs than anywhere else. The problem lies in the kind of motifs employed, their context, and their frequency. Preliminary information on these issues is available in the index of Slovene ballad types in Slovene and German (Kumer 1974). We can, for example, see that the theme of flowers growing from the graves of lovers is used frequently and in different situations. Among preternatural forces or beings, the devil appears often, either as an abductor, a seducer, a bridegroom, the buyer of an unborn child, and so on. An important figure in Slovene folk poetry is the Holy Virgin. Ballads present her not only as the simple human mother of Jesus, solicitous about her child, but also as the powerful mediatrix before God and redeemer from danger. In some ballads the deceased return to the world to intervene in the action. Consequently, in a ballad about orphans, their mother rises from the grave to provide for her children, or the dead bridegroom comes for his bride. Among animals, it is the bird that is important, either as a messenger, a helper, a harbinger of death, a symbol of the soul (in the Slovene language both bird and soul are feminine) or of the Holy Virgin, a dead person, and so forth. Death, also feminine in Slovene, may be presented as a woman in white, as the messenger of God or as a mythical being.

The texts of ballads reflect the ethical and moral principles of the people, their outlook on life and the world. This means that all evil actions are followed by punishment, either in the form of illness, some modification in the natural state (a human changes into an animal or turns into stone), or the execution or damnation of the culprit. Punishment can be averted by atonement, sometimes in drastic form, for example, by self-immolation or by cutting off flesh from one's own body. One can see that people tolerated human failings but not offenses against the community. These offenses were matters such as the refusal of hospitality, pride, faithlessness, heartlessness, the oppression of the poor, fraud, and so on, all of which were condemned by the people. Anyone sinning in such a manner may be condemned to hell, where different torments, very drastically described, exist. Adultery usually appears in ballads about the nobility and is always penalized. It appears that the Slovene people protested about the injustices they had to suffer merely by describing the nobles as sinners, as corrupt persons.

The former social order is reflected in ballads where, for instance,

the brother and not the husband is the protector of the wife and her children; the husband can by right execute capital punishment against his adulterous wife; the lover is permitted to punish his faithless sweetheart; the son may avenge his murdered father; parents decide about their daughter's marriage; and love of the master's daughter leads to capital punishment.

No less than other Slovene folk songs, ballads reveal the special nature of folk poetic language (Kumer 1975:68-81). Most of them begin with an introductory line, which is significant not only for individual ballads but for the ballad genre as a whole. For example, "Stoji, stoji en beli grad" ["There stands, there stands a white castle"] or "Leži, leži ravno polje" ["There is, there is a level field"] or "Leži mi vrtec ograjen" ["There is a fenced garden"]. Telling the story in his or her ballad, the folk poet uses stock expressions indicating time, space, contrast, and so forth, as the following examples illustrate:

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>preden to—že ono [before this—already that]</p> | <p>Preden bo jutri beli dan, <i>boš pa ti že na pare djan.</i> [Before it is broad daylight tomorrow, you will be laid on the catafalque.]</p> |
| <p><i>komaj to—že ono</i> [no sooner this—than that]</p> | <p><i>To komaj Liza zgovori,</i> <i>že mrtva na tleh leži.</i> [No sooner does Liza say this, than she lies dead on the ground.]</p> |
| <p><i>dozdaj—od zdaj</i> [till now—from now on]</p> | <p><i>Dozdaj si bla hčerka birtova,</i> <i>zdaj boš žena ciganova.</i> [Till now you've been the innkeeper's daughter, from now on you'll be the Gypsy's wife.]</p> |
| <p><i>naprej—nazaj</i> [forward—backward]</p> | <p><i>Naprej ne vem, nazaj ne smem</i> [Forward I do not know how to go, backward I must not go].</p> |

The repetition of words or sentences is also characteristic of the ballad style. Sometimes repetition is used for dramatic intensification, such as with numbers. Here is an example:

| | |
|---|---|
| <p><i>Pavka prvič zapoje,</i> <i>Lenka že gori vstaja . . .</i> <i>Pavka drugič zapoje,</i> <i>Lenka že pokič skup spravla . . .</i> <i>Pavka tretjič zapoje,</i> <i>Lenka že na konjča seda. . .</i></p> | <p>The tambour beats for the first time, Lenka is getting up . . . The tambour beats for the second time, Lenka is preparing her baggage . . . The tambour beats for the third time, Lenka is getting on her horse. . .</p> |
|---|---|

