
Chapter 24

Sjajno more (“Shining Sea”) Lake Michigan: Tamburitza from Gary to Sheboygan

Program 24 Performances

1. Sinovi, “Pjesma Žumberka.”
2. Continentals, “Oj djevojko mala.”
3. Popovich Brothers, “Mene majka jednog ima.”
4. Mike Radicevich, “Čačačko kolo.”
5. Old Town Strollers with Peter Roth, “Jovano, Jovanče.”
6. Old Town Strollers, “Donesi vino, Krčmarice.”
7. Sinovi, “Dedin poklon.”

Strollers and Sons

Mike Radicevich is a young Milwaukee musician who for nearly two decades has made tamburitza music in his family’s restaurant, the Old Town Serbian Gourmet House. True to their name, the Old Town Strollers drift from table to table entertaining the well-dressed and well-mannered restaurant patrons as they enjoy a *paprikaš* or *burek* dinner. The musicians play an eclectic European cafe repertoire—a Hungarian *csardas*, a Russian gypsy melody, a Neapolitan air, or even a French chanson from the repertoire of Edith Piaf—along with their Serbian *starogradske pesme* (old town songs) or *kolo* (dance tunes). Their skillful, understated renditions lend musical grace to the dining experience.

The instruments in the ensemble are also international. Mike is the only player of tamburitza: his wife Dawn plays violin, and they may be joined by some combination of a guitarist, a string bass player, and either a Hungarian *cymbalum* (large hammer dulcimer) player or a chromatic button accordionist. Dawn may sing a few songs, but most of their cafe repertoire is instrumental.

Another musician, Chicagoan Joe Gornick, is a founding member of Sinovi (sons), a tamburitza combo. The nucleus of the band, from the musically talented Gornick and Kirin families, are indeed the sons of noted Croatian-American tamburitza players. For more than a decade, Sinovi has played the circuit of Croatian picnics, weddings, anniversaries, pre-Lenten dances, ethnic lodge Christmas parties, and fish fries, just as their fathers did. On any weekend they may be in western Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, and occasionally in the far-off Croatian communities of California and the Mountain states. At their gigs, Croatian Americans and their friends consume lamb with green onions, work up a sweat alternately dancing kolo line dances or hopping to a polka beat, and crowd around the band beside the bar—singing until hoarse, between gulps of beer from plastic cups, old country songs whose

words they may now scarcely understand. Joe, a strong singer in Croatian and English, is usually the string bass player, while the remaining musicians play a full complement of the tamburitza family of instruments—the *prim*, *brač*, *čelo brač*, and *bugarija* (the soprano, tenor, and baritone melodic voices and the rhythm instrument)—and also sing. Like the Old Town Strollers' tunes, Sinovi's repertoire is eclectic. It is what their audience wants to hear: old Croatian folk songs as well as the latest hits from Zagreb, Macedonian tunes, Slovenian polkas, a few classic rock numbers by the likes of Simon and Garfunkel or the Beatles, and even some pop-rock-tamburitza originals.

A Question of Audience

Mike Radicevich and Joe Gornick are both tamburitza players in their thirties who make a portion of their livelihood from playing music and are both from industrial cities near Lake Michigan. The shores of Lake Michigan from Gary, Indiana, to Sheboygan, Wisconsin, have been a regional hearth to the tamburitza tradition in America. Mike and Joe both partake of the Lake Michigan region's rich tamburitza scene though they represent the two entirely different directions tamburitza music has taken in the United States: Mike plays a cosmopolitan eastern European music for the general public who patronize his family's Serbian restaurant; Joe plays the eclectic musical mix requested by Croatian Americans at ethnic gatherings.

