



Planet Carmina

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Preface

I was deeply impressed by your concert. It was worth my flying over the Atlantic for. Your conducting is much more than a first-class aesthetic experience – it is an interpretation of life.

— Paul Wehrle,
former President of Europa Cantat and IFCM

Distances of a Slovenian Stardom

This book about conductor and artistic director Karmina Šilec, her original and exploratory approaches to music and the performing arts, her world-renowned choir, and the vocal theatre Carmina Slovenica, presents an exhilarating chapter in Slovenian artistic music, spanning Slovenia and the world, the global and the local. In 1989, following the death of conductor Branko Rajšter, who had led the choir for twenty-five seasons, Karmina took over the Youth Choir Maribor and turned it into a highly potent work of art which breaks the stereotypes of choral music.

Capturing the conductor's and her choir's home and the world – from Japan to Canada, from Sweden to China, from Australia to the USA, from Argentina to Borneo, from Russia to South Africa ... – means dissecting the division between Slovenian and international identities, between the national and the global. It is a story of distances crossed by a renowned Slovenian collective which reaches far beyond the Gallus Hall in the Cankarjev dom Cultural and Congress Centre in Ljubljana and finds its place on the most prestigious stages at the pinnacle of global artistic music: the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, Louise M. Davies Sym-

phony Hall in San Francisco, Hong Kong Cultural Centre, Metropolitan Art Space in Tokyo, Arts Centre Victoria in Melbourne, St. Ann's Warehouse in New York, the Philharmonia in Saint Petersburg, the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, the Teresa Carreño Theatre in Caracas, the Parco della Musica auditorium in Rome ... The most prominent festivals to which Carmina Slovenica accepted invitations to perform are: the Festival d'Automne à Paris, the Holland Festival, the Golden Mask festival in Moscow, Steierischer Herbst in Graz, Ruhrtriennale, the Prototype New York, the Kunstenfestival Brussels, the Melbourne Festival, the Operadagen Rotterdam, the Moscow Easter Festival, the Dresdner Musikfestspiele, the World Music Days (ISCM) in Ljubljana ...

Carmina Slovenica has performed on every continent and in the most prominent concert venues, as well as in the most prestigious churches and the simplest, abandoned places in both hemispheres. Capturing in a book all of these journeys and landscapes, both creative and physical, constantly undulating, with social and intimate aspects, proved a glorious if arduous mission. And this book is just the first, very subjective and only partial inventory of all the landscapes of the group's creative world. It came to life with difficulty, respect and numerous doubts, as the life of this unusual team was in full swing, immersed in planning, in constant motion. It would be impossible and improper to halt it, which capturing it in a book form effectively does. There is much left for musicology and music related disciplines to research in this field.

On several levels, this story touches the paths and landscapes which are unique in our space, since not one Slovenian conductor, artistic di-

rector or ensemble as a whole has achieved such global presence and acclaim. With Carmina, Karmina reached the highest and hardest to reach milestones long ago - competitive, artistic, creative and educational. Persistently and in her own relentlessly elite manner, she has been proving that a choir represents an omnipotent, exceptional, versatile artistic corpus, comparable to a symphony orchestra, drama, or ballet, that it is a consummate artistic body that constantly opens new creative spaces. In our part of the world, a choir is often regarded as a stereotypical national relic, yet Karmina daringly and provocatively transformed her choir into the most elite artistic form of the highest rank.

Every project Karmina Šilec takes on is an expedition into the unknown or unfamiliar. She took a creative approach to tackling sexism in music through time, she paired and keeps pairing various times and music, creates new and exciting musical contexts, fusing the old and the new. She continues to discover unknown Slovene authors, both past and contemporary. While discovering contemporary and early music repertoires, both domestic and foreign, she constantly strives to generate a creative spirit by taking musical journeys into the unknown, forgotten, withheld. Although her fundamental purpose is to enrich her local surroundings, she has always worked as an excellent educator as well.

She has devised choregie, a unique artistic concept and a new form of vocal theatre. Choregie results from the contemporary tendency for different artistic levels, like sound, movement and light, to intertwine and overlap. These are entirely innovative expressions, a mixture of her own creative impulses from

phonology, cultural anthropology, sociology of music, psychology, ethno-musicology, history, anatomy, etc. Choregie has two meanings: it is an artistic, creative concept, and a specific method for working with ensembles, preparing them to be staged in music theatre performances in which music relates and reacts to other fields. This method includes research and development of movement, ritualistic elements, vocal laboratory, sculpting and imagining. Language, vocalisation, visuals and movement coexist in the performance; they complement each other and stand shoulder to shoulder in perfect balance.

Data on planet Carmina for the period 1989-2022 best represent the vast dimensions of this creative universe: 100 international tours on six continents. On the European continent, Carmina performed in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Croatia, Italy, Luxemburg, Hungary, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Slovakia, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey and the Vatican. In Asia, in the countries of Japan, China, Malaysia, and Singapore. In South America the group performed in Argentina, Chile and Venezuela. In the USA, Australia, and South Africa. Over 20 foreign ensembles were invited to Slovenia by Carmina Slovenica, there were over 30 presentations of Carmina and Karmina, the ensemble or the artistic director alone appeared at conferences, forums, symposia, olympics and fairs abroad. They collaborated with 257 Slovenian and 110 foreign artists. They received 62 Slovenian and 60 foreign awards, among which are the most prestigious awards for choir competitions both home and abroad – for example the Golden Mask in Moscow for their perfor-

mance *When the Mountain Changed its Clothing* and the Ford award for preservation of natural and cultural heritage. Karmina's Robert Edler award was for her important contribution to the global choir movement and the Music Theatre Now award for the performance *From Time Immemorial* still retain their luster. Karmina became a candidate for an 'European Theatre Oscar' in 2017, and also received numerous, very prominent local awards, such as the Gallus plaque, Prešeren Foundation Award for its *Vampirabile* project, and the Glazer Credential. Carmina Slovenica received the Silver Order of Merit from President Boris Pahor.

To date, Carmina Slovenica has performed 2,007 pieces of music, 828 of which are Slovenian. About 1,523 members have been actively involved with Carmina Slovenica. They performed at 72 international festivals, (61 musical and 11 theatre festivals), and at 11 music festivals and one theatre festival in their home country of Slovenia. They released 22 CDs, 4 DVDs, a cassette tape, a vinyl and 3 books, as well as 24 yearbooks.

An educational vertical with the Choral school CS has been active for a good quarter century. The school includes a department for solo singing, a year-round vocal music school, seminars, workshops, summer camps. The choir has produced many excellent musicians who are now internationally renowned opera and jazz singers, conductresses, innovative musicians, professional choir singers, music educators, as well as successful doctors, scientists, managers, producers, journalists... And they all have been permanently shaped by their special bond to CS, the experiences they gained while performing around the world, discipline and freedom.



Force of Memory

Omnipotent

We have probably all been shaped for life. Perhaps those not involved in music professionally are not as influenced as I am, but my relation to artistic creation – unrelenting attitude to my own work and the work of my colleagues, curiosity, artistic insight, self-criticism and criticism – is first and foremost the result of the many years I spent with Carmina. I attribute this system being thoroughly instilled into my being to the fact that I joined the choir as a ten-year-old girl and remained there for eleven years. During this period, I never stopped developing creatively and mentally, while at the same time I surrendered myself unconditionally to the work and its influence, which shaped me into an individual critical of her own work and led me along the path of relentless searching through different artistic genres. It also taught me to think outside the box (although I wasn't aware of it at the time), because everything was possible with Carmina: a girl of ten could sing baroque, Lebič's music, Japanese and African songs, Hildegard of Bingen, minimalism, jazz, Mahler ... At the same time dancing and playing any instrument. Carmina made us omnipotent.

— Zvezdana Novakovič, a musician

It's All in the Flesh

Indelible traces, upright posture, clear thoughts, communal in collective.

A desire for art, the scent of the stage, backstage darkness and a breath in silence.

A picture of an open mouth, a shrill voice from the lungs, chest, vocal chords. A moving voice, one and many. I count the steps, I calculate the turns, I sip the song. Pictures of music, tiny bodies, distant horizons, the same goal.

There is so much freedom in organised chaos, so many orderly sequences in the heart. Records of memories, experiences, forms of essence, common to the group and just one. Nothing is excluded, nothing peripheral, it's all in the flesh. And there it will remain. We came out of here grown-up, Carmina Slovenica taught us to make decisions and think and change the world.

We are brave, our thoughts and desires are clear.

The boundaries of our small world have been extended, our eyes have seen continents, our souls have met others like them and nothing is as it was before.

Though after all those years our feet don't take new steps on unknown paths, we have retained an open heart, curiosity and knowledge that singing will take us places. Far and deep into the heart of another.

Voice is far reaching: it is invisible threads, a genetic code and a mission, a resounding "yes" to the aesthetic, thought-provoking and good.

Once you step into the world of Carmina Slovenica, you never stop seeing, feeling and believing differently.

— Živa Ploj Peršuh, a conductress and a musicologist

Musical Experience of My Life

There is no doubt in my mind when I say that Carmina Slovenica is my GREAT life experience and Karmina my lifelong teacher.

I joined the choir a quarter of a century ago, still wet behind the ears, eager to experience new things and unaware of what it would bring. The hours I spent in rehearsal became my favourite part of the week. Each and every time I laid down my daily burden outside the door of the room with blue chairs, on the fourth floor of the Union building, and started creating something of value with a feeling of wholeness and belonging to the group.

Karmina was able to take us to a world where we all became one – there was no Minja, Mojca, Alja, or Nina, we were all Carminas. She brought out the best out in each individual and joined the hundred or more personalities in a unified whole, which worked perfectly, magically, invincibly, both on and off the stage. Each rehearsal, each concert and each tour brought a different and infallibly perfect experience, that shaped us forever. I think they marked me a bit more ...

I had an opportunity to work behind the stage, in the "backstage" of this magical world. Once again, Karmina was able to identify what I could do best. She possesses a special gift: she can find and bring to light a person's most hidden abilities. She teaches how to develop them, nurture, complement and use them in a way that they can best serve one's desires and work.

After years of various collaborations, I can safely state that this has been one of the most beautiful, richest and worthiest experiences of my life. I have deep and grateful respect for Karmina because of her abilities, creativity, vision and hard work.

— Minja Lednik, a production manager of Carmina Slovenica

Positions

It's like taking part in the Tour de France: the leader takes it hard on the chest while the rest find it easier to pedal.

— CNK

Puzzle

It was the name that set her apart. In several different ways. In the beginning by spending her first fortnight nameless, until the authorities asked her parents to please decide on a name. She became Karmina and in the years when it was in vogue to discuss the origins of one's name, she tested different ideas – that it came from the colour carmine red or from “karmin”, a form of lamentation performed at funerals. It might also be a version of the name Carmen, or the final and most exciting Latin explanation – the song. This interpretation has irritated her to this day, when she is often forced to endure attempts at introductory wit, like for instance, “Karmina as in Carmina Burana”, or “carmina boranja” (a type of local stew). Of all of them, she was the fondest of her great-aunt's mistake; she called her Karamela (Caramel). But her name did come in handy when choosing a name for her choir, which became Carmina Slovenica (Latin for Slovenian songs). The name has ensured continuity through change, it is easy to pronounce in all languages, and serves as a geographical and at times repertory starting point. And it has raised dozens of carminas who have come out of this “family”.

When she started her journey as a choir conductor, she was only sixteen and younger than her singers, while today she is old enough to be their mother. She has been standing in front of generations of singers her entire mature life. She never spoke to me about her youth, about her beginnings. Even when I asked about it, I got a sparing and tossed off answer. There was something about her first record player and

part-singing in the family car, and her first Tchaikovsky – *Concerto in B-flat minor* – as a birthday present. You always had to peel off the layers to get to something more intimate. But as I poked more and harder, there usually came a flood. True, more of a “staccato” flood, but it was there. A bit enigmatic. She is so sphinx-like. God knows when she is herself or even what herself is. She is found in so many roles, ranges, alternations. There is so much being invented with her and her music. Music coming from her vocal explorations is often heard for the first time. She has adopted this pioneering way completely. It has been her loyal companion through times of splendour and distress. It is quite uncomfortable to be in the position of “before your time”.

Is unpredictability her basic trait? She definitely always feels she needs to be going somewhere, she has conquered so many territories, she has stepped over the thresholds of so many back stages in global mega-concert halls ... She has flown so many miles and so many diverse landscapes resonate in her work. She conquers them through synaesthesia and daring and she long ago started to fuse all the worlds she had experienced, all the worlds she thinks and explores, into forever new, different contexts. Or in the words of a music critic Alex Ross: “She unveils vast forms, she deals with complex forces, she traverses the range from noise to silence, she points the way to the place Debussy once described as the ‘imagined country’, which is found nowhere on the map.”



Prestige

She received one of the most prominent international awards for choral music in October 2004, in the German town of Heilbronn - the Robert Edler award. A renowned jury including Royce Saltzman, Erkki Pohjola, Misukazi Suvaki and Péter Erdei decided to recognize her for her “powerful contribution to the development of global choral movement”. It was a life achievement award. At the age of thirty-seven!

When she received word from the German town of Marktoberdorf about receiving the Robert Elder award, she was shocked. She was familiar with former recipients, like Tõnu Kaljuste from Estonia or Frieder Bernius from Germany. The award has been given since 1999 to a conductor, composer, choir or institution for notable contributions to international choral movement.



It seemed almost unbelievable that I would be awarded such an honour in a field so vast, among so many excellent colleagues. I feel like I need to meet even higher professional standards from now on. For this reason, the award is an honour and a great burden at the same time. If your work is chosen from all that has been created in choral music in the last few years around the world, you must have done something exceptional. I considered Frieder Bernius who received this award some years ago, one of the topmost authorities, a legend. I used to attend his master classes. He set a new performance standard with Stuttgart Kamerchor, just like Eric Ericsson before him. These artists record with the largest record labels, like Sony and Phillips, which in turn places them among the most visible and renowned figures in music.

There is no institution or national organization behind me to promote me abroad. Some of my colleagues have been more fortunate, since they come from countries where musical life is organised on a much higher level, where publishers of music literature and albums and concert agencies work hand in hand ... They attack the international stage in unison. It should suffice to take a look at the Music Finland website or remind ourselves of the Vienna Boy's Choir, which is supported by a giant machinery, from tourism on. My work stands practically alone - there is no choir federation, no agency behind it. That made our breakthrough tougher and it makes this award the more surprising.

Childhood Fragrances

If you looked in the window of a house across the street from the prison in Maribor, you would see a window grate, and behind the window grate there were faces. The faces used to stare into the curtained window and the cold room of an apartment. In this apartment there was a black grand piano. It had ... keys. Each one was different from the others. They were made of ivory. This fact enflamed my imagination. I saw white hunters, I saw black hunters and fleeing tigers and elephants. And then a huge boat and on that boat, our black piano with ... keys. In this "freezer", as our grandmother used to call it, my mother would bend over them and play a tune from a foreign TV show, imitating the playing puppet. She stuck her tongue in her cheek and cocked her head sideways. My grandmother used to watch her in awe, while my grandfather was lying down under heavy blankets with his cap on. I stood by the piano in my red knitted skirt, knitted cardigan and woollen slippers, waiting for her to finish. Waiting for my turn. I did the same. If I didn't succeed, I tried again and again, searching for the correct pattern of the ivory keys, so

that the blotches from Africa sync with the TV puppet's tune. And everybody was so cold. The kitchen was the only heated room in the apartment back then, because the coal cellar was too far, there might have been some other reason also. It was warm in the kitchen, not only because it contained the only stove in the house, it was also warm with the scent of cabbage rolls, apple strudel, cracknels and preserved jam. All the pots of winter supplies were archived in the "freezer". Looking up from the ivory keys, I saw light refracted in glasses of spruce tips in sugar, which supposedly worked wonders for my bronchitis. Jars of ajvar, pickled Serbian vegetables, pickles and peppers stood assorted by size in display cabinets of first post-war massive oak furniture with a shiny varnish finish, behind the cut glass featuring roses. The smell of moth balls inside the piano mixed with the fragrances of sage and thyme hung in the closets to dry. It was in this fusion of colours and smells that I searched for my first right notes and had my first real audience.



Maestra

My first encounter with the true meaning of “maestro” took place when I was dreaming of enrolling in the “central” choir as an elementary student. Back then, that was almost unattainable. The choir’s reputation was enormous. It seemed that those who were able to be there were transported to another world, it was very prestigious. One time, I managed to go to the Union Building, up to the third floor. To that now thoroughly cursed third floor, where I was initiated into the world of voices. At the time, the choir was rehearsing a composition by the Serbian composer Radomir Petrović, a movement of his suite. During the rehearsal, as the singers were individually performing the part “men ne majka jed nui”, the conductor included me as well and that was how I passed my audition. At the time, I was terribly upset that it had taken me so long to join, but whenever I spoke to anyone about my desire, they were quick to persuade me how unrealistic I was, because only the best could sing in that choir. I was attending music school then, putting a lazy effort in learning how to play the piano and slamming my bedroom door every time I heard the word “practice”. There was no godparent to walk me through my beginnings as a singer,

those were steps I had to take alone. Instead of spending my evenings in then legendary shrines of Zlatorog beer and 57 cigarettes or in the Grad, Astoria and Đeloza bars - I spent more and more time at rehearsals.

Soon I drove our “old man” crazy by adding another choir - APZ to the MPZ. These acronyms sound so Eastern-European nowadays. Back then, they were powerful identifiers. They stood for numerous celebrations. They also stood for going abroad. Mostly we visited sister cities. The goals were interesting - vacations or rather intense preparations at the seaside, recording a vinyl, performing for the radio - they all stimulated us in our work. We were so excited to perform at the Graz cemetery on November 1st. Or to jump into a pool at the sound of the whistle after eight hours of intense rehearsals, only to climb back out again as the whistle sounded again. Being allowed to swim between a comrade’s (our conductor Branko Rajšer) legs was considered the peak of the day. Order and discipline were easily achieved on tour, as long as we were promised a trip to the department store, “where you could get everything: from a needle to a car”. I still remember promises and desires attached to the chance we might be able to buy chewing gum or something like that.

Such desires made us, eighteen-year-old girls in old-fashioned concert attire, willing to walk in line in lined pairs through Utrecht, and being laughed at by Dutchmen in fancy clothes who were sitting in pub gardens.



Flying Too High

One of the proverbs I heard again and again in my early childhood was: "He who flies high falls low." The proverb was repeated everywhere I went. It warned us of the dangers of being different from one's group. It was a lesson in proper socialisation, an instruction to stick to the happy medium. I might not have been afraid of flying high, but I was surely scared of falling low.

The beginnings of "being first" go way back. They were humble and today I find them almost funny. In my first competitive attempts, at the time with the Rotovž women's choir, I brought folk part-singing to the stage, as found in the records of the Institute of Ethnomusicology at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, instead of the then customary arrangements of folk songs. The jury was astonished. Others were seriously appalled. The next edition of the festival already featured a few imitators. At the next Naša pesem (Our Song) Choir Competition I introduced to the folk music category folk-song as a comprehensive, thematically rounded performance, complemented with visual (national dress replicas) and dance (stylized folk-dance choreography) elements. The reaction was the same, as was the influence. Such "boldness" continued. First lighter genres, first choral choreographies. And a growing focus on new repertoire fields: less (or never before) performed music, specific combinations of musical pieces, a comprehensive approach to constructing performances and, of course, introduction of other means of expression (light, movement, instruments, costumes, elements of theatre). All of these gradually gave rise to a concept we now know as choregie. From what are today relatively naïve projects like Tokrat malo drugače (A Bit Different This Time) and More a Tale Than Reality, to Vampirabile, which ripped into the Slovene music scene and even more so into in professional circles abroad. The first traces of fledgling scripts, like for example a project where the music of Mozart was supplemented by a candlelit actor wearing a costume (costume, wig and chandelier borrowed from the theatre) and reading cheesy, heart-breaking texts, were met with enthusiasm. The venues were packed, the concerts sold out, the professional critics very pleased with my prospects. Vampirabile and other projects realised from 2000 to 2004 launched me into the orbit of interesting artists. There was no lack of superlatives. People talked and wrote of the incredible success. And great hopes and good wishes for the future. They somehow got used to the intensity and concept of expression of Vampirabile, and little vampires began popping up in Argentina, the USA, Canada, Africa. Then I took this immature beauty and agreeability and dug

even deeper. It was then that many got lost. Things were no longer simple: no longer could they talk of how beautiful the tone was, because that became a self-evident and expected standard, they could no longer talk about tempo, dynamic range and innovative stability. Those projects simply couldn't support such basic analysis. There was little "bel canto" singing and no familiar repertoire left. It all fitted into a sort of comprehensive concept, a form of theatre music, which didn't fit entirely in the field of music, but neither could it be described as theatre or dance. That was the first time I seriously considered the possibility of being somehow ahead of the times in my environment. That was all I could come up with, because I experienced fantastic reactions on stages abroad, professional analyses of my concept, commissions for collaborations, but at the same time many doubts from the other side. I relied on the confidence I received from circles familiar with the development of music as theatre. Places where works by Glass, Reich, Cage, to mention just a few more widely known composers from my repertoires, were staple pieces instead of exotic excursions into the unknown, yet were received with resentment in Slovenia (by outdated musicologists and music 'experts').

*Once I had a long chat with an esteemed German colleague following a dinner in Vancouver. He asked me how my vampir(abil)e life was going. Then he answered his own question: "It's like taking part in the Tour de France: the leader takes it hard on the chest while the rest find it easier to pedal. The leader is also usually not the eventual winner."
Wonderful!*





About Time

Being ahead of the times? When is that? Which time, whose time? When we were told in high-school that one artist or the other was "ahead of his time", I took it to mean something exceptional, commendable, venerable, the best thing that could happen to you. I have come to realize many things sound better than they are in real life. Being ahead of the times means: standing alone in your beliefs, tilting at windmills. Being ahead of the times means knowing you are taking a different path and being unable to do anything about it. I would not feel the need to talk about this had not my ideas, almost as a rule, been at first rejected and harshly criticized and then soon copied both at home and abroad.

Possessing sensibility for the times is both a gift and a penance. Being in the time and going with it must feel nice and comfortable. Being behind the times must be even more comfortable, although I doubt many people realize this. Being ahead of the times can be a horrific battle with everything and everyone, and it is anything but comfortable.

I was free of any truly great tradition. The tradition of cults of the artist, great names of great composers, conductors and other performers, traditions of great theoreticians, critics and artists in our musical cultural environment.

I was part of a small music community. I was also free of the laws of the market. I was free to create, which came with staying on the sidelines of all the great developments in music. This was a great privilege for creative freedom. Yet this privilege came with a disadvantaged social and economic position. If the first privilege allowed me to fly high and far, the second limited the scope of my flight.

The Vampirettes and Prešeren

2000 was a milestone year. The angelic choir of white-clad girls morphed into a corpus of black demonic women – vampires – in a music theatre *Vampirabile*. Many found this shocking. Named after the work of Adriana Hölszky, the *Vampirabile* project brought new aesthetics, fused ancient beliefs, spells and myths with contemporary composers in a new entity.

The mythological world brought to life in the project is rich and mysterious, never fully explored. It entices us with its combination of imagination and reality, nature and the human, belief and experience, hope and fear, strength and helplessness ... Different peoples have different mythologies, but they are nevertheless somehow very similar. The project softly combines fantasy and reality, nature and human, belief and experience, hope and fear, strength and helplessness ... This world seems so far – and yet so close. This is also one of the reasons why modern composers often draw on mythology.

For this project I selected from all the great composers in the world who are contemporary in time, spirit and manner, their scores focusing on themes associated with the ancient past. People keep locking these materials in the chest of cultural heritage, but they keep surreptitiously seeping out. They include everything from gigantic national epic poems to tiny abracadabras, but they all contain enormous amounts of fantasy.

The music was written by Einojuhani Rautavaara, Arne Mellnäs, Mark Winges, Lojze Lebič, Judith Shatin, Stephen Hatfield and Adriana Hölszky.





At home, the reviews were euphoric: “[...] rhythmically and dynamically fully perfected spell binding ritual of almost bacchanalian awakening.”

Or: “[...] a magic circle, shading into the unity of different contrasts; exceptional choral vocal articulation, an expressive metastasis, spreading eerily and intensively into the silence, and the scream of the scenery in a one-of-a-kind perfection; one could hardly achieve more.”

The explanation of the Prešeren Foundation award states:

“*Vampirabile* is a sophisticated choral message in all segments, comprised of several works by contemporary composers and uniquely bound together in a dramaturgically rounded narrative. Precise vocal discipline, youthful energy, musical theatrical ingenuity and artistic cogency are among the qualities marking this performance, which spreads eerily and intensively into the silence and scream of musical witching.”

In 2000, Vampirabile continued on its glamorous journey at the America Cantat International Choral Festival in Caracas, just a day after it premiered in Cankarjev dom. The gala concert in the great hall of the Teresa Carreño cultural centre, the very place which had hosted Tomaž Pandur and his “theatre of dreams” several times before, was met with chants and huge applause. The auditorium literally exploded in standing ovations and refused to let the choir leave the stage.



Spaces

Welcome, angels of peace.

— Sign on a welcome poster. Sendai, Japan, July 2, 2008.



I accompanied them to six continents and we were writing our own *Lonely Planet* or *Traveling Planet* on those journeys together. Landscapes, real and imagined, are mixed together, they fuse into an exciting universe, where realistic distances between *The Spell* by Lojze Lebič in the Andes and *Drumlca* in the largest concert hall in Tokyo or *Adiemus* from the window of the University of Ljubljana and *Benedicamus* in Spanish Las Huelgas disappear. They are all merging into a densely populated, authentic, unique **Planet Carmina**.

How many countries were there? About forty on six different continents. How many concert goers? Sadly, nobody recorded the numbers. Just under a month-long Japanese tour alone saw 25.000 people in fifteen concert halls on all the islands.

Travelling with Carmina Slovenica brings a different point of view, stepping onto the greatest stages from backstage, mixing with audiences of all countries, breathing with them, observing the phenomenon in microscopic and telescopic view all at once. It is outward and inward, an oscillation, co-undulation,

co-habitation with a delicate seismograph. It is demanding, passionate, euphoric. It is dealing with special laws of the collective which the uninvited cannot and should not ever fully penetrate. There are numerous codes which the unqualified can never fully decipher. The community operates like a sect or boot camp, a girl's boarding school, a contemporary *workshop*. One can detect elements of all collective classes and practices. And the constant flow, alternations, lining every possible thing in a new (musical and other) context as a starting point for everything. What is most stunning is Karmina's ability to shape generation after generation of singers into the now typical and notorious Carmina perfection. After all these decades, superhuman toil through time.

The all-girl collective brings to the international scene not only the sounds of their own environment and national musical heritage, but always also another and different music, from all ages and regions. Such universality always falls on fertile ground, and it always also contains - in a surprisingly natural and never populistically flirtatious way - Slovenian musical scores. The passion with which the

Japanese audience reacted to Lebič's music, the enthusiasm of the boys' choir from Drakensberg, South Africa for learning songs from Rezija ... For any of us tagging along, every performance anywhere in the world was reason to develop a more confident view of being Slovenian.

No concert, wherever it is performed, is without Slovenian songs or works by Slovenian composers. This connection is an important one, not only because of the adjective in the choir's name. The ensemble's personality isn't built exclusively through elite appearances at the most prestigious events, but include venues like solitary village schools on remote shores of the Atlantic or numerous cultural centres in our homeland.

As Slovenia tried to enter the world with its "success story" over two decades ago, Carmina Slovenica had already written its "song of success" on the stages of San Francisco, Vancouver, Cape Town, New York, Basel, Helsinki ... It proved that Slovenian song was one way to conquer the world. It would win convincingly and with the highest scores at prestigious choir competitions in Neerpelt, De Moines, Golden Gate, Kathaumixw, Kalundborg. Experts know these are some of the hardest steps for any prime choir to climb. But as the confines of choral music became too narrow and Carmina Slovenica turned away from sheer competitiveness, enforced standards and repertoires, which were not intensive enough for the leader who saw her choir as an artistic corpus, able to hold one's own against any other great artistic formation.





Three

Scivias, 2003.

From Time Immemorial ..., 2006.

Pleading for Words, 2011.

I recall three theatrical events, projects which received many awards and are at least partially still performed today, outside the geography I am about to draw with all its tangible and fluid boundaries.

The first groundbreaking event I recall is the premiere of the theatrical project **Scivias** in Cankarjev dom's Gallus hall in 2003. It was spell binding. As the girls assume unusual line-ups, incanting, sitting on the floor, I witnessed the same effect all over the world. It is wedged somewhere between ethnos and ethos, which has become eerily relevant in recent years, and stems from rituals from the entire planet - from group prayers to chants, from shamanic melodies, mantras, to Inuit chants. The melodies are internalized even if we don't understand a word, Eskimo syllables and Latin masses carry similar messages - on mystery, love, death, birth, fear, love ... Religions and armies, tribes and peoples have always used the power of chants, because they allow us to steer the collective spirit and heart, in good times and bad times. From *Scivias* to the more recent *Toxic Psalms*, the music of old societies of different traditions perfectly relates to the works of composers like Stephen Hatfield, or Donald Patriquin, or Veljo Tormis, or Jukka Linkola, female composers like Hildegard of Bingen or Sarah Hopkins, who enthusiastically listened to the Carminas' concert in Australia, or the Slovenian composers Lojze Lebič, Alojz Srebotnjak, Jakob Jež, Marjan Šijanec ... Traditional tunes of Australia, Croatia, Uzbekistan, Peru, Cameroon, Ghana, traditional Apache melody ... merge quite naturally with Slovenian folk song. Evidence of the universal value of this project can be found in inclusion of *Scivias* into the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) programme as part of the *Discoveries* programme.