The oldest recordings of Slovene folk ballads do not preserve melodies because the collectors considered them poems and not songs. Their interest lay in the content and they consequently neglected the form, simply writing down lines one after the other even in cases where the existence of stanzas is evident (for example, those established by rhyme). In form, ballads do not differ essentially from other Slovene folk songs. The majority of them are composed in stanzas, and only a small number prove that in the past examples must have existed where the melody consisted of a single line only, as below:³



Example 1

The melodies are regularly in strict rhythm and the lines of the text retain their constant number of syllables. Exceptions can be found only in a small western region, where legendary ballads have unequal long lines and an appropriate melody, for example:



Example 2

The characteristic line of Slovene folk ballads is the trochaic heptasyllable - v - v / - v - , with an optional anacrusis (an unaccented syllable at the beginning) (Vodušek 1960: 110), although it can be found in other folk-song genres too:

³ The fifteen examples of melodies are taken from Kumer 1975 (Nos. 416, 380, 391, 479, 379, 495, 480, 473, 392, 399, 419, 429, and 407); *SLP* 1970 (No. 33/20); and Kumer 1968a (No. 288).

Kaj pa delaš, Anzelček

- v - v / - v -

One of the oldest lines is the dactylic decasyllable, called the lyrical decasyllable, - v v - v / - v v - v , also known in some Croatian regions, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and among the Baltic peoples. Nevertheless, it appears to be an old Slavic form (Vodušek 1959:201):

Sveta Kristina bolna ležala

- v v - v / - v v - v

The dactylic-trochaic octosyllable, - v v / - v / - v v , is another significant line, with the corresponding rhythm in the melody (Vodušek 1984):

Fantič je hodiv daleč v vas

- v v / - v / - v v

3/8 

There are also other forms that are not so frequent.

As mentioned earlier, the texts of most Slovene ballads are composed in stanzas of two, three, or four lines. The structure of the four-line stanzas is really varied because of the length of the lines, their position in the stanza, their repetition, and the eventual use of a refrain (Kumer 1975:82-86), for example:

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|-------|
| Kaj pa delaš, Anzelček? | M ⁴ | - v - v / - v - | 7 |
| Svoji ljubci šolenček, | N | - v - v / - v - | 7 |
| <i>trala lila tralalilala,</i> | R | - v - v / - v - v - | (9) |
| svoji ljubci šolenček. | N | - v - v / - v - | 7 |
| Stoji, stoji mi lipica, | M | v / - v - v / - v - | (1) 7 |
| pod njo je hladna senčica, N | N | v / - v - v / - v - | (1) 7 |
| u senci miza kamnata, | O | v / - v - v / - v - | (1) 7 |
| na štiri ogle rezana. | P | v / - v - v / - v - | (1) 7 |
| Mlad pastirček kravce pase | M | - v - v - v - v | 8 |
| po zelenem travniku, | N | - v - v - v - | 7 |
| mlad pastirček kravce pase | M | - v - v - v - v | 8 |
| po zelenem travniku. | N | - v - v - v - | 7 |

The Slovene ballad melodies have at least two lines, sometimes three, but usually four. The text stanzas correspond to the melody or are adapted

⁴ Text analysis is characterized by the letters M, N, O, P . . . and refrain by R, to avoid confusion with melodic analysis, characterized by the letters A, B, C, etc.

by repetition of lines (Kumer 1975:86-91), for example:

Example 3 (MM) shows two staves of music in G major and 6/8 time. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. The lyrics are: Le- pa - vo- da Lju- bljan- či- ca, le- pa vo- da Lju- bljan- či- ca.

Example 3 (MM)

Example 4 (MMM) shows two staves of music in G major with changing time signatures (2/4, 3/4, 2/4). The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. The lyrics are: Ma- ri- ja z O- gr- ske- ga gre, Ma- ri- ja a z O- gr- ske- ga gre, Ma- ri- ja z O- gr- ske- ga gre.

Example 4 (MMM)

Example 5 (MN) shows two staves of music in G major and 3/8 time. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. The lyrics are: Sta- ri Job bo- lan le- ži, on pa še zme- ri god- cu- žu- li.