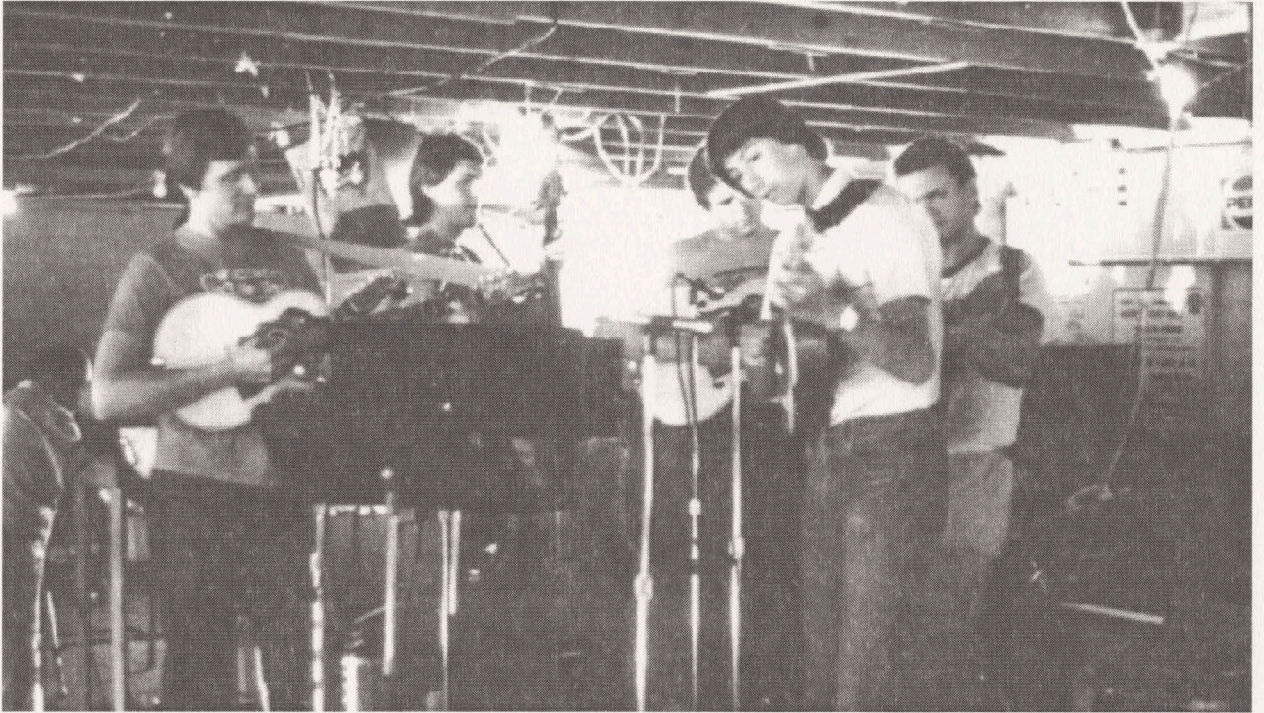
These two directions were present in the earliest tamburitza ensembles in North America. In Steelton, Pennsylvania, an immigrant from Karlovac, Croatia, Frank Hoffer, and two of his daughters established a tamburitza quartet in 1891. They played by ear on homemade instruments. Although a tamburitza history notes a couple of memorable concerts they performed for the general public (at a vaudeville review in nearby Harrisburg and at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair), most of their playing was for their own ethnic community, about which, except for their distinction of playing at the first convention of the Croatian Fraternal Union held in 1894 in Cleveland, the history is silent (Kolar 1975:38).

Only a few years after Frank Hoffer's family quartet got their fellow immigrants hopping, the Croatian *tamburica* orchestra Sokol began to contribute their music to the American scene. Led by Ivan Ocvarek, this very accomplished seven-piece orchestra was originally organized in the 1890s in Sisak, Croatia. Before coming to the United States in 1900, the group performed in Paris at the Folies-Bergère, as well as at the Grand Opera House, in the Kaisergarten of Dusseldorf, and for the proverbial Crowned Heads of Europe: in the castle of the Grand Duke and Duchess of Luxemburg, and at Sandringham for a gathering which included Emperor Franz Jozef of Austria and ex-Queen Isabella of Spain, hosted by the Prince of Wales.