Juxtaposing music, coexistence of styles, eras in Karmina Šilec's performances, multiplied

with numerous performers, orchestras or groups, looks and sounds like a breezy combination of different entities in unity, in timelessness. *O successores*, an homage to maestro Samo Hubad, boldly combined music from the past with contemporary music in Gallus hall in 2005, in collaboration with RTV Slovenia's Symphony orchestra. Simultaneously performing Arvo Pärt's music and medieval melodies of the Eastern and Western Churches is both provocative and innovative, as is combining early polyphony with the spiritual juncture of Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

I also remember as groundbreaking the stage production of ***From Time Immemorial ...*** (2006) by composer Lojze Lebič, which Carminas integrated into the Opera, ballet and orchestra of the Slovene National Theatre Maribor ensemble. It was groundbreaking primarily because of its institutional framework, which seemed stiff and rigid, in love with museum-like belcanto. Jernej Lorenci joined Karmina as director. Staring into the shadows of our ancestors, into the beginnings of our psychological distress, it was a performance which stemmed from a key thought by the poet on Lebič's music, Gregor Strniša: "Where are we, when were we, where will we be, when are we no more?" The critics were captivated and the international commendation: Karmina received the International Theatre Institute (ITI) Award at the Music Theatre Now world competition in



2008, in the category Music beyond Opera. I admit I was personally especially excited about the project ***Pleading for Words*** (2011). Because we, Karmina and I, wrote back and forth about Slovenian poetry for a long time: I kept sending her chosen poems and poets, she kept sending me musical lessons. *Pleading for Words* was the first project to weave a special bond between new and early Slovenian music and poetry. It was a special excursion into the world of Slovenian poetry, a sort of “architecture of music and word”. As an homage to Lojze Lebič, who, as a composer, fit perfectly

with Slovenian modernism in poetry, Carmina first performed *Pleading for Words* at the 26th Slovene Music Days in the parish church of St. George in Piran. There was also a special subtleness about the concert performance of parts of the projects among the arches of the Maribor Town Hall at the invitation of the Maribor Public Library three years later. *Pleading for Words* was subtitled *Slovenian Spiritual Creativity*, which was inspired by a poem by France Balantič. The consecrated space of the baroque church in Piran was suggestively filled by a succession of Slovenian





poetry and early, never before performed and not thoroughly explored Slovenian music by Daniel Lagkhner and Georgius Prenner, as well as the unsurpassed contemporary composer of choral music Lojze Lebič, whose work has been systematically and lovingly performed by Carminas on every world tour for decades. Discovering new chapters in musical history and looking into the musical future of this space served as a starting point. The girls performed the Maribor born Lagkhner (after 1550 - after 1607), whom Karmina had discovered and whose compositions from the *Flores Jessaei* collection she premiered with her choir. The same goes for Georgius Prenner (cca. 1500-1590, born in Ljubljana), the oldest known musical artist from the Slovene ethnic territory. The reputation of the zealous counter-reformer is attested by the names alongside his in anthologies, such as Jacob Clemens non Papa, Jacob Regnart, Heinrich Isaac and Josquin des Prez. At the beginning, Lebič's Mosaics was performed in the best manner of the choregie concept: a seated choir dressed in black and covered in dark tulle, in front of an altar, sprinkled with beams of sharp white light, had an out-of-worldly effect, it seemed spun into a past time, slowly writhing out of its "quiet rustle", a verse Lebič liked. Actor Jože Ropoša interpreted Slovenian poets, mostly modernist, starting with "Gods" by Gregor Strniša and further resounding with the "Stations of the Cross" by Dane Zajc. The poetry sounded quietly together with the musical flesh of motets and chorales. With its sophisticated and anything but pathetic modulation, *Pleading for Words* worked as a verbal counterpart to the perfect, superior singing. The ability of contemporary, detached in-

terpretation to turn the mystical into an ontological category related to transcendence was confirmed by selected interpretations of poetry by Gregor Strniša, Dane Zajc, France Balantič, Edvard Kocbek, Alojz Gradnik, Cene Vipotnik, Srečko Kosovel, Tone Kuntner, France Forstnerič, Milan Jesih and Tomaž Šalamun. The Latin term “religio” covers not only sacredness, but also hesitation, doubt, even rejection and curse. The project captured the entire scope of such religiosity in a thought-out, subtle coexistence of word and music. It was an open zone – from violent religious emoting and pure devotion to doubt and the final boundaries of denial. In its performative perfection, the project was suspended between harmonious reverberations and the poems’ spasmodic disharmonies, between friendly addresses to the audience and Lebič’s work *Hope*, at which point the audience was invited to sing from music sheets they were given, and the hollow poetic voices of brilliant modernists. Once again, Karmina abundantly showed her refined instinct for combining and paralleling different artistic universes, the present and the past, the sacral, as well as the agnostic and even the atheist.





Slovenian Songs

Home and abroad, always.

Carmina Slovenica has also established a name with the constant presence of Slovenian songs in the choir's repertoire through space and time. Yet this is no patriotic maxim or an act of populism.

Nowadays choirs remain almost the only "conservators" of folk songs ... Not counting a handful of individuals working with folk tradition and a few unassuming chapters in elementary and secondary school curricula. Today, folk music performed by choirs undoubtedly encompasses the widest population of all generations. This makes choral singing actually the only and most easily accessible form of learning about folk songs. And Carmina Slovenica's repertoire always includes a full-length programme of Slovenian folk songs.

As Slovenians, we are especially fortunate. Despite being so tiny that the arboretum can plant a tulip for each one of us in the spring, we also have a special privilege of having polyphonic and part-singing tradition. And there are many forms of it - from antiphonic singing in Bela krajina to forms far surpassing singing in thirds and sixths. We have a tradition of singing in fourths and even voice crossing - in Prekmurje, Slovenians also don't stop with two voices in bordun... We developed singing in harmony in folk music independently of the academic culture. And we didn't stop at three or four voices partsinging, we went all the way to five and even six voices. We didn't practice part-singing according to the rules of classical harmony. We used our own invention to guide our voices. And following a hard-to-pinpoint inner feeling we chose melodies well suited for multipart singing "na tretko" or "firer". Our polyphonic folk singing thus enables us to stand proudly among the very few. Choral music is also the field into which contemporary Slovenian composers most often choose to channel their works, based on folkloric elements.

Carminas took the *Slovenian Sounds* programme all over the world, onto the greatest and most important stages – from Yokohama, Fukushima, San Francisco, Borneo, Cape Town, Los Angeles, to Beijing, Moscow, Buenos Aires, Caracas, Istanbul. The CDs *Slovenian Sounds* and *Drumlca* are printed over and over again and are being sold all over the world.

Years ago in the middle of Tokyo, we spoke of Slovenian sounds in a series of concerts on Japanese stages. The outstanding reaction of Japanese audiences was fascinating, as was the reaction of any other audience to the girls' performing Slovenian songs, on any other continent.

A lot more work and toil went into achieving the Slovenian "feel" in the Japanese programmes. We had to prepare for performing Slovenian folk dances and songs, for playing Slovenian folk instruments with special attention as that was a new field for us. Even though it represents our authentic expression, it is easy to underestimate this repertoire. The educational dimension is one of our duties, in addition to simply receiving foreign cultures and traditions. Young singers need to learn about their own roots and to fathom them, learn how to experience them. Who if not us should be the ones to nurture Slovenian ethnic tradition?

The connection with Slovenian tradition also plays a strong programming role in your appearances at home.

Carminas have travelled all over the Slovenian cultural long-distance trail, there is no cultural centre they haven't visited in the last quarter of the century. Why is it important to maintain this polycentrism of *Slovenian sounds*?

Slovenia has a large web of cultural centres, halls, theatres and stages. They are supposed to spread culture among the widest audience, not only urban but rural, too. I suspect there are very few countries in the world with such widespread and operative cultural networks. To avoid sounding like an article in a statute of a Union of Cultural Societies, let me bring up the fact that I have performed on over a hundred concert stages and other venues in Slovenia throughout my career. This makes me happy, but it also reminds me of the times when a bass singer Ladko Korošec and other important Slovenian dramatic artists—Stane Sever, for instance—used to perform throughout the towns of Slovenia. Today this is no longer the case and too often more commercially oriented projects are invited to perform in smaller towns on the premise that they are more likely to successfully

communicate with the audience. This is of course false. I feel deeply hurt when some uninformed "expert" board or other at the Slovenian Ministry of Culture cites in their answer to grant applications that "there is lack of greater integration of the programme into the Slovenian cultural space, as well as its greater territorial dispersion". It is a matter of fact that cultural societies like ours are the ones reaching every corner of our land. Carmina is privileged in this aspect. We have performed on the most elite stages, for instance Gallus hall in Cankarjev dom, Slovene Philharmonic, Slovene National Theatre Maribor, Slovene National Theatre Drama Ljubljana; at the most beautiful venues, like St. Jacob's Church in Kostanjevica, Knights Hall in Brežice Castle, we have performed in synagogues, churches, as well as in dilapidated cultural centres from another time, in gymnasiums, castle courtyards, even in the windows of the University of Ljubljana. I feel it is important that progressive projects have been among those invited to perform at such events, giving them a chance to help oust the spirit of provincialism and encourage interest in contemporary art.

I find our polycentric system, which keeps alive so many cultural centres, amazing. After all, cultural policies are a European construct and express priority care for keeping and developing national cultures. But I do fear that decentralising development in other areas will be unable to curb the consequences of the modern politics of centralised funding. It makes me want to scream: "It is expensive to be cultured, and even more expensive to be uncultured!"

She Brought the (Musical) World Back to the Zone of Unity

Jožko Štucin wrote about *Slovenian Sounds* in the newspaper *Primorske novice* in 2005: "Changes in registers, guttural singing techniques, natural base and cultivated articulation seem so self-evident and simple; they are like a spontaneous play, a common form of communication. All elements mentioned result in some sort of superior 'new age', in the positive sense of the word, a global musical experience, surpassing cultures, nations, beliefs, and fusing with a universal and cosmic human soul into a uniform organism. With Carmina Slovenica, Karmina Šilec crossed the centuries old boundaries of spiritual lots and brought the (musical) world back to the zone of unity, of collective, warm and ours."

The Ford Award for Preservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage in the Project Slovenian Sounds

The Carmina Slovenica Choir is the winner of this year's Ford Motor Company Conservation and Environmental Grants programme. The project *Slovenian Music*, followed by the release of a CD *Citira - Slovenian Choral Opus II*, was praised for its model or rather its approach to music. At its core is full comprehension of Slovenian music and, in a broader sense, the Slovenian spiritual heritage; the choir applies this awareness to modern creative forms of expression. By an interpretive synthesis of folk songs, dance and music, the choir manages to avoid the usual trap of pursuing nostalgia, or becoming a 'living museum'. Folk heritage for Carmina Slovenica forms a model for today's creativity and creations, which comprise characteristics, features, particularities and differences - ingredients that are essential for creating modern life enriched with the dimensions of heritage ... in Maribor, in Slovenia and the world!



Women Are No Longer Silent in Church

The Vatikan, 2002.
Las Huelgas, Burgos (Spain), 2005.

Like many others before her and after her, she got excited about Shakespeare's sister in *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf. From the very beginning, she was aggravated by the *Grove Dictionary of Women Composers* and its ghettoization of women musicians. Why aren't women musicians integrated into general lexicons? She was intrigued to research the female principle in music from the very start.



Not in the context of trite feminist schemes, not gender equality, let alone suffragette type barricades. Misogyny in musical and cultural history as a whole provoked and stimulated her rather than made her lament or fulminate committedly from the trenches. She simply wanted to show that they were here from time immemorial—namely, great female composers, musicians, vocalists, philosophers, oracles and mystics.

The Clara Schuman syndrome vexed her, Clara as a great composer and pianist overshadowed by her husband Robert. Or Camille Claudel, a superior sculptress to her partner Auguste Rodin. The inability of female artists to establish themselves publicly drove her in time to the project *Musica Inaudita*. And it keeps driving her to the orphanages of Venice, to rusalkas, women in Japanese internment camps in the Second World War, where the captured women performed classical and even symphonic scores from memory, using not musical instruments but only their voices.

Women's music is like the struggle against violence, captivity, a way to survive in impossible circumstances. Searching for the identity of women's group singing keeps driving her ... They have been present everywhere, but of course throughout time overlooked and ghettoised to this day. *Musica Inaudita* was an expedition into the unknown of cloistered female composers and never before heard music. When searching for musical scores in abandoned monasteries all over the world, the material she discovered was astonishing.

Monasterio de Santa Maria la Real de Las Huelgas

St. Mary's Monastery in Las Huelgas. In the upper half of Iberian Peninsula. Not far from Burgos and the notorious pilgrimage route Santiago de Compostela.

It is crunchy cold. Harmonious sounds of 40 girls' voices of the Carmina Slovenica choir resound from the chapel where no uninitiated person can set foot and strict sequestration is enforced. *Benedicamus Domino I*. It seems like they have risen from the famous past of the Carthusian convent in the middle of the Castile and León landscape, where girls of noble descent and of the same age in the 13th century lived and created in the religious cultural centre amidst the nuns, in a first-class musical centre of the time. Inside, Jewish scholars and Muslims share the same roof with Christians. "In situ", the *Codex of Las Hueglas* sounds truly monumental. Neither the cold, which absorbed the high notes, nor thick scarves and colourful winter jackets could dispel the ghosts of the past, which control every last room of the cold, rocky sanctuary. It was before Christmas 2005, when our Schengen border had already fallen and we rolled over 5.000 bus kilometres from Maribor, through Monte Carlo, Avignon, Aviles, Oviedo, Burgos, to Barcelona: a pilgrim expedition of a special kind.

In October, three years before Spain, a similar monastery, ascetic and cold, awaited us in the heart of Italy - Farfa Sabina. In the midst of ancient olive orchards and vineyards, with views covering the entire width of the Italian boot. The monastery was extremely influential in the 12th century, even the Vatican port of Civitavecchia was among its possessions,

along with Assisi, Senigallia, Pisa, Tivoli, Osimo, Ascoli, Femmo ... Farfa's power was enormous. Today it serves as a lonely home of Suore Brigidine, sisters of the order of St. Bridget. The obscure order was given a special honour by Pope John Paul II. In 1999, when he named St. Bridget one of the patron saints of Europe at the European Synod and unveiled her sculpture on the front of St. Peter's Basilica at the very entrance through which we walked inside the basilica in the company of Maria Bianca Furgeri, the author of one of the world premier vespers compositions. On that historic October the 4th Carmina Slovenica performed as a guest choir in honour of the European saint. It was the first women's choir in history to perform in that sacred place. "From this point onward history is being written - with the first girls' choir in the history of the Church of St. Peter," said Patrizia Adkins Chiti, organiser of the event from the Donne in Musica foundation in Rome. A leading dignitary of the Order of St. Bridget, Tekla Famiglietti also stressed the importance of the white clad Slovenian girls in one of the most sacred places of the Vatican. "What angelic voices!" resounded through every room in the Vatican, where our girls performed on the 700th anniversary of the birth of St. Bridget, presenting the original *Rosa Rorans*, a hymn in her honour.

Despite the pleas in Pope John Paul II's encyclicals to recognize female genius in the field of music, the famous male choir of the Sistine chapel has maintained the domination of male singing in the Vatican. This masculine enclave was first cracked by none other than the girls of Carmina Slovenica choir and therein lies the historical importance of this performance. By performing songs by Byzantine, Catholic and

Anglican sisters they refuted in the best way possible, and in the stronghold of Catholic manhood, the warning of St. Paul that “women should remain silent in church”. But women not only didn’t remain silent in the church, they sang, and moreover songs by female composers. The misogyny of the Catholic church finally loosened a bit. Perhaps even more radical and inspiring for our national parables is the fact that in the Roman church of St. Lorenzo in addition to sacred music, Carmina Slovenica also performed contemporary Slovenian music – *The Spell* by Lojze Lebič. Standing right next to the altar it really sounded pagan-like, almost scandalous. Nevertheless, the Suore Brigidine smiled benevolently and in deep gratitude. The audience enjoyed themselves and the church dignitaries refrained from turning up their noses. Even Patricia Chiti credited the Slovenian conductor’s daring repertoire choice.

The day before in the Palazzo della Cancelleria at the *Donne in Musica* symposium, Karmina’s lecture on the music of cloistered female composers and their bitter fate behind locked convent doors left a very different impression than did the rest of the speakers. The symposium’s organisers showed their true understanding of the most democratic dimensions of ecumenism, while Swedish Princess Victoria added a blue-blooded touch to the event. And the most grotesque memory of the basilica featuring Michelangelo’s dome: mobile phones kept ringing fiercely even through the vespers led by the Pope.

The Vatican was packed those days, as one of the most controversial canonisations in the history of the Catholic church was under way: Pope Woytyla canonised the Spaniard Jose-

maria Escrivó de Balaguer, the founder of the infamous Opus Dei organisation. Luckily, *The DaVinci Code* hadn’t yet been published that year. If it had been, our choir would have surely strolled inquisitively among the half million tourists and worshippers along the paved expanse of Piazza san Pietro.

The harmonious singing of our girls filled the monastic silence of Farfa. Mostly dark-skinned, extremely young nuns were visibly thrilled by the playfulness and vivaciousness of their new temporary residents. Nevertheless, their cultured voices fitted the ascetic rooms much better than the nocturnal expedition we witnessed on the first day. Flashes were coming from under the thousand-year-old campanile. A queue of luxury cars was parked on the narrow uphill road. There was a uniformed driver in one of them. The scene played out in front of our eyes as if from a movie by Fellini: standing under the arcades in front of the basilica in pitch darkness, a bride and a groom were somewhat lethargically staring into space. It was mid-week and it seemed fake, like a photo shoot. Also there was no one around to explain what was going on. Against the backdrop of the luxurious medieval portal they looked like newlyweds on cakes – she draped in lace and tulle, a photographer with two flashes and an umbrella. An absurd scene. Marriage on a weekday? And what was the photo shoot in pitch darkness about? I bet the famous Italian film studio Cinnecita had

something to do with it. But the Italian cinema had long lost the standing it had in Europe in the time of Bertolucci, Pasolini, De Sica ...

Another thing: our journalistic expedition would never have found its way to the monastery had it not been for the then newly appointed Slovenian ambassador to the Holy See, a former chancellor of the University of Maribor, Ludvik Toplak, PhD., who gave us a ride. The Slovenian choir was one of his first diplomatic missions on his new scene, and the speech he gave in Basilica di San Lorenzo in Damaso was also his first on that mission, although it was in somewhat broken Italian. But if he hadn't sent his driver to the highway and "Uscita 6" that day, we would have never seen the Farfa Sabina. The Roman taxi driver we hired was clueless, another tell-tale sign of the twilight descending on the once most renowned of European medieval monuments.

Inside "Ristić's" Monastery

It all started with the "never before heard" music by cloistered female composers in the winter of 2002, in the Ursuline convent in Maribor, a seemingly abandoned building on the corner of Strossmeyerjeva and Slovenska streets, where once upon a time *Missa in A Minor* alias *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* by Danilo Kiš was performed at the Maribor Theatre Festival by the Mladinsko Theatre under the provocative direction of Jovan Ristić. We sat among the audience, in a circle in the middle, on boxes. It was loud, aggressive, but unforgettable.

It had been a while since anyone lived in the damp convent, which extended a somewhat unpleasant welcome to female musicians. The strings kept loosening in the humid conditions and the instruments had to be tuned during every break. Nevertheless, the audience was astounded by the repertoire. The girls in white clothes and their conductor shined. It is a shame that after that concert the damp and sterile convent never again came to life in an artistic context.

"This project as a world premiere," wrote critic Bogdan Učakar, "just might interfere thoroughly with nowadays much sought-after yet usually hollow innovations in choral projects." "Shining seems easy if you possess curiosity,

if you have an artistic goal and the ability to work with young people (the girls must adore their conductor as they appear completely under the spell of her hand)”, wrote critic Jure Dobovišek after the premiere at the Slovene Philharmonic. He added: “The unison strand of the Hymn of Kassia shines with purity of diction as if the singers regularly converse in the language of the Greek poetic source material.”

Would you enter a monastery? It used to be the only alternative to getting married.

I wonder if I would have gone to the convent back then, centuries ago. What would it be like to live there now? How would I think, how would I feel? Would I even stay in music in this way? Back then, my music would have probably served a different purpose. I went to South America once. I was asked to lecture at the university and give a master class. One of my students was quite torn between his family with multiple children and his social life so he came to class unprepared more than once. Since it took a lot for me to come there I occasionally grumbled about him needing to invest more of himself in music. Once he invited me to come to his church. I wasn't particularly thrilled about it, I was just being polite. The church was jam-packed, on fire, overflowing. Women on one side, men on the other, children separate, single people in front. All in their Sunday best, with greased black hair. They all sang to me or for me that night. Nobody had ever sung to me so beautifully. The energy they were creating gave me goose bumps. Many of them went into a trance and spoke in tongues, they were dancing and twirling. A Pentecostal church. The one in the Jesus Camp documentary. It turned out my student was the lead cantor there. Then I received a letter from him. In the letter he described how he had fallen in love with the image of my singer and the unhappiness this had left him with. He asked my advice, my absolution. He concluded the letter: "Dear Karmina, you are the grandest master in this field and you have taught me a lot. You create God's works, your music is divine, but my job is to worship God with my own music."

For me, there is nothing more important. This is not an alternative to marriage. It's an alternative to a spiritual dimension.

Were you stunned by the ice-cold Spanish convent of Las Huelgas? Did you feel the message of *Benedicamus Domino* inside its stone walls?

*We went to Las Huelgas to feel *Benedicamus Domino* in a different way, for melismas of *Ave Maris Stella* to reverberate from the centuries old stone walls. We spent lot of the time revising the manuscripts of the convent's codex. At that time, the convent housed Christians, Jews and Muslims, contributing to a very special atmosphere. Back then, our current repertoire was sung by a choir of 40 girls from aristocratic families. Where did the Iberian nuns in the 13th century get music from different parts of Europe? How could they get a manuscript if they were prohibited to sing in polyphony? Their mother superior must have had her own ways, and since the convent is situated along the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route she might have exchanged a loaf of bread for a scroll of music.*



The Spell Under the Inka Bridge

Buenos Aires, Mendoza, Andes (Argentina),
Viña del Mar, Valparaiso, San Antonio,
Isla Negra, Santiago de Chile (Chile), 2003.

My vision cleared and the secret was revealed to me for the first time during a group expedition to the Andes. It was so touristy, archaically amateurish, by bus – directly from the arms of Slovenians in Argentina, who left us in the middle of Mendoza, waving affectionately and not knowing we would soon return.

It all started on St. Martin's Day. From Trg svobode (Liberty Square) to Vienna airport. The karma could have been better. The media entourage on the South American tour of the Carmina Slovenica choir had a dramatic start. A colleague from the newspaper *De/lo* lost his passport in Schwehat. He realised this during check-in and his luggage was already on the plane to Madrid. The parting was bitter and we all hoped he would join us later on. Sadly, he did not make it. What would happen if it was one of the singers who had lost her passport? Impossible. They are impeccably (self) organized. Alenka, the long-time chairwoman

and a chaperon of the choir on tour works in close and trusting connection with the conductor and has developed all self-protective scenarios to the point where there are no slips. Nothing surprises them. Even in improvisation they remain perfect, infallible. And not only on stage.

The two weeks that followed offered an amazing insight into the choir's secrets. The balance between discipline and spontaneity disarms everyone. There are no suffering faces, any moodiness or exhaustion, even in situations where all others would fail. Carminas are able to give their best and shine brightest in the most difficult circumstances. Where do they get the energy, courage, daring, boundless confidence, complete authority, each and every one of the singers on stage? When smiles spread across faces, Karmina senses a murky, somewhat absent gaze, I have learned this by now. She spots insecurity on stage before it even happens. She knows how to light sparks in their eyes even through the most difficult passages. Elegant entrances and exits off stage, everything is flawless, to the last bow. Passionate Argentinians and Chileans naturally went crazy, there were standing ovations, chants and cries of "Maravilloso, fantastic, brilliantissimo ...". Performances sometimes felt like football matches, the atmosphere was full of cheering, enthusiastic whistling, stomping. The Chilean orchestra which took part in the *Adiemus* project spent five minutes tapping their drumsticks and bows against music stands, thrilled at the crystal voices of young European women who suddenly appeared in the middle of Santiago for their first joint rehearsal. The second rehearsal was already followed by a performance. A flawless one.

The authoritative, dominant and barefoot conductor with her hair down had all under control: she moved percussionists' stage left because they drowned out the vocalists, she handed out instructions to sound technicians, her girls were the only ones who needed practically no communication. Looks sufficed. And the performance was perfect, the auditorium stunned. But that was just the finale. So much more uniqueness had to come first. So many wild colours and sounds had to be absorbed by our missionary expedition of forty people. We had to overcome heights, distances, snowdrifts and overheated Pacific dunes. So many opposites in one place, brilliance and poverty, the warmth of distant Slovenedom ...

It truly was a privilege and luxury to witness first-hand the euphoric atmospheres in the most renowned concert halls, as well as in poor provincial churches and in school backyards, where the audience kept respectfully touching the angelic girls and showering their conductor with kisses and congratulations, where they sang along and moved to the rhythms of Slovenian, folk, Zulu, aboriginal, Inuit, Balkan, and Latin-American tunes. Missionary is indeed the best word to describe that tour, packed with contradiction, mass scenes, homely touches, confidence of a less uprooted Slovenedom than the one we live over here. We were able to see so much in the lands and cities conquered by *Slovenian songs* that we could never experience as tourists. The girls went on their South-American journey fully equipped. The colours and sounds of the continent spread in a triangle between the Atlantic and the Pacific were not entirely new to them, as they had attended America Cantat festival in Caracas, Venezuela. But this time the mis-

sion was special, it began and ended spectacularly: first a performance in Teatro Colon and finally the world premiere of *Adiemus* project with the Chamber orchestra of Chile in Viña del Mar's Teatro Municipal. The very place where some years before a Slovenian Karmen Pečar had done an excellent job at the international cello competition. It was also a descent from elite concert events such as the World Music Days in Ljubljana to the poorest environments of rural schools, churches and railway station waiting rooms turned into concert halls. One of those was home to Niños Cantores, in the suburbs of Mendoza, Argentina.

No Apple, No Pear, No Cherry Trees

It all started in the megalopolis of Buenos Aires, grey along the mud-brown rhythmically undulating river of La Plata or Silver River. When had it lost all its silver? Looking down from a plane, the city looked like a gigantic graveyard. We were greeted at the airport by our kind host Mario Bogataj, owner of the tourist agency and guardian of television and radio programmes for Slovenians. He has been living in Argentina for more than half a century. "There are no apple trees around here, no pears or cherries", one of the 60 thousand Slovenians in Argentina opened his bus tour. There are 4.000 of them living in greater Aires. We met some of them on our second day, at the concert in the Golden salon of Teatro Colón.

Over a million vehicles roll over the enormously wide avenues of Buenos Aires daily. We inched

along one of them, the biggest, longest and widest in the world – la Avenida 9 de Julio – on one of the fifteen lanes of the 140-meter-wide road. On our way back to the hotel from Teatro Colon the following day we crossed it in three stages. As the tour entourage, we arrived at the prestigious Colon with a cello on the roof and drums in the trunk in one of the 40 thousand taxicabs which are rumoured to be driving around the "Paris of Latin America", which boasts very few European traits despite the fact that four million Europeans have settled there. Most of them are of Spanish and Italian descent. The same goes for Mendoza, as we realised in the next few days. Every person we came in close contact with at the Cantapueblo festival in Mendoza had an Italian name and surname. At their head was the commander-in-chief of the Coppla organisation of choirs, Alejandro Scarpetta. He complimented Carminas, saying they were a "heavenly, exceptional world phenomenon".

The concert in Colón proved to be a rough baptism by fire to the Latin American tour: a stage, no wardrobe, yet the glitz of Versailles and mirrors. The audience was extremely grateful. *Igraj kolce* by Jakob Jež warmed them up at the very beginning. Despite the motley crew, many of them children, deadly silence overcame them during Lebič's *The Spell* from *Vampirabile*. Yet nobody cried, unlike during the tour of China, when some people ran out of the auditorium in fear. There was no end to the encores in Colon. More Slovenian songs followed in the grand colonnade hall – the largest hall of Colon, with 2500 seats, where great Argentinean pianists like Daniel Barenboim or the controversial Martha Argerich held concerts, where singers José

Carreras, Plácido Domingo, Luciano Pavarotti sang, following Mario Del Monaco, Renata Tebaldi, Montserrat Caballé, Anna Moffo, Kiri te Kanawa ... Richard Strauss, Ottorino Respighi, Igor Stravinski, Paul Hindemith, Camille Saint-Saëns and Aaron Copland were among the famous composers who presented their work in the Colon, as well as Krzysztof Penderecki, who also collaborated with Carminas at their concert in Cankarjev dom in Ljubljana; conductors who performed here include Herbert von Karajan, Lorin Maazel, Riccardo Muti, Kurt Masur, Zubin Mehta ... Every one setting their foot through the main entrance is touched by the spirits of greatness, passing along the 37 square meters of the magnificent theatre, which made history in 1857 with *La Traviata*. We held our concert but were unable to join the official tour of all Colón's workshops, since we didn't book it and the masses of tourists were enormous.

We still had the day after the concert. It was raining, a rare occurrence for late spring which awaited us on the Southern continent. The bus tour of the city was led by Blaž Miklič, the tireless theatre director whose Molière in authentic classicistic theatre costumes had just premiered at the Slovenian House in Buenos Aires. He took us past the executive mansion Casa Rosada. It was from the balcony here that Evita Peron famously addressed her people for the last time, to La Plaza de Mayo, where mothers in white scarves attended weekly the Thursday 3.30 pm marches, demanding the return of their disappeared relatives - "desaparecidos" -, who went missing during the years of military dictatorship. A stone's throw from the square stands the metropolitan cathedral, where the girls of Carmina Slovenica

sang so harmoniously that they prompted an ecstatic catechist to come running out of one of the church aisles. Despite being Orthodox, the song didn't disturb him. The church surprised with a football fan, a dark-skinned saint, who visited and called upon by throngs of zealous fans of Boca and River. La Bombonera stadium, we were informed, was designed by Slovenian architect Viktor Sulčič. We had lunch at Uncle Ivan's in Florida, the shopping centre in Buenos Aires where a Slovenian family prepares and serves tasty fast food. Our guide Blaž earns his daily bread there, too. Of course, the girls sang there, and visited the *Piazzolla tango* at the Astor Piazzolla Theatre afterwards. The show was a bit on the commercial side, but the singer was quite shocked when during one of the less brilliant numbers Carminas joined him from behind the tables in the auditorium with a polyphonic rendering of "El día que me quieras", a song by the famous "tango-man" Carlos Gardel. Even waitresses at the Piazzolla came to a standstill at the harmonious, cultured singing. The intricate contortions of the tango dancer's legs on stage were truly neck-breaking. Other than that, we had seen more passionate dances before and certainly heard much, much better singing.

The rainy cemetery of the rich and famous in the esteemed neighbourhood of La Recoleta was morbid and magnificent at the same time. Fresh flowers adorned only Evita's grave. Still. The majority of tourists in Buenos Aires opt for the so-called Evita Tour. The pace of digesting famous literary coffee houses, the spirit of Borges, and picturesque streets and antique shops abandoned in the rain, was too fast for us, time flew and our Argentinean tour continued 1.100 km farther on in Mendoza.

Slovenian Square With a Hayrack in the Centre of Mendoza

At the airport, we were met by a large delegation: Slovenians living in Mendoza, led by representatives of the respected Brajda family, followed by Alejandro Scarpetta, the tireless, likeable, leader of the Cantapueblo festival. It was a very warm welcome in a wine-growing flatland city not unlike Ljubljana. Its very logical design follows a system of quarters, with a distance of a hundred meters from one crossroad to another. Mendoza boasts seven universities and three medical faculties. First, we were shown around the city's new and old parts. Among numerous squares - of Chile, Italy, Spain - is also the Square of the Republic of Slovenia - Plazoleta Republica de Eslovenia. After Slovenia gained its independence, an Argentinean friend of Slovenians proposed naming one of the plots in the city in honour of Slovenia. The ambitious Slovenians of Mendoza designed the square to reflect Slovenia with a hayrack, typical heart ornamented benches, a symbol of the Mary Help of Christians Church at Brezje and the Argentinean Santa María de Luján. The mayor of Mendoza dedicated the square in November 1991, on the occasion of Bishop Metod Pirih's visit from Koper. The square was designed by the Argentinean architect Hernan Castro and his Slovenian wife Marjana Ocvirk. Every year on June 25, the Slovenians of Mendoza celebrate their Independence Day on this square. Outside the official programme in Mendoza, Carminas also sang in the open-air amphitheatre Pulgarcito, desolate in spring time and coming alive each year in March, at the time of the grape harvest, with the harvest festival.

The Slovenians of Mendoza took the girls into their homes. Families with six children on average turned out to be extremely warm, educated, sophisticated. Their enviable attitude to nurturing faith-based Slovene spirit was contagious, while a visit to the Slovenian Sunday school offered a solution to the problem of preserving one's mother tongue despite several decades of separation. After completing their regular schoolwork in Spanish schools, Argentine Slovenians' Saturdays are reserved for Slovenian school. Only sacrifice will get you this far, they explain. They speak exclusively Slovenian until they reach school age. It takes just several months for Spanish to sink in. The mother tongue, on the other hand, has been deeply instilled by then. Božidar Bajuk, an architect, a member of one of the most respected Slovenian families in Mendoza, and a relative of Andrej Bajuk, told us the story of how his father had organised the first multipart singing choir in Mendoza. This means that Slovenians in fact pioneered choral singing in Mendoza and laid the groundwork for the now 15th Cantapueblo festival. Whether they were aware of these roots or not, Carmina Slovenica was revered at each and every of the twenty-five concerts we gave. The concert at Cine Teatro Plaza in the Godoy Cruz district was also a tremendous experience for the local Slovenians. They were so moved and proud when they listened to the Argentinean presenter's welcome in Slovenian, who kept repeating, "čestitamo, dobrodošli" /congrat-



ulations, welcome/. Standing ovations and statements like “such beauty of voices makes my heart, my stomach ache” made it almost impossible for us to push our way through to the singers and their conductor. The performances started late in the evenings. Siesta still shifts all social life to late night hours. But the girls were brilliant. Despite the late hour and the long wait before the performance.