Example 5 (MN)

Example 6 (MNN) is a folk ballad melody in G major and 3/4 time. The melody consists of two staves. The first staff contains the first line of music with lyrics: Lep- šga de- kle- ta ni na svet, ka- kor je sve- ta. The second staff contains the second line of music with lyrics: Bar- ba- ra, ka- kor je sve- ta Bar- - ba- ra. There are four groups of five notes each, indicated by a '5' above a slur, representing quintuplets.

Example 6 (MNN)

Example 7 (MNMN) is a folk ballad melody in G major, featuring a complex time signature of 2/4, 3/4, and 2/4. The melody consists of two staves. The first staff contains the first line of music with lyrics: Ma- ri- ja šla na bož- jo pot, na bož- jo pot v Je- ru- za- lem, Ma- ri- ja šla na bož- jo pot, na bož- jo pot v Je- ru- za- lem.

Example 7 (MNMN)

Example 8 (MNOP) is a folk ballad melody in G major, featuring a complex time signature of 2/4, 3/4, and 2/4. The melody consists of two staves. The first staff contains the first line of music with lyrics: Dü- ša pre mi- šla- va- la, kam bi se o- ber- no- la, dü- ša se o- ber- no- la, pred ne- be- ška vra- ta šla.

Example 8 (MNOP)

As far as the rhythm of melodies is concerned, the ballads are not unique but are linked to other Slovene folk songs (Kumer 1975:95-99). They are in 2/4, 3/4, 4/4 time, and can jump to alternated 3/4 + 2/4 time;

6/8 time is rare and the characteristic Slovene 5/8 time is not very frequent:

Ker- mu se drem- le, naj gre spat, ka- kor je
sto- riw An- zel mlad.

Example 9

Ja- grič mi gre v za- le ni log, ja- grič mi gre v za-
le- ni log, ja- grič mi gre- v za- le- ni- log.

Example 10

No- be- na mat prov ne sto- ri, če svo- jo
jčer da- leč mo- ži, ži.

Example 11

Se- stri ca, sta- ni, na pa- šo boš šla, boš
gna- la dva vo- la pa ko- nji- če tri.

Example 12

Sto- ji, sto- ji en klošterlep v klo- štru je pa nun de- vet.

Example 13

Occasionally, as in other Slovene folk songs, 3/4 time in the melody alters at a certain point to 2/4 time, though this shift is never accidental but rather the rule; for example:

Mladpa- stir- ček krav- ce pa se na ze- le- nem - trav- ni- ku,
mlad pa- stir- ček krav- ce pa- se na ze- le- nem trav- ni- ku

Example 14

Some Slovene ballad melodies are very simple, diatonic with a narrow range, here and there with traces of pentatonic or of oligotonic structure. Thus the music itself also confirms the fact that certain ballads belong to the archaic period of Slovene folklore tradition. Ballads also exist in which quite recent melodies are associated with an old text. It seems that people loved these ballads for their textual content, considering

the melodies less acceptable. Some singers admitted directly that they knew of the existence of certain ballads we wished to record, but were unable to sing them because they did not like the strange, awkward melodies. Consequently they had not committed them to memory.

Because Slovene songs are only by exception sung as solos, ballads are also performed in groups as part-song by men or women. It is a rule in folk part-song that one singer begins and is followed by all the others, but the division of soloist and a choir singing only the refrain is not usual in Slovene tradition. We do find other forms of solo-tutti division; for example, the soloist sings the first line (or a part of it), while the tutti repeat it and finish the stanza; or the first soloist is followed by a second one with the second line, the remainder then repeating the whole stanza (Vodušek 1960:114). Here is an example of the latter:

1. solo 2. solo 3 3

Sto- ji, sto- ji Lju- bljan- ca, Lju- bljan- cadow- ga vas,

sto- ji, -sto- ji Lju- bljan- , ca, Lju- bljan-ca dow- ga vas.

Example 15

In view of the fact that after the Second World War rural life and conditions changed greatly and occasions for singing folk songs became rarer, a question arises about the existence of ballads in the future. Ballads treating general human themes will probably survive, while others dealing with stories that are no longer relevant will possibly be forgotten. It is likely that ballads of unusual content will also be preserved purely because of their curious nature. Some ballads are currently still very popular. Let us hope that the ballad as a genre is not condemned to complete oblivion.

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