Music as Culture: The Case of Slovenia

Tags: Music, Culture, National Identity, Slovenia, Music Education, Ethnography

Many times, we just assume that music is simply part of a culture. What if it was more than that? In his book, *Ethnomusicology: A Very Short Introduction*, Rice (2014) argues that music IS culture, stating that “all forms of human knowledge, creativity, and values, and their expression in music, language, cosmology, religion, ethics, plastic arts, dance, the making of tools, dwellings, cooking, clothing, and body decorations” (Rice, 2014, p. 65). Ethnologists like Rice have looked into the connections between music and culture, and have found that music contributes to the formation and construction of individual and social, cultural identities.

Slovenia, a country near and dear to my heart, where most of my cultural ancestry sits, has a very developed national identity. In this developed national identity are deep cultural roots and a strong musical tradition. Stanković (2015) defines a direct relationship between Slovenian national identity and traditional music. His study determined that Slovenian ‘folk-pop’ [slovensko narodne zabavne glasbe/Slovenian traditional music] is commonly seen as the base of Slovenian traditional music and a significant part of the Slovenian culture. Participants specifically referenced the content of these songs, their sound, lyrics, instruments, and other characterizes as defining aspects of this music as part of the cultural identity.

Ethnology argues that musical performance helps to construct a social identity (Rice, 2014, p. 72). This reminds me of the nature of social gatherings in Slovenia – and for Slovenians in Canada. Many traditional folk songs characterize aspects of everyday live in Slovenia. Back in Slovenia, evenings at a restaurant, someone’s house or in someone’s backyard almost always involves singing together and someone pulling out an accordion. Even just toasting to a meal or drink, Slovenians have songs such as ‘kolkor kapljic, toklo let’ [trans. as many drinks, as many years] with what seems like endless verses… and just when you think there are no more, verses are just made up on the spot. While this might just seem like a typical party, these are cultural traditions that create and define Slovenia’s musical and national identity. As Klemenc (2007) says, “widespread performance of Slovenian folk songs in… popular reception [are] expressions of national and cultural identity” (p. 77). And in the process, our traditional songs are passed down through aural transmission, for generations. And here’s a sneak peek inside a Slovenian gathering (Double Click to play video).

In his discussion of identity and music, Rice positions that individuals play a key role in the construction and performance of identity (2014, p. 71). A talented Slovenian musician and composer, Slavko Avsenik (1929-2015) composed many songs with the beauty and love of Slovenia in mind. Two of his songs stand out so much, that they are both considered the ‘unofficial, official national anthems of Slovenia’. The first song, ‘Slovenija, od kod lepot
tvoje’ [trans. Slovenia – from where does your beauty come?] talks about the beauty of Slovenia as a country; “Slovenia - from where does your beauty come? / We greet you from the heart, and happy we are at home. / Slovenia - Let me sing you a song. / Do not look for happiness elsewhere, than at home.” The second song, ‘Na Golici’ [trans. On Golica], is an instrumental song where the trumpet and clarinet have a conversation with each other, and emulates the sounds of Slavko’s home town. Slavko’s grandson, Sašo describes how connected the people of Slovenia are, with this song:

“I will never forget how we played a fete in the garden at home in Begunje. Young people were in the trees for hours, it was unbelievable, and they wanted to listen to Golica and nothing other than Golica. It was a miraculous piece. Golica was a sensation for all musicians… I think over and over again, that Golica is a phenomenon in itself and an incredible success as an instrumental composition, which competes with all the vocal hits. And again, all performances begin with Golica. It is a guarantee that as soon as an ensemble or group takes to the stage, it hits the audience making an immediate connection. It’s a guarantee…” (Ramšak, 2015, p. 47).

Rice also argues that musical practice, in relation to identity, inspires a sense of belonging and self-understanding (2014, p. 73). Both songs are examples on how one individual (and his brother, band and music) played a key role in constructing Slovenian national and musical identity. While some have expressed that these are just mere popular songs in Slovenia, the reality is, these songs emulate what it ‘means to be Slovenian’, connect with people, and have constructed (and literally performed) Slovenian national and musical identity.

The nature of ethnographic research allows us as researchers and educators to dive into the nature of music and culture, and see that in many cases, music IS culture. In the case of Slovenia, whether a background party, or a public picnic, music defines these events, and defines what it means to be Slovenian. This can also benefit music education in at a greater spectrum, because we can get an authentic look at the nature of the cultures by studying their music. Understanding how influential music is and its meaning enhances our content and approach to teaching it. And if we can have fun along the way, then why not?

References


I Feel Slovenia: Tourism Website: https://www.slovenia.info/en.