In New York City, Frank Zotti, the noted Croatian immigrant banker, acted as their agent, putting out an advertisement in English which plainly stated, "The purpose . . . is to introduce to the Public the Instruments which interested so much H. R. H. the Prince of Wales, and the other nobility of Europe" (ibid.). Their prestigious U.S. performances included a 1900 engagement at the Roof Garden of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York and a performance for President William McKinley on September 5, 1901, at the Pan American Exposition—the day before he was assassinated!

The band toured the United States, going at least as far as Galveston, Texas, and is reported to have settled in Buffalo, New York, where for several years they played regularly at a locally noted German restaurant.

Through the twentieth century, a majority of *tamburashi* (tamburitza players) in America have been immigrant factory workers and miners who played at a tav-



Frank ("Pancho") Majdak Jr. playing at the annual Croatian Fraternal Union picnic, Mukwonago, 1984 Photo: Jim Leary

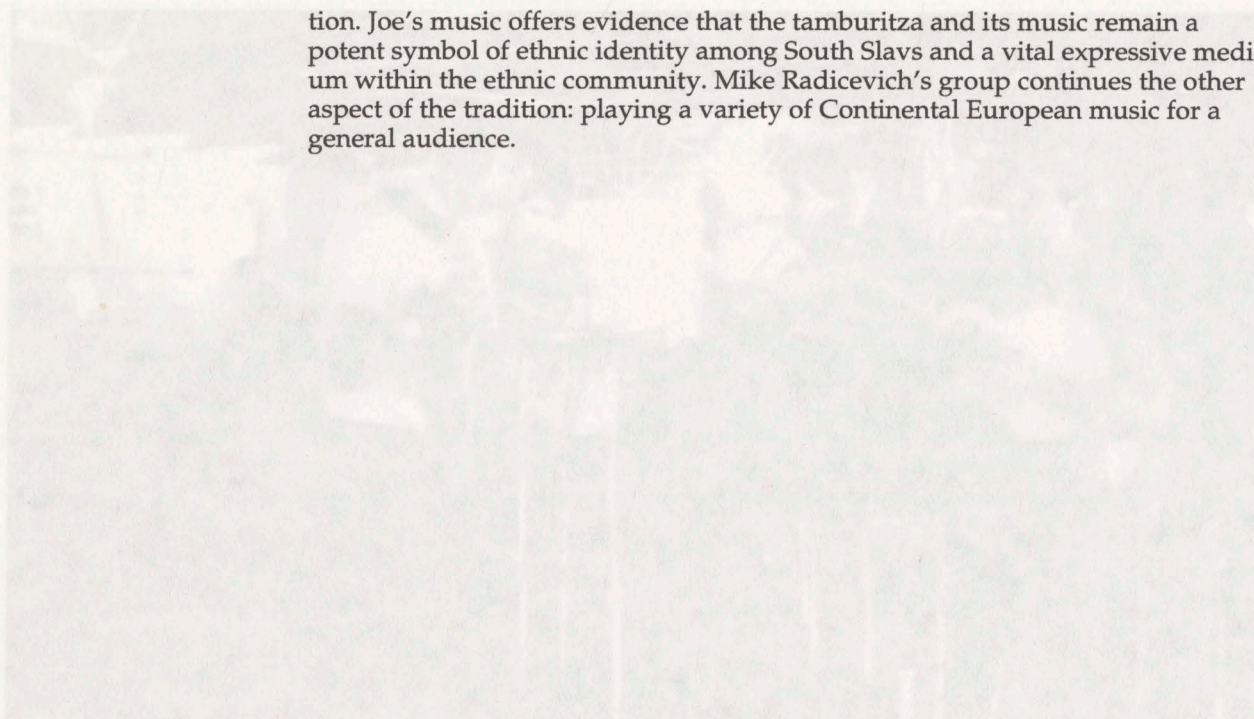
ern or church hall, or their descendants, who have perpetuated the music at picnics, weddings, and ethnic doings. But another important component of the tamburitza tradition has involved ensembles who, seeking professional status, have devised strategies to target an elite or a wider American audience.