The mood during the day was reminiscent of a *Latino Oktoberfest*. The winery which hosted all choirs performing at Cantapueblo for lunch was a spacious, pretty, yet noisy pub, part open-air, where participants were able to socialise under the tent and sing freely. There were more than enough harmonious and even more discordant voices. Even Scarpetta, the festival director, sang in one of the vocal bands. The next day he was struggling to hold it together behind the turntable in the Ander Talleres stadium, built to accommodate up to 10,000 spectators. At the closing ceremony held in the stadium and with the song of 3,000 voices, our girls were the only ones honoured by other choirs. While they were returning to their place on the stands, dressed in white, every other choir stood up, faced in the direction of our singers and applauded mightily.

There is no denying that our singing and the entire performance were by far the most refined. Slovenian song resounded in front of the 10.000 strong crowd at the stadium.

Our extraordinary choral triumph came to an end in Mendoza, with *Misa Criolla* by Ariel Ramírez, who gave us a short interview for Slovenian media despite his celebrity status, with a little help from the organizers. I was baffled by how they were able to control the masses of people in the seemingly chaot-

ic circumstances. There were no delays, no scandals; everything ran surprisingly smoothly and rhythmically. Saturated with the genuine Latin-American pathos radiated by the *Misa Criolla*, pronounced /krɛˈɔdʒə/ by the people of Mendoza. Earlier that summer, Mercedes Sosa sang this glorious mass, a symbol of Latin America, at Maribor’s Lent festival. At the time we couldn’t even dream about our choir performing this poem at an Argentinean stadium just a few months later. Walking along the picturesque Valparaiso on the Chilean Pacific coast, another song she performed that night, the cult Chilean “Gracias a la vida”, reverberated in our memories.

The Andes I, The Andes II

After that we had to part with the incredibly kind Slovenians of Mendoza, unforgettable, calm, open and charming people we kissed Argentinean style – right cheeks together. We took a bus across the Andes to catch a glimpse of the 6,958-metre high Aconcagua, meaning “stone guard” in one of the Native American languages and the highest mountain peak in the Southern hemisphere. Our first try failed. Customs officers at the border convinced us it was not worth the wait, since the mountain pass between Argentina and Chile was covered with snow, despite the warm weather of 30°C in lower areas. Driving over freshly fallen snow along the numerous hairpin bends would present too great a danger. The customs officers in the Punta de Vacas region (which translates as “Cow Peak”) were far from multilingual. They spoke practically no foreign

languages and the one who declared he could speak French lost all command of his voice when asked about snow conditions and our chances to make it to our scheduled Viña del Mar concert that evening. He just kept shaking his head. And then an astounding happened: once the bus turned back, the girls applauded loudly. They were incredibly delighted to see their hosts in Mendoza once more. They spent the remainder of the day at a poolside picnic thrown at one of the Slovenians' home. Descending the Andes we passed trucks stuck on the hard shoulder, loaded with – as we were later told – cocaine, and long queues of truck drivers, like the ones you see at Dolga vas, only with mountains all around. People waited with expressionless surrender on their faces. In the middle of the “descent” we stopped at a picturesque location with heavenly views, the girls lined along the talus and sang the *The Spell* by Lojze Lebič. Dear composer, you should have been there to see it.

The next day we made it. The weather was sunny, the skies clear, Aconcagua bathed in sun. The Los Penitentes ski centre (who knows where its name – Penitents – came from) largely resembles European ski resorts, like Polish or Czech, Štrbské Pleso perhaps. There is also a Slovenian mountain cabin dedicated to Jože Kastelic in this part. It was built by Slovenians in 1978. And a picturesque Andinists' cemetery, the final resting place or tribute to mountain climbers from different countries and of different nationalities who lost their lives on Andes' slopes. Among them was Jože Kastelic, the first pastor in Argentina, whose ethnically rooted stubbornness, according to Slovenians from Mendoza, kept him from returning from the mountain. They should know, as many of

them come from Kastelic's parts. The Inca Bridge offered one of the most beautiful experiences. The natural bridge over the Vacas River is yellow due to mineralisation by sulphur rich waters. There are six hydrothermal vents at the foot of the bridge, and in one of them a courageous Scandinavian man was taking a dip. In 1940 an elegant hotel, now in ruins, was built on the site, which is now in ruins. It was destroyed in a flood. The singers gathered on the terrace and sang the famous Peruvian song "Hanacpachap Cussicuinin". We posed for a picture against a backdrop of a mule camp and waited for our first condor sighting, which didn't arrive until Chile, moments after we crossed the border at Los Libertadores. A snowball fight with sulphurous reddish snow in front of a locked church (a shame, otherwise we would surely have sung in it), a tunnel and customs office. The drive down hairpin turns of the ski resort, among drag and chair lifts, was nothing short of spectacular. We took a picture of us with Aconcagua in the background, of course. It seems less frighteningly tall than we imagined. It used to be mistaken for a volcano, as sometimes a volcano smoke-like cloud forms over its peak. There are as many as five glaciers on its slopes. Our descent from the Andes was spectacular because of fast shifts in altitude. Even the customs procedures were a blast, as Karmina was asked to explain the entire contents of our medicine case to the customs official. The official was also quite knowledgeable in generics.

Of course, the customs official's "effort" was rewarded with a song. The border between Chile and Argentina is quite a closed one. Old animosities die hard and the inscription on the 8-metre-tall statue of Jesus Christ at the border has a cynical ring to it: "Sooner shall these mountains crumble into dust than Chileans and Argentineans break the peace which at the feet of Christ, the Redeemer, they have sworn to maintain", while Pinochet single-handedly dismantled 120 kilometres of railroad tracks on the Chilean side. It was by far one of the more miserable sights in Argentina - to look at the many deserted tracks all over the country. Snowy conditions in the Andes made us miss the first concerts of the 6th Niños Cantores biennial in Chile. The organisers worked quickly to adjust the schedule. Staying at a hotel in close proximity to Teatro Municipal in Viña del Mar was practical, although the only Slovenian performance nearby was a concert with a Chilean chamber choir at the theatre, performed on the final day of the festival's peak. It started in the National Congress building in Valparaiso, just next to Viña del Mar. The Pinochetian megalomania reflected in the enormous building was breath taking, while the centre of Chilean politics was moved from the capital Santiago, closer to the sea and Pablo Neruda, a Nobel Prize winner and owner of three houses, donated to the people to serve as museums. The concert in the Congress building was quite strenuous, as we had to wait an incredibly long time and listen to some really lousy singing. For that place, the Carminas were a true lesson in choral singing, which was abundantly clear from the reactions of other conductors. A work trip to Santiago de Chile brought the first rehearsal with an orchestra. It was very

successful and the full-length concert in the Mormon temple of the university quarter was really interesting. The programme offered everything - from *Scivias* to *Sounds of the Balkans*, *Musica Inaudita* ... The president of the Latin-American Choral Music Association, Waldo Aránguiz, paid careful and respectful attention to our ambassadors throughout, photographing their concert, studying their programme and publicly singing them such praises that especially those of us familiar with the appalling conditions Carminas have to work in back home were again left wondering whether we deserved them at all. San Antonio, a small coastal town with sunbathing sea lions on the beaches next to the local market, provided an unforgettable experience with one of the poorest schools in the area - Cristo del Maipo Llo-Lleo with 500 students. They incessantly moved to the rhythm of the choir and cooperated with the conductor's playful announcements. The reception they gave us was utterly moving: girls in traditional frilly dresses were placed in rows of two on the concrete staircase, polished by wear.

A visit to one of Pablo Neruda's houses at Isla Negra, on the picturesque sandy beach with waves breaking white against the rocks, coincided with a joint concert of all participating choirs at Neruda's grave. A gaze into the Pacific distances, accompanied by Neruda's verses nearing the centennial of Chile's number one export was not the last in the series of sounds and colours co-created by Carmina Slovenica's singers.

One last splash in the cold ocean under the hot sun of late spring in Chile and ... the end. I was meant to love and to sing, as Neruda said.



More of a Challenge, Less a Matter of Artistic Belief

The decision to take on Audiemus wasn't made to please someone in particular. I doubt it was made to please anybody at all. It was an experience of a different music language, and probably a good one at that - how else could one explain its enduring popularity through so many years and albums (we are up to album number 7). We probably should not automatically react to popularity with fear. For me, it was first and foremost an interesting excursion.

In fact, performing Jenkins was a lot more difficult than expected. Seemingly simpler materials include many other details which need to be perfected in order to avoid the performance sounding plain. Audiemus accents different vocal techniques and ethnic sounds, which can be quite straining physically. After just an hour, the performer is left completely exhausted, oftentimes more so than with seemingly more difficult pieces.

The genre is not characteristic of our choir. Besides, the piece is hard to label. Try, for instance, "world", "new age", "progressive", or something else - it's a mix of everything, which has grown into an interesting phenomenon, selling millions of albums and attracting fans ... It started a sort of contemporary musical spiritual movement, it is becoming a cult "piece". It has endured at the top of music charts for years, first in the pop music category, then switched over to classical - notably ever since important music labels took it on and it was performed in notable concert halls. I bought the record on one of my trips abroad ages ago and had been long deliberating whether I should take the composition on or not. I would probably not have done it acoustically, but I did want to learn more about its social context. I wanted to discover the secret to its immense popularity and commercial success, as well as experience performing such a piece.





5,000 km of Pre-Christmas Europe Without Borders

Monaco (Principality of Monaco),
Avignon (France),
Avilés, Oviedo, Burgos, Barcelona (Spain), 2005.

There was something intrinsically nostalgic in joining the choir on a bus tour across southwest Europe, to historically charged places, caught between the East and the West. Not many people travel like this nowadays, yet it so exciting compared to the sterile alienation of airports and transfers. We took to watching the same old Yugoslav movie chronicling a day of life on a bus, over and over again, much to the delight of our driver.

The concept of time takes on almost pilgrim dimensions and perceiving passing landscapes becomes more authentic, through day and night. It was an exciting pilgrimage through the history of Europe. Into ourselves. Covering 5.000 kilometres with a nearly 50-girl-strong expedition through the pre-Christmas trinketry of European cities and towns proved to be a special odyssey. And the hominess and familiarity of all those places felt even stronger because our passports never once left our luggage. Instead of border crossings, our journey was delineated by tollhouses and road signs to tell us which country we were currently travelling through. We almost missed the moustached customs officers of old, as well as funny and dull ceremonials in their border offices. But of course it was just wonderful not to have to unpack our suitcases and instruments over and over, and keep explaining the contents of our extensive luggage.

The destinations the conductor chose for this choral journey – partly for educational reasons, but mostly for fun and as a reward, a beautiful ending to a year of big concerts and “tours-de force” like the Swedish one – could not have

been more enticing and mysterious. It was less of a tour and more of a “camino”, as the Spanish would call a pilgrimage through unknown places to reach the final, clear goal. Revelations? We didn’t have goals, nor did we search for revelations in the vast expanses, while we approached ourselves more intensively than we ever could back home, our hearts warm with dreamy vistas of Biscay towns with vast sandy beaches and the wild beauty of infinitely empty interiors in shades of terracotta, dot-



ted by centres of pilgrimage and solitary monasteries on unusual hilltops, draped in reddish, Lorca-like moonlight.

Following this experience, tourist worn Costa Brava and Costa Maresca on the east part of the Iberian Peninsula seemed the shabbier. Spain welcomed us with “x” filled Basque names and captured us in the labyrinth of its intricate history, elusive and secretive with its Jewish, Arab and Christian heritage. It clings to Europe with everything it’s got, yet Europe it is not. We, too, made it to a pilgrimage centre and a monastery. Las Huelgas and Monserrat.

To be able to touch La Morenita, the Black Madonna, to listen to the boys’ choir of La Escolania de Montserrat sing *Violai*, a tune resounding daily in the Montserrat Basilica, one hour past noon. But this came at the peak and almost at the end of the week-long, intensive journey.

The journey started in Monaco, on the pristine morning of the first day, following the night ride along the Strada del Sole across Northern Italy. Between San Remo and Monaco alone there are so many tunnels named after their constructors, that one feels sorry to have the view of the steep and winter-green Mediterranean coastline obscured. Monaco received us as if the F1 Grand Prix had just ended. Everything was still there, everything for the race, except asphalt was as smooth as a new tarmac. The girls enjoyed the exotic fish of the Oceanographic Museum of Monaco, which proved to be much more interesting than the church where all the funerals of past and cursed Grimaldi pirates were held, with Grace Kelly in tow. According to *Lonely Planet*, the changing

of the guard at the prince’s palace is a tourist high point, yet we found parking our bus in one of the underground garages with views over the sea just as interesting. An occasional Japanese, empty streets, locals walking their dogs and the crisp Mediterranean air greeted us and soon bid us farewell. We continued our “voyage” through Nice, Antibes and Cannes with its oddly pale yellow-grey facades. The road is picturesque and built high above the sea, and the beaches quite dull. And not just because it was winter. Tasting the coffee at highway rest stops we distinguished excellent Italian from slightly less agreeable French and later on boring Spanish. But to be fair, these judgments apply only to coffee.

Les Demoiselles d’Avignon

We arrived in the town of “wild winds”, which is the etymology of the old Celtic name of Auouen, which has survived since the 6th century BC, in the evening twilight. Bone-chilling wind led the conductor to “prescribe” for her troop mandatory hats and scarves for the evening walk around town. There were voices at stake, after all. Back in the day, choir members were forbidden to have ice-cream, while today there are hardly any restrictions. Nevertheless, the rules are agreed to, especially when it comes to older singers/tutors caring for younger ones. Everything happens spontaneously and peacefully. Walking, eating, discussing, everything is disciplined and free at the same time. There is rarely need for the chaperones to intervene when a “newcomer” unintentionally veers off course. Pre-Christ-

mas Avignon was modestly adorned. Our Christmas lighting is far more luxurious than in the places we saw along the way. The Palais des Papes was desolate in the cold and darkness, yet we marvelled at its gothic outlines from the Court d'Honneur, from the very spot the 59th Avignon Theatre Festival opened four months earlier. This year's edition was marked by Jan Fabre and his lonely turtle rider, staring prophetically into the distance. A weathered poster still testifies of the event, which brings a hundred thousand visitors from all over the world to this small town each summer. The year in question, the picturesque papal palace grounds hosted not only Fabre, but also William Forsythe, German director Thomas Ostermeier, the provocative Italian director Romeo Castellucci, the Belgian choreographer Wim Vandekeybus and the former Belgrade resident Marina Abramović. The only things we could feel in the wind and darkness were the enormous expanses and size of the four gothic cathedrals. The alleys of Avignon outside the palace were desolate and anything but friendly.

The town is home to a 700-year-old university and reportedly full of young people. The girls of Carmina Slovenica opted not to sing and dance the "Sur le pont d'Avignon" on the famous bridge, as it had already closed; besides, the winter evening didn't make it especially inviting. The Rhône underneath seemed like a menacing abyss. Tourists have to pay a high entrance fee to see this rather unusual semi-sight, so we opted to disperse over the playful Christmas fairground and go for a ride on the vintage carousel. Avignon has ties to F1, too, as it is the birthplace of the famous race driver Jean Alesi, featured in many shop windows,

as well as Mireille Mathieu, renowned chanson singer who held a concert in her hometown at the fortieth anniversary of her global career, just a few days before our arrival. Composer Olivier Messiaen also comes from Avignon, as does the novelist Pierre Boulle (*The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Planet of the Apes*). And, of course, the town is known for the century plus old painting *Les Femmes d'Alger* by Pablo Picasso. We ran into Picasso once again, in a few days' time in Barcelona. We bid goodbye to Provence the very next morning, and we also left behind Frédéric Mistral, a Provençal poet and first Nobel laureate to receive the prize for literature in an unofficial language – Occitan. In his days, in the second half of the 19th century, Avignon was supposed to have more printing houses than Paris.

In the papal city, which served as the capital of Christianity in the 14th century, we didn't spend a lot of time thinking about popes – Benedicts, Innocents, Bonifaces, Clements – or Napoleon, who deported them back to the only place they belonged, at least in his opinion, the Vatican. Neither did we ponder the debauched times of papal perversions so criticized by the first Renaissance poet and European humanist, Petrarch, who moved to the town seven centuries ago. The poet who wrote about the infamous capital of bad habits and corruption, received his laurels in Rome in 1340, and fell in undying, yet literally fruitful love with Laura. It is rumoured the spark was ignited in the church of Sainte-Claire in Avignon. We never went to look for her. Laura might have been

just a figment of Petrarch's imagination, just as Dulcinea was of Cervantes'. Nevertheless, Petrarchists flock to the church in droves, just as we visit and will continue to visit many sites which only exist in literature – from Juliet's balcony in Verona to Don Quixote's home. We are so prone to gawking at all the literary clutter and let ourselves be tricked by fictional characters. Not only the Japanese with their cameras, we all fall into this trap. In 2005, at the 400th anniversary of the first publication of *Don Quixote, the ingenious nobleman of La Mancha*, new editions, celebrations and symposia popped up all over the place. Although we didn't make it to La Mancha, there was at least one *Don Quixote* themed event or poster commemorating the occasion in every one of "our" Spanish towns. In the words of Milan Kundera, *Don Quixote* is the first real novel. And if superiority of imagination over reality, with all possible ways of escaping the tongs of the so-called reality, is one of the principal qualities of a novel, Cervantes indeed once and for all proved the power of imagination, if only to make tourists stare at Don Quixote's house, stove, bed and bedpan for four centuries straight. Throughout our camino, we often intensely questioned the boundaries between reality and imagination.

Aviles—Burgos

We hardly registered crossing the Pyrenees at its most western edges; we passed the picturesque film festival town of San Sebastián, almost touched Tolosa, an important Spanish and international choral centre, and kept driv-

ing along the Bay of Biscay, between Navarre and the Basque country. The Basque language seems unbelievable with all the x's on the roadside signs: Artxanda, Erletxe, Otxoxa. We were roused by the section of road heading to Bilbao and Altamira. The Guggenheim museum and cave paintings were within reach. I remembered the expression for closed: *itxita*, and exit: *irteera*. Basques with their ambiguous autonomy and language, and mostly with their separatist group Eta, continue to play the role of noise maker in Spain. We steered clear of ethnic topics, although polls showed that at the time of our visit, 15% of Basques still believed in violence as the right way forward.

The adorned night-time town of Santander – ocean to the right, mountains to the left – hosted us longer than we planned, as we thoroughly criss-crossed it before locating the right highway to Gijón and Avilés. This was our first serious destination, we were greeted by hosts and Carmina Slovenica held a full concert on December 17 at their Casa Municipal de Cultura. The auditorium of the centre was packed, mostly with members of the older generation, and left speechless by the programme of *Slovenian Sounds* and *Scivias*. The day before the concert, our hosts took us to the picturesque Salinas beach in the Bay of Biscay, home to the Philippe Cousteau Anchor Museum, and brave bathers of advanced age striding straight into the cold Atlantic Ocean. Our bus followed a guide car to the Asturian jewel of Oviedo, an exceptionally architecturally proportionate town with interesting local sights, like the church where the wedding of General Francisco Franco took place, and a bronze statue of Woody Allen, who received the Princess of Asturias Award in 2002. Of

course, FI had to pitch in: Oviedo is the birthplace of Fernando Alonso.

The journey to Biscay in the northwest, towards the upper central part of the Iberian Peninsula and through the landscape of Castile-León was just like a pilgrimage. We kept coming across road signs for Santiago de Compostela, accompanied by the famous scallop shell, the iconic symbol used to guide pilgrims along the routes. During the journey, and partly ahead of it, I was reading *Roads to Santiago*, a travelogue by the Dutch writer and hispanophile Cees Nooteboom. Our paths first crossed right there in Burgos, though he stayed at the cathedral, and we were stationed in the Abbey of Santa Maria la Real de Huelgas. It seems odd that Cees didn't make it specifically to our abbey and our pilgrimage centre. Las Huelgas, a monastery of Cisterian nuns, first offered us the usual tourist welcome: waiting for our guide in the gift shop. The cultural centre, where Jewish scholars and Muslims lived peacefully with Christians under the same roof and Christian rule, is famous for its first-class music centre. Compositions from the Las Huelgas Codex have for years been an important repertoire staple for the Carmina Slovenica choir. Seven centuries ago, up to forty girls from noble families lived and sang in the monastery. The Carminas sang a few songs from the codex in the chapel, which is subject to strict privacy and closed to the unhallowed. Sadly there were not many listeners due to the holiness of the room and care for its undefiled nature. Despite this, a few excited tourists crowded at the doorway. It was ice-cold and singing conditions were harsh. Yet the experience was unforgettable, singing "in situ" is uncommon nowadays, especially in such holy

places, which are impossible to access without special permits. The Cistercian monastery is extremely well preserved and we did manage to give it a quick walkabout. Its cold beauty stems from delicate renovation and subtle presentation of each individual relic. A small sarcophagus containing the fractured skull of one of the famous dons buried in the basement of the abbey, left the most lasting impression.

Barcelona—Montserrat

Barcelona greeted us in its nocturnal version as we were listening to *Barcelona* and searching for Calello, a resort we were supposed to spend the night. The ascent to Montserrat, the enchanting pilgrimage mountain, was nothing short of majestic. The foggy coast at its foot, and us high up in the sun. We took a tour of the oldest conservatory in all of Europe, the Escolania de Montserrat St. Miguel from the 13th century. The Carminas and a competent girls' choir from Poznan, Poland sang a few pieces of sacred music in the basilica, followed by a famous Spanish boys' choir, one hour after noon. We took a tour of the boys' school, which looked surprisingly friendly and modern, not at all monastically dark. The boys seemed very relaxed, too. A charming monk let us in on the secrets of their school system, admitting hardly any of the boys there will enter their monastic order. We climbed up to the black Mary, supposedly blackened by soot coming from millions of candles; we

each made a wish and continued to admire the rich collection of art works in the monastery, containing everything from Picasso, Egyptian mummies, to Dali, Manet and Renoir.

We sampled Barcelona twice, once during the day and once in the evening: the breathtaking Sagrada Familia and Gaudí in every possible way, we walked through Güell park in the dusk, looked at the illuminated city skyline from Montjuïc, and spent the next day strolling along La Rambla, where we stumbled upon a stunning gothic cathedral, unique among all others in Europe for its closed, walled choir loft in the middle of the nave and looking toward the altar, almost a church within a church, designated for dignitaries in purple collars, like the ones in Buñuel's or Fellini's films.

We visited the famous Gran Teatre del Liceu,

in Catalan, or Liceo in Spanish. The stage was occupied with the hyper-modern set for Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck*. This magnificent opera house opened in 1847 and it used to be the largest in all Europe. It was destroyed in a fire in 1994, and later restored. Today it is a major opera centre for all of Europe. The security guards' incredible rudeness stunned us at the Picasso Museum, which nevertheless beautifully presents the story of Picasso's early work, especially with the *Las Meninas* series. The story of a painting that does not exist requires its own chapter. Our camino through Catalonia, the last region on our list, closed with an evening stroll along La Rambla. We knew not nearly enough about this country, apart from bilingual signs testifying to the high level of independence.

It would be impossible not to end with Nootboom's poetic description: "Spain is brutal, anarchistic, egocentric, cruel. Spain is capable of jumping off a cliff for a foolish reason, it is chaotic, dreamy, irrational. It conquered the world and didn't know what to do with it, it has got stuck in its own medieval, Arab, Jewish, and Christian past, and with its unruly towns, surrounded by vast empty landscapes, it looks like a continent clinging to Europe, and is not Europe. Whoever hasn't tried getting lost in the labyrinth-like complexity of its history, doesn't know where he travels." We tried to get lost in its complex history just a little. Through song, among other things. It's a pity that time melts away like Dali's clock. This melting away of time is so inherently Spanish. It was brief, intense slipping from one time to another. It resounded from "El día que me quieras" to "Na juriš" on Tito Bridge. Over the Drava. Not the Ebro.



Our host in Aviles, the president of the Asociacion cultural Avilés Joven, Juan Carlos Galiano Garcia, had waited four long years for our visit. After the concert he said:

“Carmina Slovenica is the best choir in the world. It is a mirror every choir should look into. It is more than music, it is a spectacle, and it is imperative to witness it live, the way music turns dreams into reality. It took immense effort to bring such an outstanding choir to Avilés. As organiser of the annual choir festival, I wanted to show my countrymen the heights one can reach in youth choral singing, which is underdeveloped in Spain.”



An Unconventional Homage to Antifascism

Slovenia, 2009—.

With several successful presentations of the *Na Juriš in the Mood!* project in Cankarjev dom, SNG Maribor and numerous concert halls around Slovenia, Karmina once again boldly went where none had gone before. Barely a handful of conductors, choirmasters and lone riders of the music (non)establishment had to right the wrong musicologists committed against Slovenian revolutionary song after 1991, failing to situate it in its rightful place in an ideologically unmarked time. Once again she proved her nonpareil when it comes to creative ambition and expeditions into the unknown, less known, withheld, concealed. These pioneering, innovative and daring qualities are also visible in the *Na Juriš in the Mood!*

project. At the same time, she provocatively juxtaposed local and foreign music in a common time frame, defined by World War II. The result is an unconventional homage to antifascism.

Though it may seem improper to draw attention to the non-musical qualities of the project in the context of truly excellent Slovene and foreign music of recent memory, it is nevertheless crucial to bring this context into focus. Very recently, Slovenian partisan music once again stepped out of the shadows and into public view through several theatre-music projects.

With subtlety, Karmina chose the most diverse tunes and compositions, ranging from marches to swing, from the most lyrical to the most politically aware, waking our musical memory in the noblest context, devoid of ideology. This is the greatest virtue of the project, in addition to the Carmina Slovenica choir's brilliant performance featuring vocally mature soloists and joined by male "Partisan" choirs in a coherent fashion.

What does it offer? From "Kozaračko kolo" and the Russian battle tune "Po dolinam i po zagorjam", the Italian resistance hit "Bella ciao", Garibaldi's anthem "La brigata Garibaldi", to the unofficial anthems of France, "Le Chant des Partisans", and the Spanish "Ay, Manuela". They are followed by the English version of "Lili Marlen" as the - surprisingly - unofficial anthem on both sides of the enemy lines (it is this song in particular which best relativises an ideological approach to this type of music); "Zog nit keynmol az du geyst dem letstn veg" (Never say that you are walking the final road) - a Jewish partisans' anthem in Yiddish; the French swing piece "Je suis swing"; as well as

a host of mobilization and humorous songs on Pearl Harbour - "Remember Pearl Harbour", "P. H. Blues", and "The Fighting Son of the Gun" ... Add to this the unforgettable jazz standard "In the Mood" ...

The part dedicated to songs of the Slovenian national liberation struggle carries a special emotional charge and features several songs, arranged specially for this occasion: "Smrt v Brdih" (Death in Brda), "Nov cvet" (A New Flower), "Šivala je deklica zvezdo" (A Girl Was Sewing a Star), "Pesem o svobodi" (Song of Freedom), "Na oknu glej obrazek bled" (Look, There's a Pale Face at the Window), "Kovači smo" (We Are Blacksmiths), "Bratje, le k soncu, svobodi" (Brothers, Let's Go to the Sun and Freedom)... all the way to "Na juriš" (Let's Attack), compositions or adaptations of foreign originals by key composers of the time - Radovan Gobec, Karol Pahor, Makso Pirnik and others. It is rumoured that Partisan songs and military units' group singing astonished even foreign reporters of the period. The Slovenian national character must have come out in the choral singing by virtue of its rebellious, lyrical and awakening quality, and most of all firm belief in final victory. Several generations grew up with it and carried it within regardless of political changes and occasional public denial. After all, we are talking about music which more often than not originated in Slovenian folk song and as such represented a vital component of our national and cultural memory. It was high time for a new generation to return it to the public ear, justly and without prejudice. For this reason, *Na juriš in the mood!* was a brave and important act not only in a musical sense, but also for the sake of the cultural history of this region.



Lyrical, Humorous, Cynical, Authentic

In post-independence Slovenian, revolutionary songs were often stereotypically presented as a means of ideological polarisation. Partisan songs were often trivialised to the point of ideological pummelling. With its immanent musical “media” approach, which included many foreign musical pieces present in radio and film during the Second World War; Na juriš in the mood! is predominantly a proof of faith in music as a renaissance force, a call to resistance born out of personal pain: lyrical or humorous, morally uplifting, but most of all deeply honest and authentic.



Between the Neva and the Sky

Pulkovo airport was inundated with the scent of Russian winter. The first road sign we encountered was familiar enough - Media Markt. Next, in a suburb of working-class apartment buildings, came a megalomaniac memorial with a sign reading 1941-1945. A heap of rusty metal from the socialist realist era. There was an entryway into the underground to the north, accompanied by thousands upon thousands of names, engraved one after the other. A memory of the 900-day-long wartime famine, blockade and nightmare in Leningrad. Joseph Brodsky, Nobel Prize winner, St. Petersburg resident and dissident, speaks of cannibalism in besieged Leningrad. Of all the dissidents' views, his is the most unconventional. He describes Leningrad as "a peninsula of factories, a paradise of workshops and an Arcadia of industrial plants".

Saint Petersburg (Russia), 2012.

But this was not the St. Petersburg we saw. We were guided by our hosts from the Hermitage to the Mariinsky Theatre, St. Isaac's Cathedral to the Kazan, the one Stalin turned into the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism, although this is one detail Irina, our guide, skipped. She did show us the hotel Madonna stays at when she comes to town. We practically forced her to take us to the Smolny Institute, the place in the centre of St. Petersburg, with historical buildings dating back to the 18th and 19th centuries. From the end of 1917 to 1991 this town was closely linked to the October revolution and Lenin, who lived and worked in the city from the end of 1917 to the beginning of 1918.

But it was the purpose of the place before the October revolution that the Carminas found especially exciting: it used to be a girls' boarding school with a strong music program. After 1991, private schools started opening here once again.

The Russian Museum is more enchanting than the Hermitage, and the unfortunate Anna Akhmatova is found in numerous portraits, in all her glory, as well as Malevich's black crosses and circles and Kandinsky. On Nevsky Prospekt, most photographs are taken in front of an antique grocer's shop, oozing French spirit and style. The largest bookstore in town prominently displays cubic metres of Putin's biographies. Not a Russian Nobel Prize winner in sight, not one dissident or samizdat hero. Strolling among neo-classical palaces, intersected with pillars and façades spruced up in lime, sky and grass, one feels as if walking through a Potemkin backdrop along the Dnieper River – it is beautiful but also somehow empty.

Out of Nothing

There was so little life in the vast streets, no music, too many sombre faces, too few coffee places, no urban intimacy. Everything was oversized, bared naked all the way to the horizon, while Chekhovian seagulls flew over the ice-covered moats and the Neva River. Hovering over the ice in near darkness. The surrealism of the moment was reminiscent of Andrei Bely's novel *Petersburg*. Although his vision of "a network of dead cities, engulfed in the mist of black death" is a Symbolist exaggeration. Equally exaggerated are the possessed characters in Gogol's *St. Petersburg Tales* or Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment*, when compared to the contemporary image of the city. The guide took us to all of his houses, which he changed as often as he did shirts. She used the word "beautiful" about three times per minute.

