Chapter 23

The Tamburitza

Program 23 Performances

1. Zagreb, "Tamburitza Airs." 2. Tom Marincel, "Na levoj strani kraj srca." 3. Vila, "Ti Marička peglaj." 4. Zagreb, "Popefke sem slagal." 5. Elias Serenaders, "Na selo." 6. American Croatian Silver Strings Tamburitzans, "Mariner marš." 7. Sarajevo, "Daj mi čašu rakije." 8. Rick March (live performance), "Kola na dangubi."

Tamburitza Extravaganza

High-spirited celebrants pack the hotel room, sitting on all available chairs, beds, and tables, standing shoulder to shoulder, spilling into the hall. Some squeeze through the crowd to fetch beers from the bathroom's ice-filled tub. Some carry on a running argument with hotel management about the noise level. It could be after hours at any convention of car salesmen or the brass widget trade association—except for one thing. While half the men and women are holding beer cans or glasses, the others are picking or strumming tamburitzas, and all are bellowing, "Bdi Ksenija, kćeri moja mila" (Mind, Ksenija, my dear daughter). This is the yearly Tamburitza Extravaganza.

Three annual events show the scope of the tamburitza tradition in North America: the Croatian Fraternal Union's Junior Cultural Federation convention, in which more than two dozen youth orchestras participate; the Tamburitza Extravaganza, where twenty to thirty professional tamburitza combos perform for and jam with each other; and the Tamburitza Festival, a gathering of adult amateur tamburitza orchestras recently created in 1986, also sponsored by the Croatian Fraternal Union. The tamburitza players, mostly of Croatian and Serbian background, hail from western Pennsylvania, all the Great Lakes states, Ontario, and St. Louis. A few are from South Slavic outposts farther west, in California and the Mountain states.

The vigorous and growing tamburitza tradition, transplanted to North America from the Balkans, was named after its chief family of instruments. A tamburitza is a fretted stringed instrument. It comes in five sizes, from smaller than a mandolin to larger than a string bass. Though it might include a violin or accordion, the group is still called a tamburitza combo or orchestra.

The original instrument was Middle Eastern—a basic long-necked lute with a small pear-shaped body—brought by the Ottoman Turks into the Balkans in the fifteenth century. The original type is still played today, especially by the Slavic Moslems of Bosnia and the upland Albanians. In other areas, the Middle Eastern form was modified and the frets were adjusted to suit Western scales and European design concepts.

Although orchestras of various sized tamburitzas must have existed a few decades earlier, the first one to receive notice in historical literature was that of Pajo Kolarić, a Croatian alderman from the town of Osijek in eastern Croatia. In the mid-nineteenth century his patriotic anthems aroused Croatians to oppose Hungarian hegemony and forever associated the instrument with Croatian national identity (Kolar 1975). Fine musicians of other nationalities in the same region, Serbians and Gypsies in the Vojvodina province, also play the tamburitza, but the instrument does not have as profound a symbolic value to those ethnic groups.

By the end of the nineteenth century, tamburitza orchestras were firmly established in Zagreb and other large Croatian towns and cities. The most renowned classical composers in Croatia, Ivan Zajc and Bozidar Sirola, also composed music for the tamburitza orchestra. Music and politics were thoroughly intermeshed. According to the prevailing romantic nationalist ideas, through playing music that sought to present an "elevated" version of Croatian peasant culture, the ensembles were promoting the concept of the equality of the subject Croatian nation (and by extension, the other Slavic nationalities) with the two dominant nations of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Hapsburg repression made it difficult to form overtly political groups, but *cultural* groups, usually including a choir and a tamburitza orchestra, could function. National sentiments could be expressed by singing in the native Slavic tongue, by giving patriotic titles to instrumental pieces, and by playing anything at all upon the symbolic national instrument, the tamburitza.

By the early 1890s Croats and Serbs had begun to emigrate to North America in large numbers prompted by the combination of bad economic conditions in the homeland and the demand for unskilled industrial laborers in the United States. The tamburitza orchestra or, more frequently, smaller rustic tamburitza combos that played at weddings or in village taverns were already a well-established part of the musical life of immigrants.

From Village Tavern to Immigrant Saloon

In America, the village tavern was replaced by the immigrant saloon. Trusted saloon keepers performed many of the services of a banker and travel agent as well as a translator and counselor. Although it is not clear when the first tamburitzas were brought to America—there are reports of singing and dancing to the tamburitza aboard ship on the transatlantic crossings—the immigrant saloon, like the village tavern, was a natural setting for small informal tamburitza combos.

The immigrants faced difficult and insecure living and working conditions, since the dominant society ostracized and discriminated against them, and death and dismemberment were daily hazards in mining and heavy industry. So they joined together in mutual protective societies for burial and life insurance, and in singing societies and amateur tamburitza orchestras for spiritual and cultural uplift. Indeed pressures analogous to those which prompted the proliferation of cultural societies in Austria-Hungary also existed in the United States. On both sides of the Atlantic, Croats and Serbs felt the need to resist the denationalizing forces of their governments and sociocultural environments. The immigrants often named the American choirs and orchestras after those in the Old World: for example, the Zora ("dawn") singing society established in Chicago in 1902 was named after its counterpart in Karlovac, Croatia.

Tamburitza orchestras—whose members also learn to sing in chorus and dance choreographed medleys of folk dances—continue to flourish, as an ethnic educational institution for Croatian youth. The Croatian Fraternal Union has orga-

The Gogebic Range Tamburitzans led by Mike Orlich (center), Ironwood, Mich., 1979 ***Wisconsin Folk Museum Collection***

nized a CFU Junior Cultural Federation to coordinate and assist their activity on a national level. Moreover, excellent musicians or dancers in the youth groups can aspire to the tamburitza "big leagues": to become one of the thirty members of the Duquesne University Tamburitzans, collegian performers who receive full scholarships to that Pittsburgh Jesuit university and tour nationally and internationally. The formation of more adult orchestras, mostly comprising alumni of the youth groups, has been stimulated by the CFU since the early 1980s.

Serbian communities have similar youth groups who sing, dance, and play, but recent Serbian immigrants have promoted a newer musical style, the accordion-based *narodni orkestar* (folk orchestra) which has flourished and largely replaced the tamburitza. Serbian tamburitza orchestras have managed to hold on only in a few localities like Duluth, Minnesota, and Ironwood, Michigan, where there has been little recent immigration from Europe.

But whether among Serbians or Croatians, the real breeding ground of the future professional tamburitza combo musicians is in festivities which follow the performances of youth orchestras. At these events, informal combos of orchestra members play by ear for social ethnic dancing. Some of these young combo players go on to form semiprofessional groups playing for weddings, picnics, and dances. Thus the formal orchestras provide a training program to ensure a continuing supply of Croatian and Serbian ethnic musicians.