For a number of years, the vaudeville and Chautauqua circuits provided a way. Two very significant ensembles were quite active in vaudeville. Zvonimir, an ensemble named for an eleventh-century king of Croatia, was formed in Steelton, Pennsylvania, in 1906 and toured actively until 1928. Over the years, personnel turned over continually, but the musicians included several of the most influential tamburitza musicians of all time: Rudolf Cernkovich, John Plasay, John Gajski, and Peter Savich. A second group, Sloga ("unity") was formed by Fabian Charles Koss in Farrell, Pennsylvania. The tuxedo-clad Sloga toured from 1910 to 1933. Koss, whose emphasis was to present a respectable, high-toned image for tamburashi, was joined in Sloga in 1925 by tamburitza great Paul Perman.

A third group, the Elias Serenaders, was a family band, formed in Milwaukee by Charles Elias in 1924. They toured extensively on the more educationally oriented Chautauqua circuit, often appearing in school auditoriums. Upon the death of the elder Elias in the mid-1930s, his son, Charles Jr., continued to tour the group until 1945. Their final travels were as part of a USO-sponsored tour of the Pacific to entertain American servicemen. The younger Elias remained active in tamburitza music, notably as the director of southern Wisconsin's American-Croatian Silver Strings youth orchestra, from 1957 until his death in 1984.

Since Elias's death, Joe Gornick has been directing the Waukegan, Illinois, youth orchestra, a group similar to the one in which he learned the tamburitza tradi-

tion. Joe's music offers evidence that the tamburitza and its music remain a potent symbol of ethnic identity among South Slavs and a vital expressive medium within the ethnic community. Mike Radicevich's group continues the other aspect of the tradition: playing a variety of Continental European music for a general audience.



Frank (Fanko) Mjokic Jr. playing at the annual Croatian Fraternal Union picnic, Lake Worth, 1984. Photo by Larry...

ent or church hall or their descendants, who have perpetuated the music at picnics, weddings, and ethnic dances. But another important component of the tamburitza tradition has involved emigrants who, seeking professional status, have devised strategies to target an elite or a wider American audience. For a number of years, the vanucherits and Chetvorka circles provided a way. Two very significant ensembles were quite active in vanucherits. The former, an ensemble named for an eleventh-century king of Croatia, was formed in Cleveland, Pennsylvania, in 1906 and toured actively until 1933. Over the years, personnel turned over continually, but the musicians included several of the most influential tamburitza musicians of all time: Rudolf Cernakovic, John Plesaj, John Gajic, and Peter Sevir. A second group, Slaga ("unity") was formed by Fabian Cernak Kosa in Farrell, Pennsylvania. The music-club Slaga toured from 1910 to 1933. Kosa, whose emphasis was to present a respectable, high-toned image for tamburitza, was joined in Slaga in 1925 by tamburitza great Paul Forman. A third group, the Elia Senaderans, was a family band, formed in Milwaukee by Charles Elia in 1924. They toured extensively on the more educationally oriented Chetvorka circuit, often appearing in school auditoriums. Upon the death of the elder Elia in the mid-1930s, his son, Charles Jr., continued to tour the group until 1942. Their final travels were as part of a USO-sponsored tour of the Pacific to entertain American servicemen. The young Charles remained active in tamburitza music, notably as the director of southern Wisconsin's American-Croatian Silver Strings youth orchestra from 1937 until his death in 1984. Since Elia's death, Joe Cornick has been directing the Waukegan, Illinois, youth orchestra, a group similar to the one in which he learned the tamburitza tradi-