Unlike other cities, St. Petersburg did not grow organically, it was not built on trade or geopolitical needs. It was meant to be a work of art and it gives the impression of a theatre set. There was some kind of a wedding taking place in front of the Hermitage, with an elongated limousine, DJ-like wedding party holding champagne glasses, and an advance guard in the form of a rusty car, its driver pulling on the handbrake to try out instant-braking on ice. There were a bride and groom present at our departure as well – he beardless, holding a pear in one hand and a suitcase in the other, she somewhat older, wearing a pink gift-wrap ribbon in her hair. At the airport, we were trying to locate their honeymoon destination – the departures board showed Kiev and Paris. We placed our bet on Ukraine.

There was surprisingly little traffic on the St. Petersburg streets last Friday. Our guide Ivan Vanya, sporting Rastafarian dreadlocks and nicknamed “Milka Rasta Toblerone” by Nino Mureškić, the percussion section of our tour – the boy spent a few years in Switzerland in the past – informed us that we were in the middle of March 8 celebrations, which they liked to stretch a bit.

Our hotel, named Azimut, was gigantic, with blood-red leather seating in the lobby, tango night on the 18th floor and an enormous fitness gym right in front of it, where upstanding Russians persisted on the stepper machines till three o’clock in the morning. Their obsession with fitness was impossible to miss. Even the boat anchored in the vicinity of the historic Aurora cruiser on the Neva River had been converted into a gym.

We were stationed on the 14th floor, the most upscale one of the hotel, designed to cater

to foreign guests and boasting a wonderful view of the magical city, which Peter the Great had built out of nothing. In the words of the unsurpassed expert on the Russian soul, Orlando Figes, in *Natasha’s Dance*: as Peter approached the Neva’s bank, he dismounted, cut strands of turf out of the marshy ground with his bayonet, and arranged them to form a cross. “This is where the city will stand”, he said and it sounded like “Let there be light!” The famous opening verses of Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman*, which every Russian student still knows by heart, elevated the myth

of a city born of the Emperor's will: "On a deserted, wave-swept shore, He stood - in his mind great thoughts grew - And gazed afar ..." Since then, 1833, the city has changed its name three times, while its inhabitants affectionately call it Piter.

Nervous High Voltage Electricity

The St. Petersburg Philharmonic, situated just a stone's throw from Nevsky Prospekt, welcomed us with blinding, sterile whiteness, antique red and white chairs, giant colossi and astonishing late afternoon sunlight seeping through the semicircular attic windows. After the rehearsal of the St. Petersburg orchestra, music stands no longer serving their purpose were strewn about like crosses at an abandoned cemetery. Several Stradivari rested softly on the old piano. The aging harp player kept feeling the strings of her instrument, the young blond bassoon player threw a glance of interest at the pack of Carminas moving along the stage.

Gentle tones of Brahms' tunes lingered in the air. The blink coming from the giant organ illuminated the room. In just a few hours, light bridges would be fixed between the imperial chandeliers and the silver organ pipes. Probably for the first time in such magnitude in Dmitri Shostakovich's concert hall of the St. Petersburg Philharmonic. Light designer Andrej Hajdinjak was the first one on stage, in the late night and early morning before the Monday concert. His light plan was realised in mirror image and never before had there been so much sun on his controls as in this instance

- in the dream hall of every European classical musician of the last 172 years.

The piano standing in the corner looked like its keys had been touched by the hand of the great Mitya himself. His 7th (*Leningrad*) *Symphony* is still performed in his hall by the house orchestra in every encore. Sitting in the last row of the raised stalls during rehearsals, observing the girls seated on the hallowed stage, unaccustomed to sensations of this type, I pondered *Shostakovich's memoirs* by Solomon Volkov and November 21, 1937. The hall of the Leningrad Philharmonic, as it was then called, was filled to the brim: the cream of Soviet society - musicians, writers, actors, artists, people of all sorts of importance - gathered to witness the opening night of *The Fifth Symphony* written by a composer who had fallen out of favour. They awaited a sensation, a scandal, trying to divine what had happened to the composer, exchanging gossip and jokes. After all, social life had to go on despite the political terror.

"This is not music, it is nervous high voltage electricity", a moved audience member commented *The Fifth*, still Shostakovich's most adored work of art, adding that, "the composer is feverishly searching for his way out of the maze, out of the gas chamber of ideas". In the West, his name became a symbol for both the right and the left. There probably never was another composer given such a political role. And it was in his concert hall that Slovenian girls were invited to perform. "Dostoevsky narrated by Chaplin", they labelled Shostakovich's style.

There is so much of Shostakovich in that concert hall it is impossible to ignore him. But instead of becoming a state artist and hero of



the socialist effort, he opted for the “foolishness of Christ”. He became a “blessed fool”, with the gift of seeing and hearing what others knew nothing about. The blessed fool recounted his vision to the world in paradox, in code, and he did it on purpose. He was playing a fool while in reality he took on the role of a persistent revealer of evil and injustice. The blessed fool was an anarchist and an individualist, mocking convention. Nevertheless, he chose to adopt tight restrictions, strict rules and taboos. Both Shostakovich and Mussorgsky were like that. From this perspective, the Carminas’ performance in the classical concert hall was not after all as scandalous as it at first appeared in the traditional context of a stuck-up classical symphonic repertoire and choral excursions of uniformed singers arranged along the choir stands. A handful of uniformed people sat in the audience prior to Carmina Slovenica’s concert. The event’s moderator promptly conducted the melodious anthem of St. Petersburg from the stage for them.

Libretto for the *Rusalki*

The invitation from St. Petersburg came as a high-level offer. After being invited a few years ago to the Easter festival in Moscow by Valeriy Gergiev, the singers from Slovenia set the stage for the 5th Singing World International Choral Festival of St. Petersburg. The importance of the event was reflected in the fact that the chief patron of the festival was none other than the Russian president, and it was

dedicated to the Russia Day national holiday. All of Karmina’s performances were sold out – she was taped by Trans Russian Radio and Television, she gave a lecture at the Hermitage and held a workshop at the St. Petersburg State Theatre Art Academy. All of these before the concert. The billboard in the hallowed window in front of the official entrance to the Philharmonic invited guests to the “khorovoi teatr Carmina Slovenica – *Rusalki*”. A large logo of the European Capital of Culture (EPK) mysteriously made it onto the billboard, and some time before we came across an article about the city of Maribor, European Capital of Culture 2012, in the Austrian Skylines magazine. We recognized one of the girls – Aina – in a photo from the project *Placebo*, dressed in her crinoline costume. A murmur rose through the plane. The sunset lit Maribor with its Minorites Monastery and the Judgment Tower hovering above the Drava River – like St. Petersburg between the Neva and the sky.

Five hours before the concert, the girls and their conductor disappeared into the worn-out skeleton of the old, yet magnificent hall. The stage was changed completely, we were eagerly awaiting the white rusalkas, the archetypal tradition which should have conquered us all with its Slavic quality. Indeed, the audience of around 800 was thrilled. Some of them, most likely conductors themselves, taped the entire, almost three-hour-long concert. In the ancient, phenomenally acoustic concert hall, the traditional melodies, rituals, legends mixed with contemporary works of music and sounded like spells. Nino Mureškič’s professional performance on percussions gave just the right rhythm, so the second part of the concert, *CS Light*, featuring works by contem-

porary composers and performed in contrasting black costumes, came off much lighter than the white clad rusalki. But only on the surface. The audience, younger for the most part, which was in itself unusual for a place like that, pranced and quietly clapped to the rhythm. It was an unusual break in the rigidity of the hallowed classical music environment. The audience was responsive, although confused at times.

After the concert, a middle-aged lady walked up and inquired about the *Rusalki* libretto. "I would like to better understand what the girls are singing, especially when covering their faces with the masks", she said. Others' responses were overly emotional. Russian superlatives sound melodious and striking indeed.

One of the hall's special features was surely the side box for handicapped children. They came to see the concert performed by girls from Slovenia. It is the hall's custom and tradition to allow the handicapped to attend the best events. Although they kept yelling even through the pianissimo parts, no one batted an eyelash. It is understood that the premier events are organised also, and specifically, for them.

Songs of Dark Laughter

About half-way through the process of creating *Rusalki*, which Karmina took time and thoroughness to complete, we started writing to each other – cautiously, inquisitively on my part. Yet always carefully, considerately. Not more than a casual thought here and there during the birthing process, with a lot

of careful assurances in between, followed by an avalanche. Always night-time notes. Why could they never wait till morning? Because everything was marked by impatience, all the time. She is unrestrained in her impatience. If you are to survive in this machine of hers, you inadvertently pick up this passion for discipline, for controlling every little creative impulse. In fact, for controlling everything. While "in the process", she ate, drank, dressed, lived in harmony with the process, the story she spun for days, months, sometimes a whole year. She deliberately involved her Carminas in all of it.

Rusalki, subtitled *Songs of Dark Laughter*, is a typical scenic ritual, based on legends and songs, and building on the most distinctive female archetype in Slavic mythology, which inspired numerous composers through time. *Rusalki* as symbols of potent, unrealised female creativity, further cement the renaissance of the suppressed female principle, a virtual staple of every one of Karmina's projects.

They occupied a place musically and expressively between worlds, between death and life. Original music was commissioned from the Slovenian composers Vasko Atanasovski, Slavko Šuklar, Urška Pompe and Izidor Leitingner. Texts were written by Erika Vouk, Svetlana Makarovič and Ifigenija Zagoričnik Simonovič. *Rusalki* is the archetypal adventure into a ritual beyond reason, into the metaphysical of good and evil. The inspiration for the staging of the performance comes from the ancient Greek treasury, songs "from soil and water", while screams, cries, laughter and songs are based on traditional Slavic melodies and contemporary musical. The restless souls of rusalkas, weavers of natural cycles and erotic primordial

bonds between man and nature, are the main protagonists of this non-narrative music theatre.

Rusalki is a performance in “no-man’s” world – in the world which can’t be described as music, theatre, or dance; it is a scenic adventure, a music-scenic ritual, inspired by mythology: once emotions become too powerful for speech, we start singing, when they exceed mere song, we dance.

The delicate balance between “elevated” body and “elevated” voice is of utmost importance for understanding the *Rusalki*. The focused and especially energetic relation to the body makes the *Rusalki* choir function as a collective physical organism. Their mythological world is further underlined by the use of imaginary language of the fairies or rusalki in all their intimate worlds.



Credo No. 1

Through the creative process, it is my role to intervene, organise, ritualize. I despise creating a performance that materializes personal confusion or results from some sort of psychotherapy, or restlessness, violence, even emotional outbursts. I refuse to be part of the drama, I only want to translate and depict. For me, a rehearsal is serious work, not a therapeutic process for the performers or myself. I desire tranquillity, kindness, order. It is only then that I can observe, control, sense and realise anything. I am all ears, all eyes, for every performer. It is then that I suggest, attract, reject, encourage.

This is how Rusalki began. The commissioned musical works arrived on schedule, followed by an overview of the musical material received, conversations with the composers and ponderings on how to anchor these works in a congruent performance. Then came planning the date of the opening night, selection of performers and artistic collaborators, and, most of all, the slow and lengthy study of new music. About half way through this process, almost as an intermezzo, the Na juriš in the mood! project came about and temporarily threw everything off track. Then came the nitty-gritty part. Or so we wished. All of a sudden and for the first time ever, we were affected by a crisis of mid-season programme changes. It was produced by greedy, clueless, reckless and arrogant people, unable to think things through and foresee the consequences of frivolous emotional outbursts. It felt like a favourite toy was taken out of a child's hand. There was upheaval all about. I was no longer relaxed, impulsive, cooperative. My intuition always speaks to me quickly and clearly, and I have complete trust in it. This time we came head to head. Preparations started off with complications.

Some of the slated performers were replaced, which seemed like a bad omen to me. But later, there were no further signs of doubt. We were looking for answers in collaboration with the set designer, slouching from one meeting to the next. We were getting nowhere. It felt like we were completely stuck. Costumes were long ready, yet the story line and consequently the set failed to become clear. The movements were indeed all there, but refused to settle into their final contours. We worked a lot, but it seemed everything stood still, obstinately not budging. Never before did it take so much anguish at a painstakingly slow pace for me to realise a performance. I had to drown all memories of past triumphs. Or they were drowned by others. At the same time, it was important for me not to get ahead of myself. Sources for ideas kept coming, as did boxes overflowing with scripts, images, drafts, sound recordings. My recorder and computer were equally running out of space. Everything needed to be shaken up and explored, even the “kill your darlings” parts. Yet the impossible remained just that, impossible, the missing was still missing. The most brilliant ideas seemed tired and washed out. I began suffocating. Several times I wanted to quit. I had never confronted such an impulse before.

*I was in a terrible state. Restless, annoyed, with back pain, unable to sleep, I got up more tired than I went to bed. Uneasiness nestled in my soul. I was careful not to show it, of course, that would be a disciplinary offence. I tried to keep the mood relaxed and encouraging, all the while guessing if they had figured me out. The feeling of an anaemic point zero. Tedious rehearsals kept dragging on and on. Then the move and new working space came. We managed to restart the machine for a few days. The set designer either “blacked out” or was too busy; nevertheless, the singers sang with gracious persistence, though without fervour. It was a frustrating game. At least there was still time ... I grew more and more scared, afraid of maybe losing my enthusiasm and goal. This frightened me. No one to talk to. I didn't want to confuse those taking part in the project, others could never understand it. It all kept seeping away. There was a day when I broke into tears. This frightened me even more. It all erupted. It was sad and bitter. Is the battle lost? Should I quit? The possibility of quitting provided me with the courage to carry on. I grew angry and the anger started pumping adrenalin. My collaborators responded with kind enthusiasm. We made corrections, changes, cuts and additions. Patience, high spirits and laughter took the place of arguments. Slowly but promisingly, the Rusalki performance started to form. I still had trouble sleeping: I mulled over problems, the tone of voices, gestures. My nights were long and uncomfortable. But it wasn't lack of sleep that bothered me; my emotions were what was draining all my strength. Where is the mistake? I drove to stores and workshops, I selected elements for the set and props. The set designer had quit. Late at night I was bringing them to the rehearsal room, rearranging them, making adjustments. As the days went on, the atmosphere gelled. The team was becoming more connected. It was close to opening night, the night of pats on the back, tearing to shreds, encouraging words, words of scorn, praise or silence. In *The Orchestra Conductor*, Wajda shows music cannot be made without love. The love was back. Dress rehearsal, opening night, repeat performances. Whatever nonsense had come before was quickly forgotten.*



The poet Ifigenija Simonovič contributed one of her poems to the *Rusalki* project, and wrote of the opening night: “The choir’s performance was magical, moving. Composure, serenity, sensuousness. Wonderful singing. I was carried as if on a pillow of wind, from the haughty cathedral to the mountains of the Balkans and back, through the deepest cracks in most intimate emotions ...”

Jacek Sykulski, a conductor and composer from Poznań, Poland, following the concert in St. Petersburg: “*Rusalki* is fantastic, in every moment, every note, every position. I was most impressed by the ability to change voices, within a single song, sometimes even within a single moment. The girls are extremely talented, yet the true talent undoubtedly comes from their conductor, who is nothing short of a genius. For me, their performance was like a theatre of voices. The girls have no problems dealing with difficult situations. I found the programme truly exceptional, a mixture of intensely different materials, the entire history of music in the first, as well as the second part. The stories narrated by the girls are multifaceted and sometimes difficult to decipher. Yet their voices never fall out of place, and when the voices are in their place, everything is. There is not one thing out of place with *Carmina Slovenica*. A truly magnificent performance. I found *Rusalki* fantastic and very much in tune with my personal mysticism.”



The South Is Not Gloomy at All

There is no way to envision travelling to the Balkans on a sterile plane. It would be a sin not to intimately cross the bridge from the West to the East, this fragile footbridge between cultures, religions, languages, nations. Like in Šijan's movie *Who's Singin' Over There (Ko to tamopeva)*, the 30-women-strong expedition of Carmina Slovenica choir covered many kilometres, from Maribor to Istanbul, with the slight difference of our bus being an air-conditioned Mercedes Benz, and the drivers didn't grill steaks on the road. There was a lot of silence between day and night, a lot of light and also a lot of girls' laughter, as well as hovering between drowsiness and being awake. There was no singing, though. The voices needed to rest in order to be prepared for the challenging concerts in rough conditions, 40°C in the shade, and constant travelling from one venue to the next. We each dealt with Balkan bias in our own way. If Balkan is defined by the territory once steadily and continuously occupied by the subjects to the Ottoman Empire, Ottoman rule ought to be the criteria for Balkanization in a certain geographical area. Is Balkanization truly an adequate synonym for going back to the tribal, backward, primitive, barbaric? The Balkans were dubbed "the oth-

Niš (Serbia),
Istanbul (Turkey),
Plovdiv (Bulgaria), 2011.

er Europe”, while there is an apparition of the Balkans, observed from afar and on high, present in Western culture. Our caravan observed it singing, up close, without conceit.

The Balkan Bridge, as writer Aleš Debeljak calls it in his book with the same title. This bridge led us to sonorous voices, open and flat, to timbre and polyphony in Bulgaria, to the enchanting music of a landscape and its thousand-year-old history of tears and blood, but also to the sumptuous beauties of Istanbul, and all the way to the Roman emperor Constantine and the Serbian city of Niš.

The places included in Carmina Slovenica’s “road movie” were therefore Niš, Istanbul and Plovdiv. The choir now got a chance to learn about its roots in the world capitals of both Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa. The bus tour spanning 3,000 kilometres from Maribor, across Serbia, from Bulgaria’s western to eastern borders, with “Šope, šope” and “Malko moma” ringing in our ears, performed by the Grammy winning choir Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares, all the way to Istanbul and back home through Plovdiv, along the Brotherhood and Unity Highway; the conductor nailed the itinerary. Because it was palpable and seductive just as the music of the Balkans, the music the girls are familiar with and can perform down to the last difficult nuance, from the very monadic beginnings, through diaphony to polyphony later on. This music is “temperamental, clever, erotic, brave and open minded”, as it says on the cover of the *Balkanika* album by Carmina Slovenica.

The entire team tasted, felt, experienced firsthand all the spices of the world, which generations of Carminas have been singing about for over two decades. The world of heroic epics

and songs of mourning rose in front of us at Čele Kula, Čegar hill and the Niš concentration camp. They made understanding the melancholy of those songs easier, as did Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque for Byzantine liturgy. “Kassia of Constantinople” was no longer the hardly pronounceable song “Tin pentahodron lyran ke pentaphoton lychian” (The five-string lute and the lamp of five flames), which Carmina Slovenica has been performing for over a decade, ever since the *Musica Inaudita* project. The most prominent hymnographer of the Byzantine era and abbess became one of us with her song, dedicated to the five saints of Istanbul, Constantinople in her lifetime in the 9th century.

The vivacious travelling group, headed by their conductor Karmina, sometimes seemed like a Molieresque travelling theatre, as it carried everything along and managed to perform a musically, scenically and choreographically perfected performance at every single venue. When technical difficulties of certain stages called for improvisation, the energy, resourcefulness and (self)help among the singers were even greater. Coming off the open-air stage at a Niš fortress to a prestigious concert hall in 20-million-strong Istanbul, and then again into small performance spaces on the university campus and the academy in Plovdiv, carried off in the professional style of well serviced companies. The only small Kafka-esque dramas took place at border crossings, where Minja, our producer, the driver and the ATA carnet stoically endured the bureaucratic whims of border officials. I forgot whether the Turks were worse than the Bulgarians, the Serbian worse than the Croatians. Still, every drum arrived to the right place and every so-



prano and contralto was in great shape from the first to the very last note of the tour. Most Ottoman and Turkish dictionaries relate the word Balkan to the mountain or the mountain chain. The semantic flaw, corrected in the 19th century, of attributing the entire peninsula to the notion of the Balkans was inflicted by the Prussian geographer August Zeune, who mistakenly calculated that the mountain range connected the Black and the Adriatic seas. The idea of the Balkans developed an increasingly political connotation. In 1918, the expression Balkan Peninsula became the target of accusations of geographical unsuitability. The expression faded in use but never disappeared. In her work *Imagining the Balkans*, the Bulgarian historian Maria N. Todorova includes

the following among the Balkan nations: Albanians, Bulgarians, Greek, Romanians and most nations of former Yugoslavia. Slovenians were not included in the mix, while Croats and Turks made it in, as they are geographically part Balkan and part European, which is a peculiar paradox in itself.

Separating the Orient from the West is the main theme in European imaginative geography, according to the French philosopher Claude Lévi-Strauss. At the same time we are talking about a legitimate fear of Islam, as the Muslim army defeated Persia, Syria and Egypt; later Turkey, Spain, Sicily and parts of France buckled in the 8th and 9th centuries ... Balkanisation is a synonym for underdevelopment, wars, blood lust. The Balkans are some sort

of “home of perversion”. It is a non-place, not understood, senseless, not European. The Balkans deny Europe in its core, they deny themselves. How foreign all this labelling must seem to an unconcerned traveller through the Balkans. They are contradictory: scary and attractive, conquering, charming and dreadful. All of these we checked on our dynamic journey, reaching as far as the megapolis on the shores of Bosphorus strait.

Niš, September 4

The first stop for our caravan was a fortified town in the South of Serbia, which proved to be a difficult venue. The 3.000 seats were not all taken, since the Urban Fest Carmina Slovenica performed at hosted three other events that same evening. Excerpts from *Rusalki* were a difficult opening to the tour, with all the background noise and technical challenges. Nevertheless, the girls managed to stir the Balkan temperament with the second part of their performance – *CS Light* – and striking encores in the style of “Time to Say Goodbye”, and a Bollywood hit. A detour to Niška Banja turned out very amusing, and a visit to the Serbian holy places a valuable lesson in history.

Čele kula (“a tower of skulls”) is an ossuary in the shape of a tower. The access road is neglected and there is an entry fee to the shrine. The ossuary was built by the Turks as a warning, and skulls of the Serbian rebels were embedded in the walls. At the Battle of Čegar in May 1809, the Serb people rebelled against Turkish rulers. The Serbian commander Sindelić blew up a weapons depot and

4,000 Serbs and 10,000 Turks lost their lives during the operation. Yet Turkish superiority in numbers and equipment decided the battle against the Serbs in just two days. The vizier of Niš, Hurshid Pasha, ordered a tower to be erected from the opened skulls of the defeated rebels. Fourteen rows of seventeen skulls were embedded in each side of the four-sided tower in order to remind the feudal people not to rise against their rulers ever again. Following the liberation from Turkish rule, the tower became a symbol of Serbian rebellion. In 1892, a shrine was built around the tower for security reasons. Out of the initial 952 skulls, only 59 are left in its walls today, as many of them were pulled out and taken away by people believing the skulls possess magical protective powers. At Čegar, the white-haired Selomor – Sele provided us with an epic narrative of the glorious history of every tree, stone and hill. Postojna-born Aleksandra Strahinić is the driving force behind the Niš Urban Fest and Nisomnija, and also works for the commercial TV channel Bel Ami: “By inviting Carmina Slovenica, we tried to offer the town and festival an extraordinary, prominent and internationally renowned act, and we succeeded.”

Istanbul, September 6-10

The word *hüzün* stands for melancholy, a sense of deep spiritual loss, pain and sadness. It is somewhat reminiscent of our “yearning”. To the Sufis, it means spiritual anxiety felt by those unable to do enough for Allah in this world. As Orhan Pamuk writes in his book *Istanbul: Memories and the City*: “The *hüzün* of Istanbul is more than just a mood, it’s an aspect of life which includes not only the spiritual side but also a state of consciousness, essentially equally positive and negative towards life.” It is a feeling specific to Istanbul and its fishermen at the Galata Bridge, it has to do with veiled women at bus stops, with Bosphorus ferries, Dervish lodges, conversations on ships, ruins, market places, masses in Taksim Square, slender minarets, recorded muezzin prayers five times a day ... Many Western writers find this charming, while some of them, the great French Turkophile Pierre Loti among others, even lived here. We ate at the pub built in his home in Eyüp – in a prosaic gesture we ordered kebab, and drinking hard earned bitter white wine in Loti’s living room and thinking of his romantic writings of Istanbul at the beginning of the 20th century endowed every object in that house with myth. His forbidden love, the married Turkish woman he called Azyade, which is also the title of Loti’s most famous novel, is eternalised on the wall of what has become a profane gathering place. The adored woman was outed and disappeared under ambiguous circumstances, while Loti was forced to return to France.

“Harem girls”, people called after the *Carminas*, walking along the bazaar. Harem girls had to be foreign, as it was prohibited to en-

slave Muslim women. The majority of them came from Russia. Calls of “Charlie’s angels” did not come from local stories. “I want to be your Charlie”, sang one of the merchants. In another part of the town, which the syphilitic Gustave Flaubert once prophesied would become the capital of the world – namely in the monumental Hagia Sophia, demolished by the crusaders – the girls were silenced when they started to sing. It has become a ritual for the choir to perform in eminent houses of culture like Notre-Dame, St. Stephen’s Cathedral, La Madeleine ... But the security officers at Hagia Sophia could not be swayed, maybe they gathered from the look of our girls that they were about to perform a Christian liturgy.

We didn’t get to experience the *hüzün*, the atmosphere at the university campus was jolly. A student choir performed first late in the evening – they sounded harmonious. It was only that Burak Onur Erdem, the head of the festival, was mysteriously missing from the closing ceremony. We searched in vain for any traces of previous year’s ECC in Istanbul, despite the enormous cultural programme on offer, although the music section seemed the scantiest of all. The closest thing to ECC was perhaps a visit to the Istanbul Modern Art Museum, built by the Eczacıbaşı family, the owners of a giant pharmaceutical concern, on the shore of the Bosphorus. The museum hosted by far the largest number of events from different fields, not only exhibitions of modern art, which is its primary task. New galleries are popping up daily all over the city, while there is still only one music hall. The Topkapı Palace, which used to serve as the main residence of the Ottoman sultans, didn’t show any signs of renovation, despite plans to renew the sultan’s

kitchens as part of ECC programme. It was Saturday, the city was brimming with tourists, and you had to pay extra to take a tour of the harem. The ticket comes with a complementary wet wipe, but the price is steep.

Prior to Carmina Slovenica's performance in Istanbul's Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, they held a service in French. The building of the city's humble Catholic community was thoroughly hidden from view from the main street and buried among neighbourhood houses. Visitors had to make it through unbelievably heavy traffic to attend the evening performance. In the room where Pope John Paul II celebrated the Holy Mass during the first ever papal visit to Turkey, the white-clad girls now sang through the entire ecclesiastic tradition, from the cloistered sisters of Las Huelgas Monastery, to gospel and Slovenian composers – Lebič, as well as Maribor-born Lagkhner and Prenner –, spicing it all up with the Ghanaian *Alleluia* and Šijanec's *Gayatri Mantra*. A lady in a pink hat standing in front of me, who bought every one of CS's albums, got to her feet and danced, clapping to the rhythm of the girls. A local conductor who performed with his choir CorIStAnbul as an opening act for Carmina Slovenica kept dabbing his forehead and trembled as if he conducted our choir in his mind.

The Cemal Reşit Rey (CRR) concert hall received our singers cold and half empty. If it had not been for the red sofas and gold leaf on the walls, we would have hardly felt like we were in Turkey. Onur Işık works as the programme coordinator at the CRR hall. In his opinion, there is a high level of choral culture in Turkey, while opera culture is practically non-existent. "The ECC taught us how to collaborate in our pro-

jects. It was the first time in history that civil society and the private sector worked together”, explained Işık, whose grandmother was Russian. “The acoustics in CRR hall are really good, we have held 200 concerts here over the course of four years, including classical, ballet, ethnic and jazz. The hall is owned by the city authorities and is also used for congressional activities, although a separate congress centre was built in the vicinity a couple of years ago. People are hungry for classical music events. We have had practically every big European orchestra here, including the Berliner Philharmonic, Vienna and London symphony orchestras. They come every year. The ECC was an important starting point for us, about 250 events were held every day, throughout the year. Cemal Reşit Rey, whom the concert hall is named after, was a composer, the most important conductor in Turkey, and a personal friend to Kemal Atatürk. His father served as ambassador in Paris.” When asked what the public opinion of the ECC was, Işık said it was largely positive. “There may have been some negative comments regarding contemporary art, but the capital managed to break quite a few prejudices, which are deeply ingrained in the Turkish culture. Wider integration of contemporary cultural practices into art is the most important achievement of the previous year. ECC Istanbul was a success story, although some, a minority, disagree. The overall budget reached well over 200 million euros.”

After Carmina Slovenica's performance at the CRR, a young man from Venezuela by the name Hernan Alcala approached the Slovenian group. He has been following the choir for years and is himself a musician, choir conduc-

tor and singer. He has lived in Paris for the last four years. “I am a huge fan of the Slovenian choir. The love affair started when I was seventeen and I took part at the America Cantat Festival in Caracas. It was there that I first came across Carmina Slovenica. I was mesmerised, since I had never before seen a performance like that, with the complex spatial direction and difficult music, which was performed so perfectly. That performance greatly influenced Venezuela's attitude to contemporary choral music. It started a whole movement. We have some very important choirs, which were quite traditional up to that point, but later changed course. The arrival of Carmina Slovenica in Caracas in 2000 was a very important event indeed. I have been following its singers all over the world, I have also come here because of them and the Hungarian choir Cantemus pro Musica. I came across the festival via Facebook and travelled here from Paris. I still admire CS performances greatly, their artistic power, innovation, wonderful results these girls are able to achieve”, said Alcala. In his opinion, Carmina Slovenica is impossible to copy. “They are far too unique, and the level of their performance is too high. I love the figuralism included in their performances, the variations, their clusters are incredible, it seems like there are several bodies in one.” He would like to invite them to Paris to perform two songs by a Slovenian and a French composer respectively, in collaboration with his own choir.

Plovdiv, September 11

The Bulgarian Yana Deliradeva did post-graduate work in music at the renowned American Princeton academy. She awaited us at the Plovdiv square, despite the broiling heat. Both she and her partner Manol Peykov inherited outstanding cultural companies from their mothers – Yana is in charge of Detska Kitka choir, while Manol manages Janet-45 print and publishing, one of the most prominent publishing houses in Bulgaria and home to every important contemporary Bulgarian author, which regularly provides the local market with translations of important figures in world literature.

A concert at the academy opened by the Children's Bouquet (Detska Kitka in Bulgarian) with a 65-year-long tradition, and closed by *CS Light*, proved to be inspiring despite the socialist realist allusions present in the concert hall, the static full-on lighting and the heat. It ended up a forceful epilogue to our tour and a learning lesson for the Bulgarian choir and both of its conductors, who were reluctant to let their Slovenian colleague go on the morning of our departure. It was agreed that the Bulgarian women would visit the Attaca Festival in Maribor the following year. Following the joint presentation of choirs at the Academy, where Yana works as a professor, she explained her first encounter with Carmina Slovenica through a DVD presented at the World symposium for choral music in Denmark. The symposium focused on the overlap of music and theatre. "It was all new and exciting to me. I admire the singers' deep and highly infectious involvement in the

process. My plans for the future include some changes to our choir's tradition which, despite its noble and global reputation, needs to change course, experiment, open up."

What about Plovdiv? It falls short of being the Paris of the Balkans, as advertised in the *Lonely Planet*, but is nevertheless a charming city with a rich tradition, modern bookstores, antique galleries, a brand new opera house designed partially as an open theatre. Rehearsals for *Die Fledermaus* were underway on the archaic arena made of stone.

"The further you travel south, the sadder everything gets", is a rough translation of an old Balkan saying, though our tour of the Balkans proved less and less sad the further south we ventured.



I am not sure we could feel better in Vienna than we did in Istanbul, that Vienna could offer events and impressions of a more interesting kind. Geographical dimensions are becoming increasingly blurred and today an orchestra from Ankara is almost a more exciting option. Just as one wouldn't expect to find the most exquisite art in Singapore or Hong Kong, since the two cities are mostly associated with trade, it is exactly environments like these that have most often surprised our choir with the most amazing people in their fields in the recent years. Although it would be reasonable for us to expect more from Prague or Budapest with their rich historical contexts, they just don't offer that many interesting artists at the moment. The compass of creativity in music has been turning rapidly. Not long ago it pointed towards Eastern Europe and Scandinavia, and has recently shifted towards Asia and even South Africa. I would imagine similar shifts are observable in literature, which finds such environments easier to flourish in and excite its audiences, while such a development could hardly be expected in the operatic field. Large centres are either not privileged by default, or have lost our interest in recent times. The enthusiasm we encountered, the devotion and endeavour we found in those places, often provided more joy than the self-evident elitism, which can often prove boring.

This made the privilege of performing in spaces such as these akin to musical missionary work. But why did we choose to go to Plovdiv, Bulgaria? Apart from being a cradle of vocal music and home of many exceptional soloists and choirs, its singing culture, nurtured by numerous excellent orchestras, has played a vital role in shaping our taste in a specific literary genre. Bulgarian authors have also been a regular feature in our repertoires in the recent years, we have been working with their resonant vocal technique, like in our project Rusalki.



Earthquake?

Between San Francisco and Los Angeles, Oakland, Gualala, and Pasadena (USA), 2007.

“Stunning, simply stunning!” Beautiful, simply stunning, unbelievably attractive. Those were the superlatives used for the entire ten-day tour of Carmina Slovenica through California with its population of 33 million. We started our flight to the Golden State from Jože Pučnik airport, stopping over at Franz J. Strauss in Munich, and from there continued to San Francisco. Some of us secretly considered the fires we had read about in the world media just before embarking on our tour. But there were none to be found around where we were, except in the bold newspaper headlines and dramatic photos of Greater San Diego. George Bush and the California senator/terminator Arnold Schwarzenegger, respectively the most powerful and the most popular Republicans in the country, although not very fond of each other, emphatically paraded around the fire sites. The smoke dispersed before we even arrived. The fire was hopefully to melt the ice between the two, a stubborn remnant from the times when Arnie had worked as consultant to Bush senior, or so we read in *The New York Times* at the time. “The skies over Los Angeles were poisonous, people could hardly breathe, dry wind drove the ashes along the

coastline, many chose to wear facemasks”, Nataša Prošenc, a Slovenian from Los Angeles reported to me. She is a videast and filmmaker and has been living in L.A. for eight years. In the time of our tour, she was in Santa Monica for the American Film Market, a trading event for movie buyers and sellers from around the world, attended by 8,000 visitors.

As far as movies go, our singing caravan stuck to Hollywood. Who knows, maybe a documentary featuring our Maribor based and world-renowned choir will be made in the years ahead, becoming a candidate for an Oscar award. This is what our Los Angeles choral colleagues (LACC – Los Angeles Children Chorus) and hosts did. They observed our performance open-mouthed and prick-eared, and were left flabbergasted. They, on the other hand, regularly perform at the Los Angeles Opera, the Hollywood Bowl, Disney Theatre next to Plácido Domingo, Lorin Maazel, Litton, Salonen, despite falling hard behind the young Slovenians, who appear musically and visually much more professional and confident on stage. The choir led by Anne Tomlinson, is in its twenty-second season, winning Grammy awards and recording with the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Their conductor doubles as artistic director and is also in charge of children’s rehearsals for an opera production in the Los Angeles Opera. This season, the LACC has 260 boy and girl singers from 60 different L.A. locations and performing in five choral levels: from concert to chamber and preliminary. There are eight teachers employed just to teach solfeggio, and at least ten people in the operations team. Carmina Slovenica cannot compete with these parameters, while LACC can certainly learn a thing or two from their Slovenian colleagues

in the fields of the most prestigious international awards, daring, polyvalent repertoire, performances worldwide, and perfecting performances. Yet sadly, deprivations which come from working in a small environment, inevitably, cruelly and unjustly result in poor working and production conditions. “Our choirs’ collaboration was phenomenal”, Tomlinson told me after the Pasadena concert. “Your girls are so unique, we watched them with open eyes and ears every day of your visit. Carmina Slovenica really is ground-breaking. In America we have classical choirs on one hand, and those performing mostly popular music on the other. There are practically no groups working at the high, elite creative level which Carmina Slovenica has been establishing, merging classical music with novel approaches in musical research. This is a phenomenon we have yet to appreciate here in the USA. Our singers found the experience outstanding, they came out of the concert spellbound. Especially after performing *Igraj kolce* by Jakob Jež and singing under your conductor.”

Hegal and Sheponhauer in Alcatraz

Californians are of course used to fires, the way they are used to fitness or jogging or idealising the cult of the body. One of our hosts from San Francisco, or rather from Piedmont, Ray G. Perman, was waiting for us at the airport with Piedmont choir conductor Bob Geary, who lived on a boat off the idyllic town of Sausalito, with a few of the singers holding up a banner reading “We missed you”, and pink lilies

for our conductor. On our drive over the Bay Bridge he started off by recounting the horrible earthquake of 1989, when the very bridge we were on now had collapsed, and describing all the measures we were to follow in case the earth started shaking. He either really had premonitions, or else it was because of his seismologist wife following tremors around the globe. Whatever the case, his advice to “hide under the table if the ground starts shaking” sounded somewhat peculiar, while we were staring in awe at the impressively illuminated skyscrapers of San Francisco. Just a few days later, his words took on a prophetic element. We were reading about paintings falling off walls and the underground by the name of BART coming to a precautionary halt for a few minutes.

The entire Pacific coast is geologically unstable, with numerous fault lines, and it was not at all surprising when the ground shook on the eve of Halloween (which, by the way, has a notably erotic touch in California, requiring every woman to choose an overly sexy costume with a morbid twist, generally donning cobwebs, while men frequently choose to represent bees and batmen). The magnitude of the earthquake reached 5.6, with the epicentre in neighbouring San Jose, yet none of us felt a thing, while the locals fled the supermarkets as products were falling off the shelves, as *The Oakland Tribune* reported on November 1. We found the earthquake thing truly curious and difficult to explain.

The tour started with a morning visit to Alcatraz. Strict and almost prison-like discipline was in place even before we sat foot on the ferry, in line with the once most horrific and escape-proof prison. It became a federal peni-

tentiary in 1934. A ferry trip to the grisly island prison started idyllically enough, as the Golden Gate rose like a mirage from the morning mist, which refused to let go of the bridge throughout the day. The mythical redness of its iron construction faded in the distance, as a celebratory song echoed from the young cultivated throats. It was one of the Piedmont singer's birthday. And the song chosen was definitely not *Happy Birthday*. The arrival on the island was nothing short of strange, as a stern lady in ranger's uniform recited rules and procedures to us, while a large graffiti on the penitentiary's front reading “Welcome Indians” recalled the times when the island was overtaken by Native American activists. The first time this happened was in 1964, when they lasted no more than four hours on the island, while in 1969 they barricaded it for no less than 19 months. Their intention was to buy it from the federal government for the sum of 24 dollars in goods. The island was dear to them, it looked like an Indian reserve, there were no comforts, no fertile land, it was isolated from all modern conveniences. But the government decided to annex the island to the national parks and drove the last Native American activists away. In the depressive environment of prison cells, once home to Al Capone, Alvin Karpis, George Kelly and other criminals of the time, we found an amusing poster from the Alcatraz library, offering works by “Hegal and Sheponhauer” among others. There were cook books with prison recipes available in the gift shop, along with a host of other American curiosities, which, at list on the day of our visit, weren't exactly flying off the shelves.



A School-Day in Piedmont

The 31 Carminas aged between 12 and 18 stirred pleasant excitement, a true euphoria and almost an earthquake wherever they appeared. Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, Regent's Theatre at the University of Holy Names in Oakland, Gualala Arts Centre, First United Methodist Church in Pasadena, and Los Angeles were places on the West Coast where "one of the most refined and creative choirs in the world" performed between October 26 and November 5, according to several of Carmina Slovenia's American hosts. The girls also found the tour exciting in the sociological sense. At first, they stayed with families of singers from the Piedmont choir, which worked with our choir during the summer under the wings of the Attacca project, performing in both Croatia and Slovenia, while in Pasadena they were welcomed into the homes of parents of singers from the Los Angeles Children's Chorus. In Piedmont, in the vicinity of the Berkeley University complex, the girls were even allowed to attend school with their peers for a day. It was a very informative experience, as well as an organisational challenge, the hosts later explained, yet it was all worth it in the end. Girls from CS compared classes, the lessons' quality, the difficulty of different subjects. The idea was excellent. A great bond developed between the two choirs both on and off stage. They baked sweet munch mallows at a picnic high above San Francisco, sang and danced tirelessly and quite globally. The following evening they jointly got the audience to their feet at a full-length concert at the Regent's Theatre & Centre for Performing Arts at the Holy Names University in Oakland, with a dar-

ing contemporary repertoire, without a shred of populist concession, which is a truly brave decision on such a tour.

Standing ovations were also received at the Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, and later in Gualala and Pasadena. Each individual concert was a passionate voyage through the history of music, experimenting with sound, vocal technique, movement and stage capacities permitting, also light design. Everywhere we went there was passion, intense experiences, standing ovations and of course the obligatory attendance of American Slovenians at our concerts. In Oakland, there was even “potica” after the concert, and the conductor was naturally obliged to take a photo with the visibly moved group of Slovenians from San Francisco. Much the same happened in Pasadena, where we were joined by a very excited Slovenian from Los Angeles, one of our greatest scientists living abroad, a former employee of NASA’s main research lab, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in

Pasadena, Dr. Dušan Petrač. He spent his time researching our Solar system and doing other astrophysical research used to analyse data sent back by NASA probes to Mars and other planets – probes sent on long voyages all the way to the outer limits of our Solar system. Lately, Pasadena has often proved a more interesting source of space information than even Houston, Huntsville or Cape Canaveral, since the space probes have been circling towards distant planets and approaching the edge of our Solar system for such a long time now. Dušan Petrač played an important part in space research programmes in Pasadena, working on the man-made

satellite project, among others. “This has been my town for the last three decades. It has a population of 140,000, and makes me feel like I live both in a metropolis and the countryside at the same time”, he explained. Pasadena reminded him of Slovenia, with its mountainous backdrop, reminiscent of the Karavankan range. “The evening with Carmina Slovenica was incredibly interesting. I admired the limits of the human organism being pushed by the girls by means of sound, movement, pagan rituals. Their high professionalism reminded me of top gymnasts, yet there was delight on the singers’ faces despite the difficult programme. I wondered whether such an avant-garde project could be realised in Slovenia. The local audience was also surprised at their originality, uniqueness, and unconventionality. I just returned from Slovenia. I was in Maribor three weeks ago, giving a lecture to the professors at the local university, I attended a science festival, and a conference on the Lisbon strategy. I am currently not employed by NASA, as all the projects have been postponed for a few years. This year marked the fiftieth anniversary of the Sputnik satellite and I gave a lecture on that. Twice in Maribor.

Every scientist can come back home in principle, yet the brain drain is still quite large. Coming back is difficult. I prepared a university programme for the University of Maribor some eight years ago, but it didn’t get the go ahead. A colleague from Cambridge explained just the other day that she is not qualified to work in Slovenia, because she lacks nostrification. In her homeland, she is a college graduate. Complicated nostrification processes and individual degree completion make it difficult to come back also for people working in science. Who

knows, maybe something will change. America is much more open. It is much easier to go out than to come back.”

Glide and Grace

San Francisco, the most European of all American cities, proved truly charming that Sunday. The morning Mass at Glide was an event all in itself. Over there, gospel is sung right from the gut and Pastor Cecil Williams is a pop icon. He discussed problems of our world today in a half-trance, warming up the audience which kept themselves cool with makeshift fans from printed out lyrics. Everyone was moving to the music, it was like being in a jazz club, some of the solos performed not exclusively by black women were unforgettable. A guy at the entrance was stuffing crack in his mouth and there were scores of homeless people in front. Glide provides them with soup, accompanied by prayer. The interior of the church is very peculiar, with tolerance thresholds projected onto the walls, and sensual, Dionysian, somehow instinctual and full singing. There is also more hugging, and young people and gays. A special magnetism lingers in the air, as well as a taste of integrity, not yet broken into thousand pieces by history, as Primož Kozak wrote long ago in his “Peter Klepec in America”, when he first listened to gospel in Chicago and became dizzy with its animal eroticism.

In the afternoon, there was a performance at the Grace Cathedral, a Notre Dame replica, at the *Voices of American Future* festival, in commemoration of September 11, 2001. All of the choirs sang beautifully, but Carmina got the

audience to their feet. The *Slovenian Dream* in the cathedral was enchanting, a woman next to me whose hand was held by one of the Carminas as she sang “Dream a Dream”, looking in her eyes, wept, the nave of the church undulated from emotion. The Ghanaian “Alleluia” was also thrilling, as was the preceding common song “Ikikaiku” by the contemporary Finnish composer Olli Kortekangas. If this is what singing in the global village sounds like, this village must truly be blessed. Just like the Shintoist candle piece on the cathedral’s mosaic, throwing circles all over the holy place, followed by a lady in a macabre skeleton costume. A small boy wearing a little tie squatted motionless in the centre of the mosaic, he was with one of the choirs. The freedom of spirituality in that place was unlimited and relaxed to the point of becoming unrecognizable. Folklore is already obliterating religiosity and vice versa. Once again, San Francisco upheld its reputation as the most tolerant city of all.

A trip to Gualala and our performance there was an authentic connection with the Pacific countryside, as was Monterey, the city of John Steinbeck and *Cannery Row*. If it had not been for the sign, nobody would have even noticed it. It looked nothing like that in real life, apart from the worn-down water tanks and Chang the peddler-like characters by the shore. The gift shops were reminiscent of his junk. I looked in vain for the road, which is “song and smelliness, squeak and squeal, glitter and clatter, habit, home-sickness and dreams”. Sea lions and lead grey gulls steer up from the sea. The fishing village on stilts hovering above the ocean looks idyllic, but too ornate in a touristy kind of way. People in Monterey pay adoring attention to some old-timers in the city



square, where old rockers thrash out at some 70s songs. It was artichoke day and everyone was getting ready for Halloween. The road to Monterrey is lined with fields of artichokes, a premonition of the Pacific in the background, and sombreros on the heads of Mexican workers, hovering like seagulls over vast patches of black land.

Los Angeles, but First, Hollywood

Such an ordinary place with the acclaimed stars on the pavement, 2,000 in all on the Walk of Fame, are almost insignificant in size. Exotic theatres – movie theatres, to be exact, the Chinese one, the Egyptian El Captain, the Kodak ..., the sites of all the major movie premieres – are tacky and costumed Batman and Superman are there only for the cameras of the Japanese. Every other tourist contemptuously waves off plastic heroes standing in the street. The Carminas pose for the camera in front of the Chinese theatre, they're in a playful mood. The spirit of the famous hovers over the street after all. A nearby church is sporting the aids awareness ribbon and every single black person is carrying a guitar on their back. There is a wail of a police siren, but the vibe of the place is less than glamorous. We quickly abandon it and head to the farmers' market where American esprit and the knack for business, for the beautiful and rich blossomed to most agreeable proportions. It's all along the lines "how are you guys", everything is cool, all smiles, hustle and bustle. And I can't get Cecil B. DeMill's fateful telegram out of my head: "Flagstaff no good for our purpose.

Have proceeded to California. Want authority to rent barn in place called Hollywood for \$75 a month. Regards to Sam. Cecil."

The girls were vivacious on the coast of Santa Monica, despite the ocean's bad breath and suspiciously brownish hue. The famous pier, the long one where so many Hollywood love stories were filmed through decades, was teeming with tourists. An ageing hippy was singing "The Dark Side of the Moon" in one of the corners, another hosted an amusement park, a fast-food restaurant, a casino and public restrooms with characteristically American slits in the doors. Global consumerism of a fairly low range, yet highly priced.

That day, "David Hasselhof" in his blue cabin on the endless beach looked more like a Texas ranger than a bay-watching hunk with the famed red rescue torpedo. The girls pleaded with him to let them use the lifeguard cabin for a quick picture. They thanked him with a song, a genuine Slovenian, revolutionary one. "*Break into a song of freedom ...*" He was visibly moved, filming them, smiling at them, not unlike so many others in this youthful land, full of smiles and kind greetings. The Getty Museum, offering views of all sides of L.A., is no exception, it's kind, not at all strenuous like its European brothers, free, approachable and providing fun instead of hours of arduous inspection with no break. Undemandingly American, youthful, warm, somewhat shallow and lacking the depressive quality characteristic of Europe at this time.

On our way home at the Munich airport, sun-tanned Slovenians returning from exotic destinations kept stopping us and asking where we had been. Everyone was familiar with the Carmina Slovenica brand. One of them quipped:

“Wait, are these all Styrian girls? I thought they were Slovenian.” America doesn’t see this as an issue. There is so much tolerance and kind affection, whether at the top of a skyscraper in downtown Los Angeles, where couples make out in little red huts while children frolic in the heated pool up on the 20th floor, or in Il Pueblo among the mariachi, where it all began. With the Spanish in America, of course.

Slovenia Is Like Carmina Slovenica

Thomas Brandi, Slovenian honorary consul in San Francisco: “Outstanding combination of singing, dancing, jazz, theatre. It was magical. The amount of work it takes to achieve such perfection, the superb organisation of the girls. They represent true Slovenian hope for the future. I feel truly fortunate to be able to witness their performance. I have just spoken with one of the mothers of the Piedmont choir and she told me how beneficial contact with Slovenian girls has been for her children. My mother was from Lower Carniola, my father was Italian. She came from Rožni Dol, some thirty minutes from Novo mesto, near Semič. I keep noticing the stellar future Slovenia has in Europe. Slovenia is strong in character, integrity and courage, which is all represented by the girls in Carmina Slovenica Choir through their brilliance, their hopes and dreams. All of this is Slovenia today. Just look at these girls, how they sing! Slovenia is on the best of tracks.”

I Am Inspired by

Sue Bohlin, composer, oboist, pianist, co-conductor of the Piedmont Choir and director of the Anchor Bay Choir, USA: “Karmina Šilec’s choir has been my inspiration for over a decade, ever since they won the Golden Gate competition in San Francisco in 1998. I’m inspired by their appearance and their sound. There was no choreography in the choral world before Carmina Slovenica. Most of the time everything was extremely static, while Karmina introduced a number of completely new approaches to the theatrical aspect of the performance. I’ve forever been intrigued by such an inventive style of working with singers.

For the past year, I have been directing a rookie choir in Anchor bay in Mendocino County. When teaching, I keep going back to Carmina Slovenica in my mind. I would like to offer them a similar version of education in singing and other fields. I truly never before saw or heard anything like it, and I’ve been to many different areas around the world renowned for their quality choirs, from Estonia (where I come from), to China and the Philippines. Nowhere have I seen anything so unique and special.”



Angels of Peace in the Land of Smile

Fifteen venues on the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu (Japan) in the almost rainless rainy season of 2008.

We met at the idyllic Matsushima Bay, with a welcome song and broad smiles. The ice had been broken long ago and the tour started on an encouraging note, albeit with a careful step. Sapporo and its unbelievable Kitara concert hall were the last venue at the moment. Thirty-six Carminas and Karmina Šilec were almost predecessors to the G7 plus Russia, just a week before the former Olympic city, or the near-by Toyama, welcomed world-class dignitaries – from Sarkozy and Bush to Medvedev and Brown. It was a magnificent and coincidental sequence of events we were hardly aware of at the time. We were too swept up by the wave of Japanese excitement over our musical phenomenon. It was repeated and increased through fifteen stellar performances. There was no time to think about Bush's birthday, the last one he would celebrate as a president abroad, about our serious Japanese host, Prime Minister Fukuda, about Emperor Akihito, isolated in his castle, let alone about the heir to the throne, who had only been born the year before. The Japanese pay little atten-

tion to politics. Theirs is a completely apolitical world of zen-like calm and we found ourselves in the middle of it. It was bliss.

If politics is the art of the possible, a mega-tour such as ours must be the art of the impossible. Nevertheless, the organisers in Japan took care to make everything possible and stress-free. It all ran smoothly, accurately, as agreed. Everything was concentrated on and subjected to our great artistic mission. The alliance among the conductress and the girls was inspiring, creative and human to the point of conspiracy, with the single goal of executing our expedition as perfectly as possible; and keep the flow going right to the end.

Slovenian girls aged 13 to 18 filled concert halls on every Japanese island through fifteen performances given between June 22 and July 12. They strained their creative bows to the max and joined forces to enthrall over 25,000 guests, which is a rough estimate of every sold-out concert hall on our way from Kyushu, to Honshu and Hokkaido. The tempo would prove too much even for the greatest artistic collectives, yet the girls from Maribor only increased their suggestive and magical powers of the exacting programme thoroughly planned back home a long time ago.

Sendai, July 2 **Miyagi Kenmin Kaikan** **1,590 seats**

A jam-packed concert hall. A quiet, disciplined, respectful, yet passionate and responsive audience followed the almost two-hour-long concert with astonishing concentration. The

only oddity would be tolerance toward latecomers. We witnessed it throughout our tour, with much bewilderment, even at the most renowned venues, such as Yokohama and Tokyo, where the global cream of the crop mesmerises Japanese audiences just as our Maribor choir did. Albeit bent to the floor, the ushers discreetly led latecomers to their seats during the concert. They sit them down with a deep bow. This was the first curiosity we noticed with otherwise flawless Japanese, punctual as clockwork. If you came to the Gallus hall in Cankarjev dom half an hour late, you would never be let in the stalls. But this proved to be just the first of many Japanese incomprehensibilities. We were to encounter many more on the way. The traffic in this densely populated country is just unpredictable.

Sendai was the eighth stop on our 26-day tour, the longest, most ambitious, most extensive in the history of Carmina Slovenica so far. On that humid summer evening, the city of nearly a million people showed no sign of its famous icy winds blowing over the Japanese sea from Siberia. The girls spent the first part of the day in the idyllic Matsushima Bay, where small boats took us on a trip among small islands of many different slate forms, covered in pine trees, and screaming sea-gulls, floating over our heads in a bewitched and Hitchcockian manner for the entire voyage. Then came a walk among the Buddhas, draped with red bibs, past a temple, mysteriously silent despite a throng of tourists. The journey back to the city was quiet, concentrated, the girls were already preparing for their performance.

Half an hour before the concert the visitors waited in an orderly single file in front of the glass entrance door. They were perfectly

calm, relaxed and quiet. They arrived focused to the venue of the eighth concert in Japan. Since the very first concert in Fukuoka, the Japanese opened their hearts and concentrated on the exacting programme which Karmina had put together along the national-global principle, traversing time and space, proceeding from the most challenging modern sounds of Slovenian vocal music to more relaxed folk tunes in a polka potpourri style, and all the way to the global musical treasure trove from every meridian. There were a few Japanese pieces to sway the local audience, prompting applause and almost hymnal bliss at every venue. Being among the visitors and experiencing their energy escalate all the way to euphoria was a special adventure, especially since euphoria Japanese-style is truly something completely different.

There was not one slip, from no one, which is a great achievement in and of itself. To experience something like this night after night, in one mega concert hall after another, from one elated atmosphere to the next, just as elated, with nuances providing truly exciting experiences across the spectrum, without comparison. The series of concerts in similar, yet vastly different circumstances, was a singular adventure.

The 45-member tour arrived to Sendai from Sapporo, which showed no signs, on that Monday on the last day of June, of the upcoming G8 summit in nearby Toyako, where the entire developed world would land just a few days from then, in a small lakeside town, planting

trees of peace and advocating for 50 percent decrease in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, among other things, while the first ladies paraded in their kimonos in through the shadows of cherry trees no longer in bloom. The unfolding of events on the global level was predictable, with the mandatory antiglobalist protesters in Sapporo Park and several cynical comments in pro-Western Japanese media, all expositions of the Times. These were of course the only newspapers available to us as the Japanese writing system is unintelligible to most foreigners. It takes a few days for the viewpoints and code systems to shift and one starts enjoying the light and delightful Japanese food and rituals spanning every life situation, including departing to truly unusual and multifunctional restrooms. But the story on those is much too profane for our superior artistic context.

The Carminas were welcomed to the largest cultural center of Sendai by signs reading "Welcome, Angels of Peace". It was there we became aware of the women crying while listening to the Japanese song *Mother* (母よ/*Haha Yo*). The hit currently playing at that particular theatre was *The Sound of Music*. Judging by the posters, the Japanese von Trapp family is quite loveable. After the Sendai performance, the bravest of the girls visited the onsen spring in Nishikigaoka. They also paid their respects to the 100-meter-tall goddess Mizuko Kannon Bodhisattva, who apparently lent her name to the famed cameras. The Japanese pray to her for domestic bliss, business success, safety in traffic and good health.

It was terrifying to watch Sendai on television years later, flooded and desolate after a horrific tsunami.

Akita, July 3 **Kenmin Kaikan** **1.500 seats**

Kenmin Kaikan seemed like a small provincial town. We arrived there by the speedy Shinkansen. It was our first. The Carminas set a record boarding, which takes a few minutes. They were at their seats in a flash and once again demonstrated their discipline. The train was not as super-fast as we were led to believe. We felt no lifting effect advertised in the funny commercial for its French competitor - TVG. The stewardesses on the train could easily be mistaken for cleaning ladies, they bowed from one compartment to the next, while tree plantations glistened from every patch of passing land among boring prefabricated earthquake resistant houses of the Japanese countryside. The girls travelled in complete silence, waiting for their evening performance. Another brilliant reception, the conductor receiving gifts backstage: votive objects, origamis containing good wishes. Naoko, the lucid translator who looked like Yoko Ono, is translating simultaneously. We are standing in front of the empty concert hall, observing the truck and the careful loading of set and equipment. Ant-like technicians put everything away in record time. Japanese precision is fascinating. When all is done, a slender young man sweeps the stage with a brush. The same movement, again and again. In Japanese society, everyone's role is highly defined and perfected. There is no idle running, though they could do with some intuitiveness and quick reflexes. Everything runs accord-

ing to a hierarchical and pyramidal order, every unanticipated step is double-checked. After a few days, one gets used to the tidiness, order and discipline.

Yokohama, July 4 **Mirato Minai** **2.020 seats**

A concert hall in a multi-mega-bay-side-complex, built in 1998, on the shore of the world's fourth largest harbour. It leans against an amusement park with a dominant Ferris wheel. The Japanese seem to love them; they are found in every major city. They are like European music to them, like Riesenrad in the centre of Vienna Prater, jam-packed with Japanese every summer. The sun sets behind the artificial island in the middle of the bay and the girls are celebrating a jubilee: it's the pianist Franja's birthday. We are all dizzy with the prestige of the concert hall. Everything worth anything in modern classical music took this stage. The performance is truly inspired. From Lebič's spellbinding "From the Stone in the Water", to the wild "Dubula", the atmosphere is electrified and jacked up with the suggestiveness of Boccelli's "Con Te Partirò" or "Time to Say Goodbye", when the girls venture among the audience and bid a symbolic farewell, with a kiss. They must have caught the spirit of greatness permeating the hall. The audience seems to be used to great performers and standing ovations. They are thrilled. The hit tune "In the Mood" is an appropriate farewell to the passionate Yokohama, Japan's most multicultural city and one of Asia's most



influential cultural metropolises. Everyone, from Milan's Scala to Royal Albert Hall and the great conductors like Abbado, Mehta, or Masur, have performed in this "shoe box", as the acoustic shell of the main concert hall is wittingly called. While boarding our bus after the concert, a mother and her daughter seem to not be able to part from our conductor and singers. They keep waving long after we are gone. We are headed to the newly built hotel with a view of the magnificent harbour, and the next morning back on the speed train to Nagoya. "Benedicamus". We celebrate. Just like in the *Codex of Las Huelgas*. For a moment, reminiscences depart for the cold monastery in the Spanish countryside on a recent pre-Christmas journey with Carmina Slovenica, but with a different group of girls, one generation before "the Japanese" one.

Nagoya, July 6
Aichi concert hall
2,500 seats

A difficult performance due to early afternoon timing. It is harder to achieve the right motivation and the back-stage atmosphere is more mundane, more humdrum. The concert hall is huge, once again packed, and the air outside is tropically humid. The fact that Maribor's opera house appeared on this very giant operatic revolving stage just a year before, with their performance of *Lakmé*, makes us feel almost at home. The performance was followed by a reception in the lobby. The reception was moving, there were two choirs from Nagoya, a women's choir and a girls' one, and they

both paid their respect to the Carminas. The exchange of gifts was followed by a song sung by dozens of noble female Japanese voices. They chose the mother song, the one composed by the founder of the Min-On Agency, Dr. Daisaku Ikeda. We never got to meet the influential octogenarian from Japan in person, but he was constantly mentioned by every representative of the Min-On Agency, which organized our choir's tour. The gentleman who is one of Japan's living legends also founded Soka University, numerous kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools, the Tokyo Fuji Art Museum, the Institute of Oriental Philosophy, and the Toda Peace Institute, among other things. He received the United Nations' peace award and holds honorary doctorates from many universities around the globe. We left the Nagoya concert hall to deep bows and the humorous goodbye waves our singers were slowly starting to adopt on stage. In the end, they started smiling and waving back to the audience. So very Japanese.

Fukushima, July 8
Prefectural Culture Centre
1,752 seats

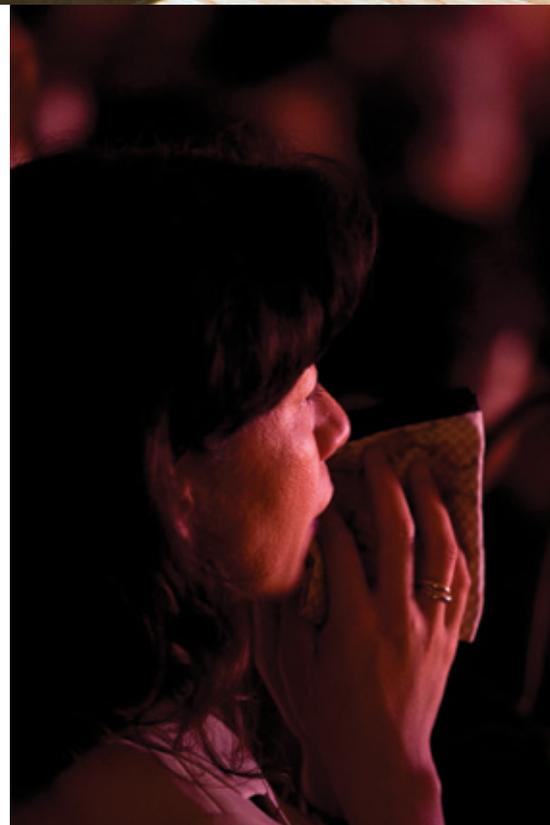
We remembered Fukushima for its Buddhist holiday. When two stars meet, people hang their wishes from a bamboo tree. We followed suit, hanging those for the past and the ones for the future. Karmina found two bamboo branches somewhere and brought them to our hotel, complete with colourful pieces of paper to write wishes on. I wonder what ended up on them. Giggling, we tied the pieces of paper



onto the branches. When I think about how happily and successfully our tour turned out, the meeting of stars and good wishes must have been a fruitful one.

Tokyo, July 9
Metropolitan Art Space
1,999 seats

The day started off ceremoniously with an official reception at the Min-On Agency headquarters, where we were greeted by the association's president, Hiroyasu Kobayashi, in the presence of the Slovenian ambassador to Japan, Mr. Miran Skender. After the reception,



we viewed the precious collection of Min-On Music Museum. There was more restlessness before the evening concert this time. I attended the rehearsal. I get a unique insight into the viscera of the choir and the empty mega-hall. It's a rare privilege. Karmina observes the concentration of movement. "Not good walking, pick it up!" she speaks into a microphone from the auditorium. "Don't walk idly! Keep your back straight!" She wants the singers to pinpoint mistakes in particular parts of a song. The answers are analytical, comprehensive. There is ample self-criticism and focused determination. Every moment, each singer knows what is right and what is wrong. Fireflies get a bit tangled up in front of the stage and the performers correct themselves immediately. The conductor finds the percussionists not loud enough and they indeed step it up during the concert. Everything they agreed on was realized. Perfectly. The men in black from the Min-On Concert Association sit in the V.I.P. Box. I observe their happy faces. The conductor receives a bouquet of flowers, so lavish the usher staggered bringing them on stage. There's frenzied applause and something feverish in the air. There is a reception back-stage, the ambassador's wife is giving out red carnations. The next morning the Carminas grace newspapers' front pages once more. Karmina is giving interviews. "The journalists were thoroughly prepared, knowledgeable, they posed

unconventional questions", she tells me and my colleague with a smile. We grow serious as the thought of unkind media and election campaign incidents back home remind us of a completely different reality.

The next day, the girls were rewarded with lunch at the Hard Rock Cafe. Tokyo burger and fries really do taste completely different, and better. A King Kong observes us through a window. Not far away, at the market, the Japanese are celebrating en masse. We are not sure what the occasion is. Probably marking the change of seasons. Their pantheistic openness of belief is very relaxed and attractive. We curiously join them in breathing in the warmth of healing fires outside the temple.

Hiroshima, July 11 **Alsok Hall** **1,730 seats**

We had a gloomy morning walk through the memorial museum. The date of August 6, 1945, and the hands of the clocks stopped at 8:15, when the first atomic bomb was used as a weapon, cuts deep into everyone. The museum presentation is thought provoking. The story of a girl called Sasaki Sadako, who died from radiation, of leukaemia, is heart-breaking. Boy and girl scouts from around the world march all over the memorial complex in great numbers. Once again, everyone is taking pictures of our girls. Even off stage, they catch everyone's eye. And once again, there is a huge crowd at the concert. The disciplined audience again waits in a straight line in front of the entrance, half an hour before the start.

Kurume, July 12
Ishibashi Cultural Centre
1,300 seats

A playful end to the tour. What at first appears like a sleepy little town, turns out to have a vivacious night life. We had ourselves some karaoke and tried to fit into the Japanese way of life. We even went to the pachinko parlour the day before. But the karaoke was much more fun. The last concert was a playful one. Karmina unexpectedly brought a suitcase on stage, for the Lebič part. The girls reacted inventively. They react to any playfulness with confidence and humour. It is as if they have practiced these qualities for ages. For the polka potpourri, Karmina unexpectedly appears wearing the national costume. She dances onto the stage to “Kresnice” (Fireflies). Laughter in her eyes. The conductor becomes one with her girls. By the end the audience dances to the wild rhythms of “Dubula”. The final notes of the tour resound. The final trickles of sweat on stage. As crew members among the audience, we get pats on the shoulder and respectful waves from people in the auditorium. It feels awkward getting credit for doing nothing. We retreat backstage and observe the girls. They’re crying. They’re sorry it’s all over. They sing the beautiful “Where the Boys Are” by Connie Francis to the dozen boys from the technical crew on the stage. They are moved. Just as are their parents the next evening, when the girls

sing “Zdaj zaorji pesem o svobodi” (Plough Now the Song of Freedom) upon their return at the train station. And putting on face masks in order to look more Japanese.

The most famous Slovenian in Japan, the Jesuit, poet and Maribor born Vladimir Kos, was sadly away in the mountains of the Yamaguchi prefecture during our Japanese marathon. The missionary sent us a letter several weeks before the tour, wishing us “bounteous blessings”. His wish must have come true; our Japanese rainy season passed almost without rain.

I wonder what the Japanese would end this with. Probably: Osewa ni narimashita (Thank you for having us).

Better Than Opera!

Hiroyasu Kobayashi, the president of the Tokyo based Min-On Concert Association, at the closing reception in Tokyo: "I am captivated with the way such young girls, ambassadors of music, have brought Japan and Slovenia closer together. The point of all the performances is to allow people attending a Carmina Slovenica concert to feel the unconventional approach and give a warm response in every place. At the start of the concert tour, when they heard the Japanese songs, they were truly thankful. There is no difference between large cities and rural environments. We felt immense gratitude and understanding on the part of the audience, as well as great effort to understand what goes beyond normal cognitive comprehension of choir music, across language barriers. The first, the second, and the third concert already managed to establish a firm bond between Carmina Slovenica and the audience. Right from the start, the opening Slovenian part of the programme, featuring sounds in mystical harmony, completely overwhelmed the audiences everywhere. Even rural audiences proved to be well informed, knowledgeable, open and very interested in choral singing.

In the last 45 years we have brought thirty choirs from around the globe to Japan. All the best choirs from Russia, Israel, Bulgaria. But Carmina Slovenica is a different case, as it is such an unusual, unconventional girls' choir, breaking new ground in the global choral movement. We have never heard anything as unusual and exciting. Many said that they found their performance better than opera, which, as you know, is very popular in Japan. Some of the reactions we gathered from audiences at the concerts were downright euphoric. Filling out our questionnaires, many admitted they had never heard anything like this before and were deeply moved, deeply felt the music despite not understanding the language."

You Bewitched the Japanese Audience!

After the concerts, the organizers kept bringing coverage by the Japanese media, and it really was intense. The cover of the Seyko national newspaper stated that Carmina Slovenica "bewitched the Japanese audience" with its concerts. After the thirteenth concert of one of the largest tours in the history of a Slovenian artistic ensemble, it was time for an immediate taking stock.

The invitation from the Min-On Concert Association came two years prior, in the middle of the 2006 tour. Their approach to hosting projects by the world's biggest orchestras is intensive and thorough. Arrangements, planning – from repertoire to every last technical detail – took quite some time. We planned to perform in Japan years ago, at the World Symposium on Choral Music in Kyoto, but our visit proved too difficult due to the demands of our musical theatre projects and the hall the symposium had available. This tour shows how much technical support is really needed to carry out our projects. We travel with two truckloads of equipment at all times: a broad set of instruments, lighting, sound equipment and anything else we need to put on our show.

The Min-On agency followed our choir for several years before they decided on an invitation, as they were trying to decide whom to bring to Japan for their 45th season. They were familiar with all our DVDs, they saw our taped shows and had detailed knowledge of our repertoire. It was interesting to witness the very first joint technical meeting right upon our arrival. They even knew some of the tunes from Adiemus and several other projects which were not in the programme of the Japanese tour. They really did a thorough job researching us. The openness and broad view adopted by the association showed in its support for Slovenian literature, which is not a common quality of agencies organising performances by foreign groups, not least in Asia, where the preference tilts more towards a classical repertoire. Half of our concerts, on the other hand, feature national music, from contemporary to folk tunes, which is a big privilege and of great importance to Slovenian composers. Most orchestras and groups touring Asia face difficulties when it comes to their repertoires, as the organisers usually expect them to include Brahms, Mozart and other historical highlights, while our repertoire was left entirely to us. The organisers only gently expressed their desire and suggestion to include a Japanese song or two, which took not even ten minutes out of the entire programme. The experience is definitely different, and I am thankful for the encouragement. Japanese songs provide a different contact

with the audience. They represent a different dimension of following a concert, much more emotional than one would ascribe to the Japanese. I could literally feel completely different emotions behind me, expressed in a different way than in Europe or South America. The tears shed by women, men, older and younger concert goers were a new, different experience for all of us up on the stage, too.

As we were preparing to start the tour I felt the exacting and responsible nature of the chosen repertoire, as every concert hall we were to perform in was huge. Establishing contact with an audience of 2,500 people is something completely different. We had to adapt our musical theatre projects for performance in classical concert halls. To make a long story short, there are numerous additional factors to consider when it came to the audience's perception. I wasn't forced to compromise, everything went down well, despite our refusal to steer towards the popular and buy the audience's favour with tunes people whistle to themselves in lobbies of hotels over here.

On the Japanese tour, the Carminas surpassed everything, they tested the limits of impossible. There are not many groups which move fifteen times in a month, giving just as many performances on just as many stages. On top of it all, the girls were constantly switching between free time and working hours. Maintaining constant singing, acting, performing condition was a real feat. The logistical side of the tour was tremendously exacting. It took us a whole season to prepare for Japan. There was more work involved in psychological than musical preparation, to make sure we could manage fifteen concerts with all the changes of place, worlds, planes, trains, with the pressures of timing, responsibility, having everything packed at all times, and shifting into performance mode besides. When compared with other groups, one could say such a tour would be easier for a soloist or a classical musician. But our choir was psychologically thoroughly prepared, we might have found it easier than even a group of professionals would, as they lack the advantage of psychological preparation, which is not as easy to enforce in professional musical organisations. It takes great discipline on a voluntary basis, as discipline built on repressive measures would not allow for a spontaneous shifting into performance mode. This shift on tour needs to be both mild and sharp at once.

After our Chinese experience it was hard to predict what would happen with the Japanese. I must admit they surprised me quite a lot. I knew of their affinity for classical music, Romanticism, jazz, I was aware that they followed contemporary trends in popular music. But I was surprised by their willingness to open to ethnic and early music. They never lost their concentration. When you are onstage, you can hear lack of concentration behind your back, you can feel restlessness and the boredom in the audience. But here, there was great concentration even during parts of the programme which were a completely novel experience for them. There was also feedback gathered by the organisers from professionals attending the concerts, as well as from questionnaires filled out by the audience after a concert. This is something organisers do



regularly and the response was excellent, as we were told by Hiroyasu Kobayashi, director of the Min-On Concert Association and a man with 45 years of experience in this field. The organisers were very pleased, he was, in his own words, enthralled with our tour, which quite possibly even exceeded their expectations.

Having the most prestigious concert halls await us in all those renowned cities (Osaka, Kobe, Tokyo, Yokohama), and having them all sold out, with up to 600 people left outside the door, was a great compliment for us. It was truly a great achievement; such an invitation is a compliment, not having to put yourself out there. The leaps in quality started with the Easter Festival in Moscow, with Valery Gergiev, and with Dresedenmusikfestspiele, where we performed by the invitation of Hartmut Haenchen. We had invitations from some of the strongest European players under our belt, yet Japan is a cultural superpower, the Japanese can buy any good thing in the world. There is not much left for me to desire, now that I experienced a tour through these super concert halls, with posters of Yehudi Menuhim and other greats next to ours in the hallways, jam packed auditoriums and screaming audiences. What else could we wish for? This feat was greater than any of us imagined, even I couldn't have predicted it.



Placebo or Is There One Who Would Not Weep

European Capital of Culture,
Maribor (Slovenia), 2012.

The European Capital of Culture 2012 (ECoC) in Maribor was preceded by a special festival edition of the new music theatre Choregie aka choregie. The event took place before the official opening spectacle on the new Leon Štukelj city square. The event would have been truly spectacular had Maribor presented the best it had to offer. But those lost opportunities are long forgotten now.

Choregie aka choregie was introduced with Placebo, a true subversion on stage. Karmina deconstructed her home Union Building hall for the occasion of the performance and the festival. The stage doubled as auditorium, the performance took place where one would usually find the audience. The central city hall was given a completely new image and content.

Karmina was involved with the ECoC project from the very beginning, from the first drafts and composing of programme proposals designed to win over people in Brussels. She deflowered ECoC with Like a Virgin, a themed Choregie festival, the birth of which she accompanied with Placebo or Is There One Who Would Not Weep, and ended it with the Slovenian premiere of John Cage's famous "4.33". The central theme of virginity is subject to very random artistic and other interpretations and is at least ostensibly set in opposition to transparently commercial (yet successful) pop culture advertising tricks. The author stands by her principle of presenting high quality creativity in music, which alas fails to find its place in the treasure trove of generally accepted mainstream repertoires, resulting in her

logical choice of new-age experiment and radical derivations stemming from classical music traditions, as well as her preclassi(cisti)cal (pre-baroque, “pre-secular”, ...) sources. And of course in a free, contemporary, strictly musically transcendent (re)interpretation, adding new connotations to the musical experience. (New) music theatre is an innovative step away from both musical and theatrical conventions. In wintertime, at the beginning of the year, when nothing much is going on in Maribor (yet), Carmina Slovenica performed Placebo. As in many other projects, here, too, Karmina exposed and questioned the female principle in art.

A human being can conquer the inevitability of death with motherly love. The love which makes even God's love little more than a barely convincing derivative; motherly love as primary sanctuary, promising survival. In place of anxiety we call love, a representation of the motherly is established. Meditation, inspired by the subject matter of the suffering of Mary, Mother of Jesus, during his crucifixion, and by the medieval hymn for “Stabat Mater” (So Stood the Mournful Mother).

There is nothing more mysterious than pain, which invokes awe and attracts us at the same time. We only become what we should have always been in suffering, robbed of all sensory pleasures, freed from passion and narcissism, and in constant anticipation of death. Overcoming pain and fear ensures a full, emotionally charged life. Christianity has put suffering and death at the heart of its ritual, which announces the joyous revelation through the cross, through suffering. Jesus on the cross validates the imperfection and vanity of human existence, and surpasses them with superhuman love and hope. It is motherly love that embodies these in their purest form.

The menu included Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, Jacob Cooper, Johann Sebastian Bach, Antonio Vivaldi, Pēteris Vasks, Gavin Bryars, Karmina Šilec and Tom Waits, and texts by Julia Kristeva, Jacopone da Todi, Paul Valéry, Jean-Pierr Siméon, Jean-Luc Nancy, Joy Harjo, Walt Whitman, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt and Hafis.

Karmina entrusted the implementation of the project to a large group of over a hundred performers on stage. Carmina Slovenica and the Slovenian Philharmonic Choir were joined by soprano Sabina Cvilak, countertenor Bernhard Landauer, and actresses Jožica Avbelj and Olga Kacjan. The instrumental part fell on shoulders of cellist Karmen Pečar and accordionist Marko Hatlak.

The introduction was not a concert, but rather a “costumed landscape”, Joys of Women, a spatial installation of women’s costumes by Belinda Radulović, a frequent collaborator in Carmina’s costume design. Oriana was a concert of the international vocal-instrumental quartet Musica Cubicularis, which performed a varied selection of English Renaissance music from the time of the “Virgin” Queen Elizabeth I on antique instruments – lute, viola da gamba, and virginals. Who’d Have Thought That Snow Falls was a distinctive multimedia performance. The extremely exacting vocal composition attempted to suggestively express foremost the distinction between real art, which lives and is embodied by the American composer Morton Feldman, and “so-called” art represented by the pop-icon Madonna with her song “Like a Virgin”.

The music-dance project La licorne de la



vierge (The Virgin's Unicorn) was devised by the Paris-based Slovenian jazz composer, conductor and trumpet player Izidor Leitinger, and French dancer and choreographer Nathalie Pubellier. The programme reveals that they found their inspiration in a collection of Flemish tapestries from the Middle Ages, celebrating the five human senses and the "one desire". The latter is symbolised by a mythological unicorn, which can only be tamed by a pure virgin - despite his overtly phallic manifestation or, indeed, because of it. The performance is a dynamic interaction of physically and expressively intense duets by female dancers to contemporary music which builds on the minimalistic repetitiveness of an electric base with vocal and instrumental (trumpet or flugelhorn, piano or electronic keyboard) improvisation.

Culture in Times of Hunger

Adopting the attitude of distanced, even cynical observers is the safest and consequently the most popular option. Giving praise or – God forbid – even enraptured recognition to anything or anyone is instantly recognised as a kind of PR, narrow-mindedness or calculating sucking up. Instead of unambiguous expression of joy over the year's bounty of art, culture, humanism we thus – in the absence of data on income financial facts – wade into the swamps of general condemnation. This kind of approach to ECoC prevailed at its very early stages, as we watched the soap opera of establishing the ECoC Institute, its birth, first steps and poops. We have all continued to dance to the same tune up to this day, albeit less enthusiastically due to exhaustion. It doesn't stop us from quietly gloating over it, though. ECoC prompted so many deliberations on our past, present and future, on our identity, our self-image, our talents and potentials, our downsides and weaknesses, our wants and expectations ... This alone makes ECoC's effect on our community immeasurable. We reappraised many things and many people. ECoC served as an extraordinary mirror. And it brought so many outstanding exhibitions, performances, concerts, lectures and other events! The harvest was so bountiful I doubt Maribor could even process it all. I believe many are not even faintly aware what was on the menu that year. They also don't realise that this is not something to be taken for granted. That it is unique and unrepeatable. The credit for this goes to everyone: from originators of the initial concepts to intermediate staff and those finishing the race. I don't remember ever having so many issues of culture and its effects on the table. Effects continuously measured through ECoC. All this time, there has also been a lot of talk about hunger and culture, about culture in times of hunger. It's true: culture cannot fill an empty stomach. But hunger and culture do have something in common: a very convincing lust. Appeasing hunger naturally comes first, but once the hunger is satisfied, lust can't remain the only thing we strive to quench. I fear our time and place leans toward remaining in the philosophical circle of searching to quench hunger alone. This is the spiritual grounds ECoC was supposed to be built on, and that is not an easy task. It is a horrendously difficult one. There was another idea of hunger, which began manifesting itself in connection to ECoC from the very beginning. The hunger for money. Culture is an independent connective force in society, it's creative and dynamic, diverse, challenging and critical. But my fear is that this time around, culture (i.e., ECoC) divided people, even making enemies all around, courtesy of the "gold rush". The level of culture of a given environment can't be measured by a few prestigious events alone, nor by some formal aesthetic

scale or the quantity of culture on offer (several thousand events per year mean nothing at all). It can't even be measured based on economic, practical or social benefit, or the number of tourist buses or the hundreds of thousands of visitors. The level of a city's culture can only be measured by its ability to raise its spirit toward grandeur. This made me hope that the ECoC vision would lean toward finding artists who would be capable to create this. And when (if) they were found, to win them over and convince them to stay with the project. It is still unclear whether it was successful in this regard. It is difficult to understand ECoC as an astronomical step or even leap forward. It takes some time before one can look back and see or recognize this. This time has yet to come. At the same time, we still hold on to frustrations, stemming from unfulfilled expectations, which we naively and unrealistically married to ECoC. Our vision is blurred by these expectations. It seemed we were so close to nearly acceptable conditions for creative work, it seemed we would almost be able to realize them. Studies for new permanent venues were carefully prepared, institutes and associations were being founded. We were driven by a naïve impetus. But it only took a few months of a seemingly fruitful period of culture in Maribor for all those plans to implode. And the impetus came to a crash landing. A conflict arose: in the face of the greatest cultural achievements many were forced back to stages of infancy, to standards characteristic of the previous century. We grew up in a culture proud to stay in step with the Western world, despite the fact that at home there were (or could have been) many culturally more interesting developments than abroad. This was one of my greatest fears for ECoC. Would it be able to hold on to the road and what kind of attitude would it develop toward our cultural identity, how would it cope with the fact that we were always used to being side-lined by great cultural achievements? Was it going to only import or eventually also export? For some, ECoC could serve as a springboard, helping them reach higher and further. It would enable transition into the realm of greatness. Alas, ECoC failed to develop this strategic part to its full potential, it simply ran out of time. It left its soldiers to their own devices. As before, they each remained limited to their local perimeter. What is this environment's range today, a year after ECoC? Is it broader because of ECoC? Or is it in resignation? Will we finally, sometime soon, see a visible result of another kind of maturity? So far, the city has lacked any solid vision in cultural policy. Will new experiences help shape one faster and more firmly? I saw ECoC as a great opportunity to provide different conditions of production for our city and Slovenian artists, starting of course with financial ones, which could extend into the international arena. I envisioned it as a broad festival, introducing an irresistible vibe to the city, one that sucks you in, awakens curiosity and desire to be part of this magnificent action. I expected exciting spatial interventions, aesthetic, well thought through and serving to inspire the city's inhabitants. I expected to gain new infrastructure and at least a few newly founded institutions in cultural fields that were wanting. I expected ECoC to inspire, to make us proud and identify with it. ECoC fulfilled all of this. And, at the same time, it didn't.

— Opinion column in the newspaper *Večer*, December 29, 2013



**ENTREE
ARTISTES**

In the Spirit of Pina Bausch on Sarah Bernhardt's Stage

As I make the hallowed entrance with the Carminas to the first rehearsal with Heiner Goebbels through the employee entrance to the backstage of the Théâtre de la Ville (TDLV) in Paris, I am engulfed by a strange fragrance. A mix of urine and decomposing wood. In a terribly subjective moment, I think of Zola's "The Belly of Paris". We are close to Les Halles, the former marketplace, idealised by Hemingway in 1921. It was then he announced that "this is the best place to eat, drink, write and love".

Nowadays, hedonist practices have globally faded to banality, but old and new pillars of art are ultimately still present, fit as ever and hosting every worthy and exciting current development. This also holds true for the 41st Autumn in Paris Festival, Festival d'Automne à Paris, where Carmina Slovenica performed not once, but three nights in a row – the festival is still considered one of the livelier intersections

Paris (France), 2012.

of contemporary art and the most provocative poetics from both hemispheres. The festival's and theatre's young director (since 2008), Emmanuel Demarcy-Mota, claims Autumn in Paris is an "elite, but not elitist" festival, "open to the world, quality audiences of all kinds, but above all exclusive in its long-lived and active role of producer and scout in the world of art". This includes the butoh performance, which we admired on the *Stage Between Heaven and Earth* in September 2012 in Maribor, with star performers Sankai Juku and Ushio Amagatsu, and whose creations have been produced by the Théâtre de la Ville for the last three decades. Producer Pierre Barnier explained the workings of French public funds invested in quality foreign productions, but once back home, his explanations sounded less plausible; an interesting multilateralism for the future, which the French have been practising for decades. This was the second Slovenian, Maribor connection with the renowned institution in just a year. And there were more, as I soon uncovered. *Are they learning?*

The theatrical scenery is old, even wires and electrical sockets seem to be from the era of Sarah Bernhardt, the first leaseholder of the theatre on Châtelet square at the end of the 19th century. The main, modern hall with steeply pitched auditorium of one thousand seats is now named for her. Even the over-the-top sign above the theatre bistro is reminiscent of her. There is nothing else, really. Exiting the metro, an older lady addressed me, asking: "Where in God's name is this Théâtre de la Ville, there is no sign anywhere!" I doubted she was a local. Or was she? None of the numerous guests at our "Slovenian" performance *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing* at the renowned

Paris theatre looked like the usual audience at our premieres. There were no evening gowns, no petit bourgeois glamour, just an intent, knowledgeable audience, spending their time before the performance reading at the theatre bookstore, or smoking in front of the entrance while leafing through the culture newspaper *La Terrasse*; you get one as soon as you approach the Théâtre de la Ville's front entrance.

"It has a Pina Bausch feeling about it", a young Parisian woman, a painter by the name of Marie explained to me at the reception after our Paris premiere, where everyone patted Goebbels and Karmina on their backs while the Carminas were changing backstage - into the evening wear of their choice. Once I told the French woman where I was from, she wanted to know whether the Carminas attended regular or music school. Usually both, I explained, and she found this hard to comprehend. Then she questioned me about Eastern discipline and war trauma. Somewhat annoyed, I cut her off: "Do you know how old Neža is, the girl in the blue overcoat holding a loaf of bread on stage, one of the main protagonists in the show? She was born in 2000." Doesn't this speak volumes on the heritage of war and socialism, so obviously blown out of proportion for Westerners' marketing purposes? She could hardly believe the "mature" professionalism the girls displayed on stage. She had seen every Goebbels work in Théâtre de la Ville. I asked her about the last one. "I believe it was *Le Reprise*", she said. I moved on, instinctively looking for Slovenians at the reception. It was a bizarre patriotic gesture. There were



about five of them. I was introduced to Etcha Dvornik, a performer who had been living in Paris for the last three decades. She invited me to her premiere *Alpe! Alpe! (The Alps! The Alps!)* on November 10 at La Reine Blanche in Paris. She regretted not hearing Slovenian in our performance. “There was some”, I objected. “In Lebič’s composition “Zima” (Winter), and also when the girls were talking amongst themselves.” But this didn’t cut it for the Slovenian from Paris. While taking the girls on a sightseeing tour of Montmartre, Liza Japelj, the lively Slovenian cultural attache in Paris, who had been living there for decades, informed the girls that Parisians never applaud in between scenes. It happened twice in the three nights Slovenians performed there, both times at the same spot: after the traditional In-

dian song *Taka Din*. I met Liza some time later in the Slovenian region of Prekmurje, while on tour with Feri Lainšček’s novel *Namesto koga roža cveti (Instead of Whom Does the Flower Bloom)* or Halgato with a group of French journalists and publishers. She had translated it into French and was helping launch it on the French market.

The ambassador was absent. Too bad, it would have been a great opportunity: this time, it was one of the most famous Germans on the global musical theatre scene who brought Slovenians abroad. It is not often we can witness such export of knowledge and talent. Ms. Japelj mentioned the grape harvest at the wine museum in Paris a week ago. Another parallel between the capitals. All this aside, we keep forgetting what kind of extracurricular learning experi-

ence each of these working trips represents for girls aged eleven to twenty. This time, the journey was brought to a close at a musical fountains show in Versailles.

Pompidou's Child and Our Export Product

Like so many other great Parisian cultural projects and institutions, the Autumn in Paris Festival is also the child of the former French president George Pompidou. In the early 70s he thought it would be a good idea to create a festival which could match the Wiener Festwochen, Venice Biennial, Berlin, and Amsterdam. It was designed four decades ago by Michel Guy, with hefty backing by the government, which has supported the festival to this day. This explains Pierre Barnier French Théâtre de la Ville producer of the Japanese butoh group statement he gave before their Maribor performance, namely that the French cultural ministry has been supporting not only Japanese, but other nationalities in their creative activities for three decades. This includes Slovenians, as Paris was one of the eight producers involved in Goebbels' performance. Who, apart from the then Slovenian cultural minister Žiga Turk, would dare to publicly deny culture's role as an effective vehicle in global economy, a way to profit richly from little investment? When was the last time a Maribor based project, or a Slovenian one for that matter, reached the most prestigious European cultural market and attracted funding and global promotion from large foreign institutions? We have to conclude that what we

have here is an export product par excellence, in times when most of our export consists of scandals and problems.

Heiner Goebbels has been the Autumn in Paris' distinguished guest for twenty years and promoted many of his performances here. He revealed to a French journalist that his and Karmina's working methods differ. "She thinks I'm a hippie - although I'm more of a control-freak hippie." But there is nothing hippie-ish about him. It's true you can hardly sense his presence when he is rehearsing with the Slovenian girls, there is nothing authoritarian about him, if anything, he seems too calm. Nevertheless, he requires them to sing through everything, from the very beginning to the very end. Very un-hippie-like. An unusual method. Karmina keeps saying, "no ritardando, no crescendo ...". She worries about the sound. There are no numbered microphones, just names, to make it more "human", the Germans explained. The problem with this is that there are more than one Ana, Neža, Maja, Anja and Nika. With the Carminas, the level of unpredictability is negligible. They have a solution for everything. "You need to pay attention with Brahms and keep your vocal chords relaxed, it's not like you can sing while changing your cloths, with skirts over your heads", the conductor warns. As always, she detects the stress one of the girls in semi-darkness is experiencing. Indeed, she passes out just moments later. The director is instantly at her side, but the rehearsal continues to the end without stop-

ping. It is followed first by a debate about the famous white Goebbels notebook, and later by an analysis with the conductor. The German is constantly surrounded by three German girls taking notes. I witnessed the same scene in Graz, at the Styrian Autumn festival, where I saw *When the Mountain Changed its Clothing* for the first time. On the evening of the last performance, everything runs smoothly, in text and song, for the third time. The Carminas let themselves go, as does the audience, the hall buzzes with pleasure after the performance. The girls express their desire to sing in the next project. To sing and sing, for two hours straight. As if they miss the singing already ...

Jack Lang

In its first season of 1972, the Paris Autumn Festival attracted giants like Iannis Xenakis, a year later Rolf Lieberman performed the famous *Un Jour ou Deux* with Jasper Johns, John Cage and Merce Cunningham. Strong seasons followed featuring Peter Brook and Giorgio Strehler; they managed to lure the then still unknown Steve Reich and Meredith Monk to France, as well as the religious music of Islam, Lebanon, Syria, Buddhist liturgy, butoh, contemporary Japanese film, traditional Chinese music, African storytellers, architect Arata Isozaki ... Contemporary opera, music theatre, contemporary dance, visual arts, literature and film have all found their place at the Paris Autumn. Once, when the former director of the festival, Guy, was accused of importing elitism, he ventured into the world to discover fresh talents. But he never renounced the greatest

of them all, such as Pierre Boulez, Peter Brook, Bob Wilson, Patrice Chéreau, Maurice Béjart, Tadeusz Kantor, Antoine Vitez ... who became part of the canon of performance arts and music in the decade after the festival opened.

In the eighties, the festival established contact with new contemporary art institutions, including the nearby Centre Georges Pompidou, IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique). Sponsorship was taken over by the Foundation Yves Saint-Laurent. In 1989, the fund raised as much as 5 million francs from private investors. Those were splendid days for French culture under the guidance of the enlightened cultural minister Jack Lang, who is scheduled to come to Maribor once the dates are agreed upon. Jana Pavlič, the performing arts producer at ECoC, gave assurances of this after the premiere of *When the Mountain Changed its Clothing*.

Next to the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels and the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York, Théâtre de la Ville has become the epicentre of contemporary dance: for the last three decades it has hosted up to thirty shows per season, (co)produced by the city of Paris, as well as numerous world premieres of the highest rank. The theatre's name is closely linked to the success of Pina Bausch, who was brought here by Gérard Violette, the Théâtre de la Ville's director from 1985 to 2008. He literally "went to Germany to get her". In the eighties, the Paris festival promoted new French dance, headed by Maguy Marin, honoured this year with six different events. It also brought five incredible Flemish choreographers to the world's attention. They are Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Jan Fabre, Alain Platel, Jan Lauwers and Wim Vandekeybus, joined by

great Americans, such as Merce Cunningham, Carolyn Carlson, Lucinda Childs and the aforementioned Japanese group Sankai Juku. The new generation of choreographers after 2000 started out at the Théâtre de la Ville as well: Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, Akram Khan and Rachid Ouramdane. There is another connection between Slovenia and the Paris theatre, which can be found in *Musics of the world*. Théâtre de la Ville launched the European career of Zakir Hussain, the Indian tabla virtuoso performing at this year's ECoC. The late barefoot singer Cesaria Evora from Cape Verde also started her European journey here. And Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who was completely unknown prior to performing at the Place du Châtelet ... The Théâtre de la Ville's regulars include classical musicians Andreas Staier, Fabio Biondi, Miklós Perényi, and the Kronos Quartet. An interesting fact: there are still signatures of two immortal classics at the Théâtre de la Ville – one by Carl Orff, who presented his *Oedipus der Tyrann* here in 1963, and the poet Jacques Prevert, who joined him in an inseparable artistic duo.

“Croatie, la voici”

That year, the Paris organisers were mostly flaunting Goebbels' *When the Mountain Changed its Clothing* from Slovenia, and an exhibition of wax sculptures by the Swiss eccentric artist Urs Fischer, whose work was already melting on that November 3, at the closing of his exhibition at the École Supérieure de Beaux-Arts. There was of course the renowned British composer Gavin Bryars and his *The*

Sinking of the Titanic, and Jérôme Bel with his *Disabled Theatre*. He also presented his project featuring the handicapped that year at Documenta in Kassel. There was a performance we were familiar with from ECoC, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* by Bertold Brecht, historically directed by Heiner Mueller in 1995, when he was already dying of cancer. The performance was part of the Paris Autumn 2012, starring the famous German actor Martin Wuttke. Apart from the aforementioned artists, that year was culturally dominated by the Croatians. At the Palais de Tokyo, a mecca of contemporary visual arts close to the Alma tunnel where princess Di lost her life, there were exhibitions by video artists, Ivan Meštrović was at the Rodin, the Croatian Apoxyomenos at the Louvre, Croatian literature was presented at the Comédie française, comic artists and caricaturists at La Rotonde. *Croatie, la voici (Here it is, Croatia)* was the fil rouge of Croatia's festival programme in France from September 2012 to January 2013. Our neighbours were diligently preparing cultured Europe for their entry into the European Union. Ambitiously, visionary and with synergy, the way they know how. While on our side ... We are lucky to have some daring individuals among us. Female individuals, to be exact.



Diwali and Oktoberfest by the Pacific

From Melbourne to Port Fairy
along Australian Victoria, 2014.

Terra nullius, Nowhere's Land, as it was named by British colonialists, received us on a crisp morning, after a 14.000-kilometre flight from Vienna, via Dubai, to Melbourne. The start of the most remote, bureaucratically the most complex tour to date, on the only continent not yet conquered by Carmina Slovenica. The forty girls joining the expedition embarked on the exacting journey well prepared, focused and full of expectations. After some difficult performances at various venues, from the most prestigious Arts Centre to churches of Melbourne, they also managed to soak up the secrets of stunning Australian nature – shearing sheep on a real-life farm, thousands of seals below the cliffs at Nobbies, sleepy koalas in the eucalypt woodland on Phillip Island, penguins parading into the sunset, twelve stone apostles by the Great Ocean Road, waiting for a cow whale at Warrnambool, even surfing the



morning waves in Port Fairy moments before our departure. The only thing missing were the kangaroos. In their place we got huge herds of dark cattle, grazing on the shore. The mild Pacific climate brought stunningly green pastures and ocean together. There are no harsh winds, no worn down rocks, only haughty exotic cockatoos joining seagulls in every resort area.

Contact of Two Worlds, Mild and Alluring

A superstar status can't ever be taken for granted, but the "great lady", as charming,

180-year-old Melbourne is also called, surprised the girls with trams clad in Carmina Slovenica, and giant posters all over the place. And after the first performance stellar reviews in the Australian media of *When the Mountain Changed its Clothing* with Heiner Goebbels along the lines of: "I'm not sure how they managed to create the precision of a complex choral project without the guidance of their conductor. They coaxed an exhilaratingly beautiful choreography out of their bodies and objects ... And they sang. How they sang." Or: "These young women, full of life, boast not only magnificent, harmonious vocal quality, but also joyous dedication and vitality, which make their

performances overwhelming.”

Our countryman and late poet Peter Košak described Melbourne decades ago as “a cross-road of winds and climates, a casino of horses, lottery and gastronomy, slowly dying in splendour”. The joyous city greeted us in the throes of Diwali, the Indian festival of lights, and Oktoberfest. Throngs of young men in leather trousers and young women in mini dirndls walked the Federation Square and Yarra riverbank with beer mugs in their hands, mingling with spiritual beauties in saris. The smell of sausages was overwhelmed by masala and curry. It was a typically Australian contact of two worlds, mild and alluring. Unlike the American melting pot, it is a living coexistence and intercultural mix.

Beneath the Australian Eiffel Tower

It started off in a disciplined way, tentatively. We were surprised by the incredible kindness and light-heartedness exhibited by everyone who received or accompanied us on our journey. Once I asked Stephanie, the slightly awkward French girl who kept pace with the Carminas throughout the tour, what was the secret and story behind those wide smiles we saw everywhere. She explained that this was just how Australians were. She did take a step back on the closing night though, claiming that this was just skin-deep, that things didn't run as smoothly if you found yourself in actual need of help. Nevertheless, Australian light-heartedness was contagiously calming and far from what we were used to back home. The Arts Centre Melbourne, where the Carminas performed *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing* four nights in a row, and with great success, has its own Eiffel tower on its roof, a 162-metre tall iron construction, the trademark of Melbourne and its mighty, limitless artistic potential. Few cities below the Southern Cross have such abundant cultural infrastructure. It could even match London and Paris in this respect. The Arts Centre, in close proximity to the National Gallery of Victoria, at that time offering an exclusive exhibition of the French fashion musketeer, Jean-Paul Gaultier, and the Hammer Hall, a classical concert hall, home to numerous institutions: the Opera Australia, the Australian Ballet, the Melbourne Theatre Company, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, Musica Viva, the Bell Shakespeare Company and the Australian Chamber Orchestra, led by Richard Tognetti, with which people of Maribor

are already familiar. In the 2008-2009 season, Maribor's own Marko Letonja was appointed the first principal guest conductor of the Orchestra Victoria, leaving Slovenian footprints among all the famous ones in the pavement leading up to the hall. This "walk of fame" includes Australian pop icons such as Olivia Newton John, Kylie Minogue and Nick Cave, among others.

Our Apologies to the Aboriginal People

Much has changed in the attitude toward the indigenous people in the last few years. On fences around houses, I kept seeing signs "Our apologies to Australia's Indigenous peoples, because the land our house is built on was taken from them". There was one of those by the entrance to our hostel in Port Fairy, too. Before the show started in the central theatre of the Arts Centre, the announcer asked everyone over the loudspeakers to turn off their cell phones, and proceeded with an apology to the Aboriginal people for all the wrongs they had endured. Their presence was everywhere, yet they were nowhere. I could only discern a dark ancestor's facial features in an occasional passer-by. On February 12, 2008, the parliament of Australia finally and unanimously apologized to its indigenous people for 200 years of injustice, plundering, killing, stealing and taking of their children. In the words of Bert Pribac, an Australian Slovenian: "It took a long time, a really long time for the apology to

come. But it did come and it was sincere."

Josephine Ridge, director of the Melbourne International Arts Festival, one of the largest and most prestigious in the Southern hemisphere, feels that Australia constantly questions its identity, more than any other country in the world: "We are a strong combination of all sorts of influences - Western civilization, British, the colonial, there was a mass influx of Chinese in the middle of the 19th century, at the time of the gold rush, and they are still coming. In the beginning of the 20th century, there were strong migratory waves from Germany, Greece, and Italy. From the end of the Second World War, citizens from other European countries have been coming here, too, along with people from Asia - mostly China and Vietnam. The land is therefore no longer shaped by this colonialist idea, as it doesn't reflect who we are. During the last decade there has been considerable attention paid to Australia's indigenous inhabitants. We have finally matured enough to realise the precious existence of original peoples living in these parts, and acknowledged their truly rich culture. So what is our identity? It's a combination of everything, and you will see it in our art, in our food, our architecture. Compared to American identity, which was dominated by the 'melting pot' principle, Australia is a very harmonious society, with some exceptions, of course. Somehow, we have made it. Of course, we are no strangers to racism and intolerance, but Australia is unique in its lack of wider international, intercultural, or interracial conflicts. For the last decade, there has been great awareness of the stolen generation's tragedy. Many measures have been taken, we have not only realised our delusion and the terrible in-



justices that were perpetrated, but also found a way out of this in order to create a more harmonious future for all of us. Aboriginal art has been represented at the Melbourne International Arts Festival for years now, and for the last two, the festival opens with *Tanderrum*, a ceremony bringing together five Aboriginal language groups. I find this festival's initiative especially dear."

Are Aboriginal events included out of reverence or do they comply with the festival's artistic standards? "They absolutely meet every standard. Also, *Tanderrum* is not a show, it's a real ceremony, and it has become one of the most popular events in the festival. I shouldn't single anyone out, but these are really exceptional artists", the director assured us.

Anthony Tomsic on St. Kilda

We get our first respite between concerts on St. Kilda's Beach, a resort with a long sandy shore, a marina and a chain of street stands, as well as wacky sweet shops filled with books. The girls instantly disperse along the vast beach. Making my way through the tourist bustle I come upon a Slovenian selling his novel to passers-by for 20 dollars. As I read the name Anthony Tomsic, it is impossible for me not to stop. He is a nice, attractive young man, who has been to Slovenia on several occasions, so he says. He stands behind an old typewriter with an inserted sheet of paper and observes inquisitive visitors with indifference. He doesn't seem too eager to sell anything.

Once he realises where I'm from, he presents me with a new-age looking and sounding book *Welcome Circle, Eruptions of an Imagination*, and starts talking. He used to work for an esteemed investment bank in London, but every once in a while he takes some time off to write a book. As to why he is selling from a stand under the open sky, he doesn't say.

The Penguin Parade

There are but a few places in the world where tourists can flock to nature's own amphitheatres and observe in total silence and semi-darkness at sunrise or sunset the march of the world's smallest penguin species on their way from the sea to their sleeping quarters or the other way around. We joined an international throng of tourists, most of them insufficiently clad, and tattooed Japanese, on Phillip Island, to witness this world class miracle. Every evening, despite the obtrusive gazes of the masses, the tiny creatures toddle to their night dwellings, giving no heed to the noise or cameras occasionally flashing despite warnings against it. The parade is one of the few globally trivialized Australian tourist rituals, apart from this, Victoria's western coast is intact, free of gaudy stands and incredibly idyllic. A town like Port Fairy would be ideal to spend one's peaceful retirement in, for instance.

Devilish Slovenian Language

28 October is a day reserved for Australian Slovenians, and on that day we paid a visit to the Slovenian Catholic Mission, St. Cyril and Methodius in Kew, in the suburbs of Melbourne, although our first meeting came before, at the Arts Centre, on the night of the Carminas' first performance in Australia. We had already hung out before the concert and the ten women were in a gay mood, some of them visited the prestigious cultural institution for the first time. They were proud of the young singers from Maribor. The most zealous of all Slovenian women from "down under" is surely Draga Gelt, a teacher, founder and director of a theatre group active since 1997 at the mission of St. Cyril and Methodius. These days, the group is performing their full-length theatre play, *Devilish Slovenian Language*, in various Australian towns and cities, from Sydney to Geelong. "People are only interested in comedies nowadays. Most of our actors are second or third generation Slovenians in Australia. They struggle with the language, but they put in a good effort. Sometimes a word sounds different, but we understand each other", says Draga, originally from Dobrova near Ljubljana and living in Melbourne since 1968. She spent many years teaching at the Slovenian Catholic School in Melbourne. She also founded a school at the Slovenian Association Melbourne, but they ran out of children. She has been teaching adults for fourteen years now. She has also written manuals for both adults and children. "We received books from Slovenia, Italy, and the United States, but they proved too difficult for Australian Slovenians. Realising this, we have tackled the manuals

ourselves. We have also written the comedy we are performing at the moment, based on the difficulties we have been facing in Slovenian class. We have included things our people experienced when visiting Slovenia. There is a scene where a professor of Slovenian language comes to inspect our class and gets himself into some comical linguistic situations.” Is there such a thing as a renewed interest for Slovenian language? “Third generation young people, between twenty and thirty, are very interested in Slovenia, they would like to visit, so they are learning the language.” Draga stresses the fact that this is the first time a Slovenian art collective is performing at the Melbourne festival. “Slovenian women in Melbourne’s biggest hall, this is an amazing achievement.”

If Songs Die, the Land Dies, Too

After a “long day’s voyage into the night” we passed the former border crossing of Šentilj, and hours of silence ended in a resounding “Song of Freedom”. And the local football club anthem, of course. We soaked up so much freedom and different horizons under the Southern Cross. In his book *Terra Nullius, A Journey through No One’s Land*, the Swedish traveller Sven Lidquist wrote about the indigenous tribe of Arunta, whose members believed there was a connection between cultural and biological survival. If songs were to die, the land would die, too ... The songs didn’t die. There is a new and respectful interest in the Aboriginal cul-

ture, and the respect is mixed with remorse. The Aboriginal people have been saved from total destruction and oblivion by their art and culture, which the white world was unable to comprehend for such a long time. The parallel with our story is self-evident, even though we don’t believe in “Dreamtime”, in being created by Gods while we were dreaming. Yet, those colours, sounds, and the Pacific sand will haunt our dreams for a long time to come, in the same way as songs from Rezija, Hindu and Balkan songs performed by Carmina Slovenica will linger on in Australian venues.

Carmina Aina Reljič sees Australia as one of the unforgettable pearls on the necklace of her memories. Like others, this one, too, is special and unique: "A continent where you feel welcome at every step, from the moment when a loud 'welcome' comes from the audience in the middle of your first performance. We felt at home in Melbourne, our posters everywhere and people recognised us, saying, 'You are one of the 40, right?' We also felt like 'one of us'. On tours such as this one you let go off your individualism and, for two weeks, you live like part of a pack, as a whole, which is at all times aware of the need to function as one, as this is the only way to succeed and also the only way to survive. But once back home, each of us strings another pearl on our necklaces, we count them all and keep in mind, that they have all been cultured at the farm of Carmina Slovenica."

As Eva Germ looks at the photos, she can hardly believe that she really was "down under": "We had a wonderful tour, got excellent feedback, and taking a bow in front of an audience of 2,000 felt just indescribable. You feel so small and so big at the same time. When people ask me about our choir, I always tell them it's more than just 'singing in a choir', it's a way of life. Carmina Slovenica shapes you as a person and gives you the opportunity to experience things you hardly dare to dream of ... Then comes a little tear at the memory of the wonderful days, full of friendship, singing, city sights and natural wonders we experienced, and then it is 'back to life, back to reality'. Lucky for me, I see reality through Carmina Slovenica's tinted glasses."

For Jasmina Črnčič, the Australian tour is another unforgettable experience in the collage of everything that happens when you sing with Carmina Slovenica: "I have been with Carmina Slovenica for fifteen years and the miracles which happen every time we come together never cease to amaze me. Every one of us, from the first to the last, always gives their all, we each bring our spark in our unique ways to our community, elevating the results of our work to a superior level. People come and go, but the atmosphere and the beauty of our creations persevere. I'm not sure, how, I just know that out of everything in my life, Carmina has given me the most, so I don't even question it anymore. It's not important. What is important is every now and then, when we come together, for a rehearsal at the Union Building hall in Maribor, or a tour of Australia."



The Ultimate Collective Experience

New York (USA), 2015.

It seems that innovative musical theatre projects thrive in festival environments much better than in institutional ones. Most of the more important works are thus produced or co-produced by festivals. The Prototype Festival, where Carmina Slovenica performed in a chilly January of 2015, is an important new opera platform for the USA. The project premiered and saw four additional reruns at the Prototype Festival in St. Ann's Warehouse in New York, at the festival of "visionary musical theatre" works, setting new guidelines in the field of opera. This is what garners so much attention from the professional and popular media. Carmina was invited to collaborate with the festival by its artistic director and opera producer Beth Morrison, also nicknamed the "Diaghilev of the 21st century" in professional circles.

"The breathtaking *Toxic Psalms* suite, subtitled *The Ultimate Collective Experience*, traversing centuries and the globe – a perversely charming, provocative pastiche", the American media responded. It must have captured the zeitgeist – violence, terrorism. *Toxic Psalms* remain eerily current.

In today's world, religion is turning into the main source of deadly violence. There is something very obvious and common to all the conflicts we are witnessing: terrorist acts are perpetrated by people blinded or abused by ideology. Men kill for the glory of their "psalms". This is the perversion and travesty of religions. The 21st century battles are not fought in the fields of extremist political ideologies, they are focused on the issues of cultural or religious differences.

The flexible and open form of *Toxic Psalms* with its accompanying iconography perfectly reflects today's social and political climate, leaving ample room for reflection. *The Ultimate Collective Experience* includes a deliberation on acts committed under the influence of authority – individual or systemic. It takes very little to turn a completely innocent being into a criminal. Most of the evil in this world is perpetrated by insignificant, ordinary people following authority. What happens when authority takes on ideological colours, in political or religious sense, how come responsibility always rests with the other? With its subtitle, *The Ultimate Collective Experience*, the project touches on both the collective and individual.

There is force in the collective. The more voices there are, the louder the masses speak, we know this. An individual takes on different traits through belonging to a group, a different kind of power, accepting different forms of responsibility. The masses harbour the power to overcome the sum total of individuals' psychological and physical traits. Masses stir ambivalent attitudes in people. They are both alluring and repulsive. We feel attracted to them because of their spontaneity, for example, the strong effects they sometimes trigger, and we are repulsed by them because of their (un)controlled behaviour, great physical force and psychological pressure they put on an individual. A choir, on the other hand, is an example of a collective with a higher level of integration among its members, a higher level of integration between the choir and its social environment, and at the same time it serves as a model for formation of group identity. Nowadays, singing in a choir is one of the few human group activities not primarily motivated by money or power.



I placed the issue of the collective in a more relevant political frame – a collective infected by ideology, a set of values and beliefs based on dogmatic principles. I started from recent history, beginning with Hannah Arendt and her reception of the Jerusalem trial, when she tried to establish how one of the greatest Nazi criminals Adolf Eichmann managed not to identify with his actions, which caused mass murders, explaining in his defence how he was merely following his superiors' orders. This principle is also a test of the Milgram experiment, introducing authority of knowledge and achieving incredible results in ultimate obedience: a known number of people executed what was asked of them, without thinking about the nature of their own actions or conscientious objections, as long as they perceived the orders as coming from a legitimate authority figure. As many as 65 percent of the test subjects used maximum, lethal levels of electric shock they were to deliver and never questioned the moral aspect of their actions; when following what they deemed legitimate authority they were capable of horrific actions. The role of a scientist, an intellectual and therefore trustworthy person, the Milgram experiment, including spiritual leaders, religious representatives, and, of course, politicians.

The Ultimate Collective Experience takes this principle and applies it to the specific relation between performers and audience. The chorus sets a mirror to the audience while at the same time suggesting its proper emotional response. This interpassivity mimics paid mourners or canned laughter in TV series.

Before the premiere of *Toxic Psalms* at the festival, the British newspaper *The Guardian's* American correspondent published an extensive interview. Every Slovenian artist yearns to be mentioned by *The New York Times*. "The stunning new work by the talented Carmina Slovenica". *The New York Times* announced on the front page of its culture section, followed by a favourable review of the performance. In the words of the critic Zachary Wood, the performance was "a lively, theatrical, cross-genre performance, unusual in its choice of techniques, eclectic in its musical style, and politically charged". "*Toxic Psalms* are proof that even the most macabre material can yield pleasure through the virtuosity and intensity exhibited on stage", wrote Woolf in his review, adding that the choir created unforgettable images on stage. "... All of the material is conveyed with commitment and precision from this highly skilled vocal ensemble", Zachary Stewart praised the performance. The contributor to the biggest web portal for theatre reviews Theater Mania, added that "... the grandiosity of the staging rivals what one might see at the Met".

Every performance was met with an extremely favourable audience reaction. The notoriously tough and arrogant audience, known for leaving the auditorium even before the curtain, followed the performance with remarkable focus. The vocal theatre from Slovenia was rewarded with long, standing applause and ovations. Since the largest international fair of performing arts, the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP), opened at the same time, New York turned into a true cultural juncture. Completely sold out shows were genuinely outstanding successes.

Several conductors from all over the USA were in the audience to see the performance. Dr. Kristine McMullen, of the The Ohio State University: "Every time I see Karmina's work, it rouses me as an artist, it challenges me to think differently. There is so much superficial and trivial art in this world, but you never see this with Karmina. Not only is her work of the highest quality, it also possesses a propulsive and daring quality. I hope that Carmina Slovenica influences future work of conductors all over the world".

In the thirty-five years of its existence, St. Ann's Warehouse has presented, produced or commissioned a unique and diverse body of work - from innovative theatre and concert performances, from Charlie Kaufman and the Coen brothers, Lou Reed and John Calso, to the National Theatre of Scotland. Lately it has evolved into one of the most important and influential venues in the centre of the revitalised Brooklyn neighbourhood of Dumbo. The season in question started off with the National Theatre of Scotland, The Wooster Group, and continued with the famed Tiger Lillies and Carmina Slovenica.





On the Collective and Violence

Rotterdam (the Netherlands), 2016.

Opening for one of the biggest European opera festivals – the 11th Operadagen Rotterdam in the Netherlands – would be a great honour for any artistic group. Considering all who had the privilege in the past – Heiner Goebbels, Christoph Marthaler, David Lang ... , what were the criteria for choosing the opening act?

Guy Coolen, the festival's artistic director, invited Toxic Psalms based on its successful presentation at the Prototype festival in New York the previous year. Both festivals skew toward progressive performances which further evolution of musical theatre's aesthetics. Toxic Psalms were also presented last year at a large musical gathering ClassiCal:Next in Rotterdam, which probably drew added attention on the part of Operadagen's organisers. Coolen is also very active in the organisation Music Theatre Now, which I have been collaborating with regularly.

In recent years there has been a prevalence of (R)evolution in thematic orientation of the festival, questioning the meaning of the revolutionary slogans Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity today. This year, the Rotterdam (R)evolution added a fourth theme to their festival, choosing to forgo ideals for people, asking who are the revolutionaries who bring about watershed changes. Indeed, who are revolutionaries of today?

Toxic Psalms offer a glimpse into the dynamic of collective response when it comes in contact with ideologies, the effects of this collision and the issues of personal responsibility in such situations. These questions are put in the context of following authority, of the subordinate or insubordinate way an individual or a group respond to orders imparted by authority. A large majority of people will execute what they are asked to, without giving much thought to the nature of their actions or possible guilty conscience, as long as they feel the order or guideline has been issued by a legitimate authority. It takes very little for a completely innocent being to turn into a criminal, once they are guided by authority - of an individual or a system. Toxic Psalms deal with contamination of religions and thus bring to light the image of human brutality in the name of faith.

We complemented the events of the festival in Rotterdam with Invocations at the Paradijsskerk. Alongside the Toxic Psalms' electrified experience, this programme had a detoxicating effect. It includes a selection of spiritual music originating in different religions and traditions. The programme's architecture is based on the relation toward primary spirituality. Personal declarations by authors from different times and places, speaking of spirituality, act as direct reflections of the spiritual world - a meeting point of timeless, eternal and exciting. The music also reflects passion, not for violent enforcement of its psalms, as is the case with the Toxic Psalms, but a passion of human striving for connecting with one's soul, which ascends "from Earth to Heaven".

There has been great interest in having the choregie concept performed in festival environments, and lately also in institutional environments of opera houses. Thus, Karmina was invited by the Basel opera to stage Lebič's *Fauvel* one season, and in the previous season by SNG Opera in Ljubljana to stage her own *Evergreen* project.



Kim Whitener, artistic co-director of the Prototype festival, commented on her collaboration with Carmina Slovenica: “Once we discovered Karmina’s work, we were stunned by the beauty and precision of her creations, they really get to you. We never see anything like this back home. I believe the audience’s reaction to the performance was positive. People were surprised, stunned. As they were leaving after the show, you could see that they just had an unbelievable experience, that they’d never seen anything like this before.”



Time Without Honour

SNG Maribor, 2015.

Music of all time, from plainchant, contemporary polyphony, clusters, contemporary movements, youthful fluidity, creative maturity, time without honour, set to music and theatre – these are the detailed basic labels of *Fortuna Won't Be Fauvel's Match!*, a choregie project by the Carmina Slovenica vocal theatre. At first planned with the restored Minorite monastery building in Maribor in mind, it had to change venue due to the city's cultural plans, such as they are, opting for protocol over art. Luckily, the Old Hall of the Slovene National Theatre Maribor proved to be a functional venue as well, although the sacred decor and flow of the old church would have added a key dimension to the music theatre performance.

The score for the only music theatre work by Lojze Lebič, a critique of social climbing, disloyalty, envy and cowardice, brought together

in the acrostic Fauvel '86, was rediscovered after three decades by Karmina. It serves as the thematic basis of the show and an embodiment of the idea of choregie: co-ordination and juxtaposition of contemporary and medieval music. It is a novelty since it is seldom performed on our stages. In the performance, Lebič's fundamental material is complemented by its source, which the composer used as well, the dissident romance in verse, Roman de Fauvel, originating in the literary and philosophical underground of the French court. Other additions include fragments of medieval ritualistic plays and excerpts from philosophical essays. The performing hierarchy of means of expression such as music, movement, light, words and space based strictly on the score, faithfulness to and consistency with the score, as well as a respectful attitude toward music, have always been imperative in Karmina's work. All her projects have been irrefutably and steadfastly subjected and contracted to the music.

Compared to the attitude contemporary theatre takes toward the classical canon, comprehensive musical artists find themselves in a much more difficult position, as they are allowed unreasonably restricted leeway. This is especially true of the museum-like conditions back home. This is one of the reasons why the choregie concept in our country was met with respectful enthusiasm on one hand, while a part of the professional music circle in Slovenia insists on interpreting Karmina's new-music theatre and performances of "choral music" as boredom with music on the part of the author, which could not be further from the truth. Herein lies the fundamental value and novum of the "project", making Lebič's (still)



distinctively modern and efficient score shine in a new light and leave a much more lasting impression than existing and seasoned performing practices. Truth be told, we can hardly handle multi-genre projects as critics. Nevertheless, after so many diverse shows successfully performed in difficult foreign venues, the time has come for us to adapt to this concept of musical theatre, defined as the antipode of opera, musical, operetta, musical comedy. It is becoming a category, phenomenon and dimension of its own. In this way, Karmina Šilec is creating a new aesthetic in Slovenia, one that is infinitely better understood across our borders. Despite all this, her projects are becoming part of the Slovenian artistic pantheon. There is a distinct narrative side to the full-

length performance *Fortuna Won't Be Fauvel's Match!*, a new development in choregie projects, which have up to now been based on tableaux, a series of musical stage images. The synthetic effect of individual elements in this particular piece of art is far more intense and original.

A movement consultant from the USA, Sidra Bell, infused the performance with an allegorical and ritualised inventiveness. There are some breathtaking scenes like the one with the ship or the frozen silhouettes of allegorical figures of sin. One can definitely tell movement is fundamentally incorporated in every last shred of the creative process. In the "vocal laboratory" of choregie, as in this particular project, the voice is far from being just an instrument,

it is a convincing and palpable language in itself. It is useful to learn to recognise choregie elements before letting oneself be swept away by the performance. Questioning relations between artistic and musical materials on stage is at the centre of it all. With this in mind, the most recent Fauvel by Carmina Slovenica is far more than just an allegory of principal shortcomings, of the corruptive and depraved half donkey-half man, or merely a critical view of society, delivered from the podium, for instance, whence all the loud judgements of today are launched.

A new interpretation of Lebič's work with a different cast is of course subversive and clashes with a mentality of immutability. With Carmina Slovenica, the performance becomes even more subversive. Astonishment at the capability of a young group to act with confidence and master difficult choreography, exhibit verbal agility and singing perfection, even though the concentration of all these components can give rise to turmoil on stage ... Such a performance demands an enlightened listener-viewer. The presentation's dramatic arc is flawless and suggestive scenes accentuate the incredible abilities of the young actresses-performers as superior interpreters.

The work is extremely interesting on the level of content, as it deals with eternal human companions: greed, lack of reason, hunger for power, cajoling and other character flaws which everyman is familiar with. The performance makes man into a political/religious symbol of everything wrong with our society and systems of management. A power-hungry medieval donkey struts over the stage as a central metaphor for moral corruptibility and decadence. The piece works as an insight into the past through a transparent, false "curtain", behind which the audience watches 14th century adventures, all the time knowing that this might not be "the correct timing" of events. There could just as easily be a Donald Trump speaking from the podium, which makes Fauvel resonate today as intently as it resonated when first performed centuries ago. Fortuna Won't Be Fauvel's Match! is partly a critique of society, as it reveals eternal provocative truths through the allegorical gothic romance. Fauvel's court Esperanza (Paris) is the lair of Evil and God's Order is upside down: the evil is allowed to rule while the good is forced to suffer.



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Contradictions in the Land of Shadows

Johannesburg, Pretoria,
Potchefstroom, Bloemfontein,
Drakensberg, Durban, Cape Town
(South Africa), 2017.

In his novel *Disgrace*, South African Nobel prize winner J. M. Coetzee recorded his darkest thoughts on his post-apartheid homeland: “One gets used to things getting harder; one ceases to be surprised that what used to be hard as hard can be grows harder yet.” So he left, forever. To Australia. His protagonist David Lurie, a professor of English, didn’t leave. The plot of the novel *Disgrace*, as well as the movie starring John Malkovich, is set in post-apartheid South Africa in all its cruel, irrational and ethically confused reality. It detects violence which is no longer restricted to white Africans against black ones, but instead pointedly suffuses South African transitional society.

It is much worse than what we experienced during FIFA World Cup in South Africa in 2010, when we were reading picturesque notes on the stunning beauty of a country the size of France and Spain put together, riding new synergy, boasting solid infrastructure and excellent roads ... But almost two decades of democracy and racial equality later, the “Rainbow Nation”, as the South Africans are also called, continue the search for their identity. Apartheid might be dead, but hopelessness continues to reign supreme on its ruins.

It's Too Dangerous

Darkness and hopelessness followed us on Carmina Slovenica's two-week tour of five South African cities, constantly intermingling with touching interactions with the locals, and superior choral music of this unusual and most beautiful country. Someone mentioned angels in the land of shadows, which turned out to be an appropriate metaphor. We kept dropping out of the hallowed and beautiful concert halls

and warm receptions, from Pretoria to Cape Town, and into accidental pieces of reality, with its restrictions never waning.

Tucked in the back of a picturesque tropical garden of a country motel in Potchefstroom, we were only able to order food over the phone. The owner refused to let us, five grown-ups, go out. We didn't believe her at first, but took her advice after experiencing a strange nocturnal encounter on our first evening in Pretoria. Nothing really happened, but a friend of ours did end up forking over a few rands to a group of four hooded guys. So they left. The receptionist fearfully awaited us behind the barrier. We were truly unprepared for such lack of freedom and such constant need for vigilance. One is supposed to be weary of crime in South Africa, but not paranoid, at least as tourist guides let on. White locals are careful to a much higher degree, while the sense of safety simultaneously migrated into their subconsciousness.

Guarded Public Spaces

Another thing that struck us as unusual were the heavily guarded entrances to all public venues. There was a whole flock of guards in front of the University of Pretoria. Our papers were checked every time we went through. The university campus is not unlike those at Oxford or Berkeley: gorgeous buildings of individual schools, architecturally designed according to their subject matter, with immaculate tropical gardens in between. There were no students to be seen, and we were not there during holidays, not even on a weekend. We asked our hosts to explain the situation for us. Faure Bosman, one of our girls' "Pretorian fathers" (they were residing in the homes of our hosts), and the president of the Pretorian children's choir Jacaranda, explained that they were in the middle of negotiations on tuition-free studies. But there was little hope. He shared his own story as well. He worked as an accountant for a large company. The new black owners fired him at first, but then the Black Economic Empowerment eased off. They found themselves in dire straits and invited him back. "Many of my friends have experienced similar stories", he explained, resigned to reality. We also found him too unctuous when it came to the guards in front of the university. This must have been the latest white strategy. At a crossroads, he closed all of the car doors. Despite everything, he still loved his city and his country, and spoke Afrikaans with his family at home. His wife was African, he had Dutch ancestry.

We were amazed to see how quickly the beautiful university hall of Musaion filled in the evening, despite the empty university centre.

There was also an outdoor auditorium, but one could see it hadn't been used in a while. What a strange world, beautifully kept on the surface, and shockingly cleared, sterile beneath. Nevertheless, the girls from Slovenia were met with a passionate response. "People here respond well to excellence", Christo Burger, choir master for local choirs, explained. "You can see we live in a multicultural and multilingual environment. We experience them more intensively than anywhere else on the planet, and they are at their most productive in music."

A President with Seven Grades of Elementary School

We changed places, venues, and weather conditions every other day, the nature sometimes took our breath away. It was not uncommon to take out your phone and try to photograph the stunning clouds hovering over the magical landscape in the Drakensbergen (Mountains of Dragons), where you can find the oldest earth on the planet, dating to the Big Bang. There, in the school of the boys' choir of Drakensberg, well-mannered and sweet singing boys charmed our girls.

The Nobel Prize winning author J. M. Coetzee never leaves my side throughout our journey, alas, people in his own country, neither black nor white, read his works. They denounced him, because he exposed them too much. I ask an African woman, a professor of mathematics, about it. "No, that is not something we would need today. Not with a president with seven grades of elementary school, crum-

bling universities, and our children in constant danger. When our neighbours have been disfigured, when young people are leaving their homeland indefinitely ..."

The images painted by middle-aged professor Jane from Bloemfontein, the most unusual city in the heart of South Africa, could not be bleaker. Our conversation takes place in the Hobbit motel in Tolkien's home town, where Tolkien fans from all over the world meet annually. Images of the city are surrealistic and we mostly come in contact with white people. A tour of the national museum is an interesting experience of skimming over local history, leaving you confused as to who won and who lost in the previous century and in the decades following the apartheid. A nice colonial theatre was brought down and replaced with a car park. This is what I see in one of the showcases.

In their book *A Manifesto for Social Change*, Moeletsi and Nobantu Mbeki, a journalist and a professor of economy, research obstacles which have hindered the development of their country in the last decade. First and foremost, they point their finger at the African elites, which are to blame for the current misery. Their architects of poverty and advocates of change search for solutions to the blunders of the entire continent. Alas, they haven't found them yet.

On tour with Carmina Slovenica, we are constantly bombarded, before and after concerts, by pessimistic views of our white hosts and mysterious looks of the black, with whom we are not supposed to make eye contact in the street, or, God forbid, engage with in conversation.

We are tempted to, though. They really are



unified and in harmony only on stage, in music. This is how things seem in Coetzee's gated empire, where the barbarians are not always black and both races are branded with hatred in its most extreme form. During our visit to the memorial for the women who died at a British concentration camp, located in the city whose name literally translates as Fountain of Roses, we become even more aware of the absurdity of all the atrocities bestowed on the South of the oldest continent of them all. At the end of the 19th century, the British were eradicating

their former European countrywomen. 26,370 white women and children lost their lives on these fields of terror at Bloemfontein. Today, the site hosts the Anglo Boer War Museum. There is an unusual and eerie installation at the entrance, of a knitting needle, stuck in a ball of barbed wire.

A hike up to the Naval Hill with a gigantic statue of Nelson Mandela is also on every tourist's mandatory pilgrimage list. There's a planetarium there, where we were able to wander at the Southern Cross in the middle of the day,

and the achievements of their youth choir, which had just returned from a lengthy tour of the USA. Their conductor, Huibrie Verster, is the most unusual and magical being we met on the entire tour. It is almost like she was invented by her fellow Bloemfonteinian, Tolkien. I bet she is a master of Teng war.

The Protagonists

South Africa's residents cannot be simply classified as black or white. Most of them are African, 79.5 % of the population, 9 % are white, the percentage of racially mixed offspring of white immigrants, slaves, and Africans is slightly lower. The latter speak English and Afrikaans and are the majority population in Western Cape Province. The rest, or 2.5 %, live mostly in KwaZulu-Natal province and are descendants of Indians who were forced to immigrate to South Africa as servants in the beginning of the 20th century.

But even this statistic doesn't paint the whole picture. The number of official languages in South Africa is a much more appropriate indicator of its variety - there are eleven of them and they reflect different cultures thriving in different parts of the land. The largest cities are the most exciting, such as Cape Town in the south or Durban in the East, on the coast of the Indian Ocean, where the entire land is thrust in a ruthless mix of rural, urban, traditional and modern.

It's not really fair to question the delusions and dark sides of this beautiful country of Nobel Prize and Oscar winners, Aids and crime in the context of a passionate choral story ...

Actress Charlize Theron, an Oscar winner herself, as well as the heart surgeon Christian Barnard, Nobel Prize winner Nadine Gordimer, and singer Miriam Makeba - Mama Africa, Mandela, and Tutu, Nobel Peace Prize winners coming from the same street in Soweto ... These are South Africa's protagonists. As is Oscar Pistorius, the para-Olympian, who faces murder charges. There are 51 million people living in South Africa, speaking eleven official languages: Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Pedi, English, Ndebele, Sotho, Setswana, Siswati, Venda and Tsonga.

Cape Town should also be classified as a protagonist, as it is one of the most charming cities in both hemispheres. The ornate backdrop of Table Mountain, accessible with a modern rotating gondola, is a famous tourist site, attracting the world and his wife. Phenomenal selfies with the abyss as background and a maddeningly beautiful backdrop of the megapolis further down, with the quirkiest football stadium ever. Once again, most people taking selfies come from Japan, some of the more daring ones can be seen free climbing with no protection whatsoever. The Cape of Good Hope is another weary mass destination of bored-out-of-their-mind tourists, with the Indian and the Atlantic Oceans separated by a borderline, visible and invisible at the same time.

The Whole Truth of *Disgrace*

Let's get back to the plot of *Disgrace*, exposing the new South-African post-industrial and pre-apocalyptic reality – a melting pot of old and new, rising out of a long denied, uncontrolled, raw energy: a completely innocent sexual affair between a university professor and his student gets blown out of proportion and turns into a scandal. The professor is accused of rape (which really didn't happen). Despite the advice of his colleagues, the professor refuses to tactically withdraw and instead cuts the umbilical cord connecting him and society, he refuses to play the game, leaves the university and enters the unprotected zone. He resigns and moves to the countryside to live with his lesbian daughter. The symbolic aca-

ademic universe and its petty perversions are child's play when compared to the symbolic universe of the post-industrial agricultural environment in South Africa's heartland.

What used to be child's play (the mutual affair with the student) at university, albeit with cruel consequences (media, lawsuit), turns into a right nightmare in the village. A group of young villagers burst onto his daughter's farm, kill her dogs, rape his daughter and burn the professor's face. The daughter somehow accepts this horrific incidence, both of them having almost lost their lives, she refuses to report the rape and continues with her life as if nothing has happened. In her mind, even the brutal rape is understood as an act of initiation and entry into the tribal, symbolic universe of the primitive villagers. But as primitive as they might appear, they have their own symbolic system of values, which is much more cruel and harsh. Rape is not a groundless crime, it is initiation, acceptance into the community. The daughter accepts these conditions, while the professor once again cuts the umbilical cord to the symbolic universe and steps out of the second vicious circle. What does he have left? Although the tribal system in the countryside is much closer to reality than the sophisticated university system, the former professor and destroyed farmer find solace in proximity to death. It is at this point Coetzee reaches his darkest and most cruel moment. His professor starts out with poetry, with boring rhymes written by Byron, whose works none of the students read any more, while after committing a sin on campus, he ends up as the angel of dogs' deaths. The secret remains unsolved. Perhaps the killings of dogs at the beginning might point to South Africa's difficult past

(dogs were once trained to attack black people). Perhaps the answer for all of us, observers of this unusual country, lies in Coetzee's apparition of destruction, self-degradation, decent to the lowest level of life. And, in the end, acceptance of horror?

But this is much too dark an image, because, as the black musician Tsimologo said after one of the concerts at the Academy of Music at North-West University in Potchefstroom: "Only music can save us." Today in South Africa, one can only be multicultural in a singing choir. They are only brought together by the right harmonies. Similar feelings were experienced in the hot auditorium of Brabner School in Bloemfontein, overflowing with emotion. When three different choirs were packed on stage, and the home mixed choir sang *Trič Trač Polka*, when the European Alpine music grotesquely merged with African rhythms, when a stout black woman behind me sang along the entire "Time to Say Goodbye", which was Carmina's farewell present, there were so many collisions of this kind of different worlds.

Or when I was approached after a concert by Anna Bohber, an 87-year-old organist who visited Slovenia a couple of years ago. She liked travelling to strange countries and she was enthralled with Slovenia. She remembered our country for its chicken shaped form. "We went to Postojna cave, I've never seen anything so beautiful. A sweet country with prolific culture. I went to an organ concert by Poulenc in Ljubljana. I brought back an Anton Nanut CD. He is a superb conductor."

Our return from the strange rainbow journey was euphoric. Parents organized a party on Maister Square. The city officials did nothing.



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Exchanges

It's almost impossible to imagine a greater difference than the one between an October morning in Maribor and a May evening in Indonesia. The light creeps into the room, much like good music finds a way to my heart, while I ponder this and that. Yet a morning in Maribor is beautiful, too, despite the cold dampness which cuts through my chest.

— KŠ

The First Epistle

Dear Karmina!

Last year, you traded the mild Slovenian winter for a hot summer on the Chilean coast, where you held workshops, in the summer you headed off to the North of Europe, to Lithuania. Your lust for unknown cultures and worlds, which you take abundant pleasure in annually, has been coupled in the last few years with spreading your teaching knowledge over the world, with collaborations and heading juries at global choral events, Olympiads and other monumental affairs from China to the USA, from Finland to Sweden, from Russia to South Africa, Australia ... Your missions between home and other parts of the world have not been systematically followed or presented to the public lately, at least for a decade.

When did you come to a point where you surpassed local and national levels, when you competed with your choir and won at the most prestigious competitions? Everybody knows who you are now, you are welcome everywhere. How do you decide, now that you are on top, when everyone wants you? Does this make it easier? Is it harder?

You have refused to be blinded by rewards, imposed standards and repertoires, not inventive enough for a restless researcher of your kind. Through the years, you have shown perseverance in proving that a choir equals an artistic corps, just like a symphony orchestra, you refused to let it dwindle down to a celebratory backdrop, and insisted on it being a superb, dynamic artistic body, constantly opening new

and yet unknown spaces. Where do you get fresh ideas, time and time again, how do you avoid routine, overabundance? Your ability to slide into new worlds with your high, the highest artistic standards and the strictest groundwork, is amazing ... Where do you find a fresh repertoire each and every time, all that sheet music, all the tunes, contemporary, authentic, foreign, remote? And where does your incredible altruism stem from, when you guide dozens of singers, instrumentalists, every imaginable corps along towards the most exacting artistic goals with such extraordinary charisma and artistic force? What have you alone gone through in the last years? What have you changed? What, who have you engaged, sought out, risked, exposed, which creative horizons have you travelled far and wide? Yet through it all, you have never strayed away from the art in music, which is a heroic act in itself in the times of supermarkets and cross-over trends. "Slow listening" is an expression I first heard about from you. Aren't you afraid people will accuse you of "policing music", when you advocate music as art with such vigour and stringency, when you promote music which requires a different kind of listening, a different, deeper insight into the material ...? But each year in September, at the auditions for the Carmina Slovenica choir, you listen to less real music and more popular choices. How do you deal with this phenomenon, year in, year out?

Gone are the *Drum Café*, *Miracles* by your group Kebataola, the minimalism of *CS Light* in Cankarjev dom and the Grand Hall of SNG Maribor ... Are you happy with the years you left behind, with the space and time you temporarily stepped away from, although I know they follow you everywhere?

How do you manage to separate all your international and local missions, how do you keep up your constant creative condition, which has through time endowed every project of yours with excitement, the highest quality, international recognition, perfection, and superiority? Some people take on stage names, you were given one at birth. Even the renowned metonymy of the song (Carmina/Karmina) is no coincidence. It is embedded deep inside you and in everything you have built, constructed, kept at a high enough level for the last eighteen years that you and your Carmina Slovenica choir are today considered above the Vienna Boys' Choir. Not that we are aware of this fact in our city or country. I know you dislike pathos and whining, almost as much as you hate calimerian or cheesy superlatives. So, please, skip this part and tell me instead, what do you think about post-Pinochet Chile, now lead by a woman president? Is it any different than it was in 2003, during your tour of Argentina and Chile, in that summer we had to cross the Andes twice due to snow, when you sang Lebič's *Spell* in such an enchanted manner under the Andes' peaks, and *Misa Criolla* at the Mendoza stadium, in front of 10,000 people, admiring the warmth of faraway Slovenians in Mendoza? Tell me, did you cross the Andes once more, without your choir? Did you remember your girls, standing on the terrace of the run-down hotel, among the sulphur-yellow dripstones,

singing the Peruvian song *Hanacpachap Cus-sicuinin*? Did you remember us throwing balls of red snow in the middle of summer ...?

There was so much innovation and novelty in last year's choral opus, with the Kebataola group, so many exceeded creative boundaries, your own involvement and altruistic projects, the Attacca Festival among them, which you employ to bring vocal music to young performers and audiences, to endow them with an artistic experience. Do you think you will change anything? Do you think young people will stray from consumerism, chat rooms and pop music, and come back to original quality singing?

There is also your recent collaboration with SNG Maribor Opera and Ballet on the project *From Time Immemorial*. You experienced Lojze Lebič not so long ago. Do you have nice memories of those performances? Did you pay a high price for your pioneering effort of bringing contemporary vocal repertoire into these parts, so full of unyielding traditionalism? Has there ever been a time when you regretted taking this creative step? Did the audience you had spoiled with a friendlier and in every aspect more comprehensible *Audiemus* by Jenkins perhaps hold the avant-gardism of the last year or two against you? Did you have any problems navigating between the Scylla and Charybdis of their reception?

You performed *Adiemus* for the first time in Chile with the local orchestra from Santiago, at the Teatro Municipal in Viña del Mar. You received standing ovations, much like you did at home. What do you think the Chilean audience would make of Lebič, for instance? When I remember the children humming to Slovenian songs in the schoolyard of a small



Chilean town, I can't help but envy you the universal nature of your mission. The limits of your language are not the limits of your world, what you have is so boundless. How do you live this boundlessness?

I remember the funny building of the national congress in Valparaiso, Chile, the Pinochet-like megalomania and armed guards, and colourful choirs, with you and your Carminas reigning above all. And a completely new set of girls this year at the Grace Cathedral, where a woman next to me cried as one of your singers held her hands while singing *I Dream a Dream*. How many have you pushed to tears and how many have you brought to their feet! "Stunning, simply stunning!" Sure-

ly you remember? And that Asturian town. Was it Aviles? When exactly was that? Where we admired a nativity scene in the rain, went looking for Picasso, and laughed at the bronze Arturian prince on the tarmac - Woody Allen. You have forgotten already, haven't you? I know your thoughts have already moved on to butoh and the Shinto shrines ... Singapore is also just around the corner ... May the world once again be your home this year, may you remain daring and unconventional as long as possible, on the banks of your Drava River or any other exotic one.

Melita
Valparaiso, January 2004

Dear Melita,

I've been coming home from tours with the choir with holes in my memory for years. I only remember a scene here and there. I guess I'm too focused on the concerts, constant organisation and coordination. I can only muster one profound memory per tour. There are also a lot of fleeting ones, which I can only recall when in the company of other participants. On such occasions, I listen to stories in amazement, as if I was not there, too. The first time in Chile? Chicken and rice every day, sand in my teeth and ears. And the double attempt at crossing the Andes. I believe the Argentinian police locked us in our bus, because we looked like a bunch of looneys, rapping stones together and chanting weird half-spoken phrases. With the addition of a young man recording everything with his camera. That was From the Stone in the Water by Lojze Lebič. You see, the only memory I have of my first real tour abroad, when we went to Požega in Croatian Slavonia (what a place to start all of this, isn't it?), is a long, dark hall, where we munched on coleslaw, glassy French fries, meat loaf, and stewed fruit. They told us to "Enjoy", and we sang Cigani su gusku spekli (The Gipsies Cooked a Goose) as a thank-you ... In South Africa, I see an image of the house I was staying at, apparently also the largest museum of antiques on the entire African continent. Forever young, Twin Peaks. So much past in such a small space attracted some bizarre ghosts to my 18th-century bedroom, too. I believe their intention was to get me out of bed that night, but strangling me a bit first. I was told I arrived in the morning in front of the church where we were meeting with bags under my eyes, pale and exhausted. So I was assigned new hosts. With them, I held hands and sang rock 'n roll before every meal: "One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock - God." In China, I held a bull's hip with plastic gloves on my hands in the middle of the street, sipping out blood through a straw, while the Chinese were fleeing my concerts of contemporary music, screaming and crying in fear. The managers asked if I could do something "a bit more bel canto". In Canada, I tried to get into my concert gown before a very formal performance, but couldn't fit in anymore. I performed in All Stars tennis shoes and a polka dot summer dress, next to a conductor in elegant tailcoat. I was told I was "very progressive"! I remember a fantastic response to Vampirabile in Venezuela. A standing ovation lasted for 20 minutes. What a glorious

response! The organisers were devastated. We busted their schedule. They seemed to have forgotten their initial statement: "If we managed to handle Tomaž Pandur, we'll handle you, too." In Russia, at a festival where we performed at Gergiev's invitation, a man looked into the window of my hotel room on the 15th floor, allegedly the same hotel one of the James Bond movies was filmed at. The 15th floor! A Spiderman. I almost fainted. He was the window cleaner. Nevertheless. Gergiev received flowers after every movement (!) of the symphony ...

Such are my memories, you see! And you want to chat about the national congress in Chile!

I only got a better look at it this (last) year, when I ventured to a nearby market place. On my way there, I ended up in a tiny Feng Shui shop, where the shop assistant played Rachmaninoff's All-Night Vigil for me. He wants me to come to his house for dinner. He comes from China and his favourite movie is Yugoslav Valter brani Sarajevo (Valter defends Sarajevo).

All these memories have fired me up. I'm writing this late at night. I don't want to turn my light off, because there are bats above the wooden ceiling, I can hear them munching away. The Lithuanian choral federation decided on a location by some lakes in the middle of the forest, so here we are, at our week-long symposium. They believe this will make them connect more. After all the vodka and meat they had last night, they went to the Russian sauna, beat themselves thoroughly with beech switches, and then hopped squealing into the lake. They are now connected. Meanwhile, I'm listening to the crunching sounds in my room, which is quite luxurious, bats notwithstanding. I don't dare complain anyway, since I'm the weird one not jumping in the XXL dragonfly-

infested lake every break I get. It's beautiful here. Today I was presenting Slovenian music, yesterday contemporary literature and, of course, the composer Lojze Lebič. But they had already seen my DVD From Time Immemorial the previous year ... They are familiar with all my projects. Why would Lebič not be accepted everywhere? Of course he would be. Here and anywhere. Some would like his works, others wouldn't.

Where do I get ideas from? Probably from lakes and saunas like these, from idling and staying awake. The latter is especially strenuous, it never eases up. The ideas flow in and out, some of them get stuck, so I arrange them into a box in my study room. Then comes collecting the material. A year or two per project. Are you purposely trying to make me angry? I didn't pay a high price for any of my repertoires. They were all a joy to me. Besides, I think there really can't be any talk of particularly dogged traditionalism. I find such reception of contemporary music very realistic. I think the percentage of people who recognise this type of musical expression dear, is appropriate for the social structure prevailing in our environment. I completely understand why most would find Adiemus easier to listen to. Are you suggesting I should ignore the Vienna Boy's Choir remark? All right. After all, "every true love is a sad one".

Do I hope the Attacca Festival will have a positive influence on young people? Of course I do. If I didn't, I would find something else to do with my time. I will rejoice over every young person who finds and adopts a new dimension of quality pastime in their life. It is true, though, that I only realise the amount of amassed material once I sit down and start preparing for a lecture, once I begin looking through recordings of different projects. I also see that they have taken hold. It amazes me every time when I realise they are known all over the world. I wish I knew how to put it into words, what kind of experience it has been for everyone accompanying me on these journeys through history and geography.

Do you want to know how I deal with "I am not getting down on my knees"? Melita, I never get down on my knees. I swallow and hit back with the same voices six months later, passionately involved in medieval chants or Pärt. I believe the Slovenian era of worshipping LCDs, MP3s, GSMs, GPRSs, DVDs, DVXs ... will pass. I believe the Lidl, Interspar and Hofer will no longer act as confessionals to the void, lost souls. I believe pragmatic modern society will understand that art means more than recording a CD or a music video; that having a blog is not literature; and that while a mobile phone and internet might be established signs of "civilized" society, they can never be a sign of its culture. I can't remember how many times I've said this already! The majority of people, so enthused over the hedonistic possibilities made possible by the new Slovenian reality, real life has only most recently become a real possibility. The Slovenian dream. The reality of the matter is, that it is much easier to stick an MP3 in one's ear than it is to practice and create music, that communicating by SMS is easier than functioning as a collective and adapting to its needs, that it's easier to spend free time in chat rooms than dabbling in various forms of creative action; and concert tours are best substituted by an all-inclusive rest on some beach in Turkey. Parents simply lack the time to take their children to choir practice, they are too busy pushing carts through shopping centres. I've said all of this!

Whatever people accuse me of, even if it's in relation to music police, I just don't care. I know I'm right to defy certain trends. Not all cross-over trends, to be clear. Just the cheap, bland, simplified trends of enjoyment and instant showmanship.

On journeys such as this one, when I take my materials out of suitcases, hours and hours of recorded music, I realise how much has happened in all these years. Indeed, there were hundreds of people and most of them had to be pushed or pulled in some way. Nevertheless, I feel this is how it's going to be for as long as I'm willing to say "let's go there". Once I hear myself say "you go there", it will all be over. Cross-over, as it were.

Karmina
Valparaiso, January 2004

The Second Epistle

Dear Karmina,

As I'm writing this, you are already four concerts along your Asian tour. I'm sure you and the girls are getting loads of attention and standing ovations from the passionate audiences in Singapore. You added the Esplanade Cultural Centre on the map of conquered mega-halls of the world - among them the Symphony Hall in San Francisco, the Teresa Carreño Theatre in Caracas, the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires, the Cultural Centre of Hong Kong. I remember the gorgeous "shoe box" with circular grandstands on a Yokohama beach, and the Metropolitan Art Space in Tokyo, where your Japanese hosts greeted you with a gigantic bouquet that made the hostess holding it buckle at the knees.

Exchanging winters in Slovenia for working summers on some beach somewhere has become a habit of yours. You've been everywhere from China to the USA, Canada, from Finland and Sweden, Russia to South Africa, Australia - on teaching missions by yourself, or with your girls ...

How were Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, at this point in time you can probably already compare the two different Asian environments? Spending the time before Christmas in exotic locations is always so much fun. I wonder what the capitalist-crazy Kuala Lumpur looks

like in Christmas decor. Singapore is your city in a way, this faraway capital of global choral movement has been attracting you time and time again. Did it welcome you in its full glory again this year? There are more and more "grateful victims" of your choral colonialism. I'm sure you shocked the expert community of Singapore once again.

Where was it, in Spain, I believe, when people begged you to come to Malaysia? Your lectures on leadership are supposedly a hit from Lithuania to Labrador and Argentina. I really think that leadership should be taught around the globe by conductors and not by some trained MBAs with boring economic jokes. They are doomed to fail. Just like in music, where the leader must hold everything together, to the very last breath ... How could one possibly compare this to "managing" as we have witnessed it here at home, in every infamous and tragic local story.

You must have arrived to Kota Kinabalu by now, on the island of Borneo, or Sabah, as they call it. You are looking at the high Kinabalu, surrounded by orangutans and wild elephants, whistling with the hornbills ... Alas, my Wikipedia reality is no match for yours. Your "Asian sounds" are being echoed with real ones. When you performed your Asian programme



in Union hall prior to leaving on tour, the familiar mixture of pride and enthusiasm once again filled the auditorium. You brought such an ancient tradition of civilizations so foreign to us with such force, one can't possibly compare it to any verbal "heavenly" memory, no other performing experience ... What was it again that the Malaysians wrote to you? That they can't wait for tomorrow, for December 5, when all local and state excellencies will mark your concert with their presence, in the auditorium with 5,000 other spectators. Although ... I remember the Chinese fleeing the halls with screams of horror, crying. And the managers pleading with you to choose something "more bel canto". I guess no such thing happened in Malaysia. Or did it?

How many rivers with curious names have you crossed? You probably don't remember them, except for some poetic major river systems. You are in for quite a leap from Kinabatangan River in the rainforests of Borneo, to the ice-covered Drava River in your hometown. What I would most like to know is what will you bring back from this mission and put in your famous box of ideas, "which multiply like rabbits". Good old Steinbeck. If it weren't for you, I would not have seen his Monterey. After that Halloween evening in Berkley and the earthquake in Santa Fe ... But I have digressed, my apologies, you're in your Asian story now ... Everyone here sends their love,

Melita



Dear Melita,

What in reality is Malaysia today is a question we haven't found an answer to in the few days of our stay in this country, diverse in every possible aspect. There are too many faces to it. Every attempt at finding some cultural or national identity would inevitably fail. It seems that by far the most recognisable desire, bordering on passion, is to rush, to overtake the West, be it in building skyscrapers, the number of cars, the richness of food, even the amount of Christian inspired festive iconography which has, in this case, turned into first-class kitsch. When you find yourself puffing along damp, dirty streets where every corner smells of its particular food, you can never escape snow covered Christmas trees, and dancing, saxophone playing Santas. This mirrors the musical tastes of most almost fanatically religious Chinese and Indians. They are the majority population we have met on this particular segment of the tour. It's like other people don't exist here at all. Not in the streets, even less so at cultural events. They are probably here for business and possibly a massage treatment or two. The Malaysian proneness to hospitality is charming, sincere, sometimes even exhausting in its desire to please. Showing one's love for food rarely ends with the fifth course. Luckily, most of us share this love. Our tastes in music are an altogether different story. No matter how much effort we put into creating our concert programmes with plurality in mind, it seems

the greatest ardour is always reserved for Christian religious music, although it does come out again toward the end of the programme, once the repertoire veers toward more attractive compositions. The otherwise concentrated and keen audience has obviously been brought up in some kind of pop-classical mixture, reflecting their fascination with Western culture and complete denial of their own ethnic heritage. There is a prevailing enthusiasm for trite covers of hysterically squealing sopranos singing opera arias, and passion for preposterously distasteful American Christmas hits performed to soppy choreographies staged by the locals. This makes our own efforts here almost missionary, both as an idea and as performance, when it comes to Carmina Slovenica choir: a segment of Slovenian music, followed by some contemporary music literature and a segment of Asian music. The latter was an especially interesting experience, as it seemed we, coming from another part of the world, were more knowledgeable of it and had greater capacity to perform it. Indian music in a Tamil Methodist Church paired with Slovenian folk music. Together they work as a true cultural exchange, with an added note that our curiosity, tolerance and most of all worldliness are far above those of the Malaysians. However, we lag behind them in self-confidence, which often borders on arrogance, especially with the Chinese segment of the local population. They have proven to be aggressively patronising even when it comes to some of the oldest realms of Western culture, be it Christianity or the Vienna Boys' Choir.

Kuala Lumpur is a city where the future is being built on every corner. This future is based on Western replicas, from Gucci bags to White Christmas in the monsoon rain. It only takes a few minutes to get from China Town with stands offering knock-off imitations, to the gilded Indian quarter, among queues of Muslims headed to mosques or shopping malls, where you'd feel right at home, between Bata and Zara. A bit further on is the Armenian quarter, the Scottish "mountain" golf resort ... and, most of all, food 24 hours a day.

Malaysia's desire to join the "West" results in its inclination to issue invitations to foreigners. This means organising numerous fairs, symposia, and other international events, during which it aims to prove itself. Our tour was no exception. The hosts showered us with attention and invested a lot of effort into making our visit unforgettable.

If in Malaysia we turned our heads at disorder, kitsch, dirt, a form of latent

roughness, because of the strict Muslim authority governing the two-faced public and private lives, Singapore proved to be the complete opposite. With a distance of just a few hours, the two cities' cultures are galaxies apart. Our concert at the world-renowned Esplanade performing arts centre was surely the professional high point of this tour. The concert was sold out two weeks in advance, and the audience was made up of educated, cultured professionals. No wonder the choral culture of Singapore is among the most advanced in the world. Their proficiency, values, diligence, economic situation and cultural background provide practically ideal nourishing conditions for choral activities. This field is developed to the utmost extent. Choral education is part of compulsory curriculum in both primary and secondary schools, as it is recognised as an extremely important activity for establishing a progressive and cultural society, which Singapore definitely is and would like to remain. For this reason, the government sends their students to places all over the world. And I was really glad when I met one of my students from the University of California. The Esplanade performing arts centre thus hosted our latest music-stage project Rusalki, as well as an adaptation of the minimalist music project by CS Light. Given the superb technical support in production, this concert excelled in both performance and reception. For professional circles in Singapore, this was not an introduction to the work of Carmina Slovenica, as they know our choir well and appreciate it greatly, hence the invitation. I'm not sure I should write this at all ... The organisers were much surprised at the favourable reactions from the audience, which is – so we were told – not known for expressing their approval with standing ovations, not even for the Berliner Philharmonic. The glitz of Tokashiyama megastores, Prada, Luis Vuitton, shoes, perfumes, and more shoes, handbags, Nike ...

There is one more sight to come. Borneo, an island in the clouds. The third largest island on Earth, a magnet for adventurers, photographers, novelists, naturalists ... If a place managed to avoid various trade routes and remain in its own time, it becomes a destination, every traveller's desire.

Our visit was accompanied by Slovenian sounds and great honours from the Sabah government. The assembly of ministers, interest from the press, jumping over bamboo, sandy beaches, Kinabalu, and a lot of clouds. There are so many impressions. How do they manage to invest 5 million dollars in musical education? Dear Melita, I'm not into writing tonight, I'm much too tired ... Meanwhile, Iztok is still climbing palm trees, yelling out: "I Tarzan!"

Selamat Datang!

Karmina
Borneo, December 4, 2010

Where Every Hero Becomes a Nuisance

Večer newspaper, January 18, 2005

People who decide the conditions you eventually work in are present at your concerts. They sit in VIP seats, listen, and applaud, sincerely, I'm sure, Do you think they are not moved by art, at least not profoundly, or is it a case of strict separation of art and (one's) own life which makes them unable to think the artistic quotidian?

Cultural production is a result of complex and oftentimes conflicting social processes. Every social environment's atmosphere affects art, culture, or non-culture in a deep way. When I say this, I don't only mean the quantity of art or the level to which this art is consumed by different audiences, but also the environment's attitude towards culture when it comes to the broadest conditions for its production. Art and attitude towards it are precise barometers of a society. Today's pragmatic society often gets lost in trying to grasp the definition of what development of a certain part of it actually means. The signs it proposes as "civilised" are rarely signs of cultural behaviour at all. On the contrary.

It seems many people share Marx's way of thinking: that we, the artists, are the lucky ones getting paid for our hobbies. But art is in no way an asylum. Art simply has its demands. It all sort of boils down to the logic of the end

justifying the means, as long as the overall context doesn't put the means in charge of the ends.

Those individuals who determine our working conditions and impose them on us through their status, are infrequent concert-goers. Most of them, both at state and municipal levels, never once during their tenure have heard the work we do and they judge. This holds true for commissions of experts, bureaucrats and politicians currently in power. It even seems that some of the more prominent decision makers are drawn less to art and more to visits of actresses starring in Mexican soap operas.

Despite the decision makers being absent from Carmina Slovenica concerts it wouldn't be fair to say that your environment is un-supportive of your art?

Of course not! On the contrary! Our concerts are sold out, the audience is grateful and there is no lack of feeling welcome. There have been so many good wishes, acknowledgements, applause in these past years! One almost gets used to them, gets spoiled by them.

Over all, Maribor has always shown a certain fondness for my work. I remember all the kind words and enthusiastic welcomes. We made our own working conditions happen. Maribor



served as my nesting ground. Problems have only come most recently. There has been an evolution which requires us to ponder the way forward. This of course is not exclusively Maribor's problem, it has to do with just a few individuals. But when the wrong people find themselves in the wrong places ... We are really close to acceptable working conditions and it would be very easy to secure them. All we need is to want to do it. This is what the ire stems from, in all of us building our CS institution. And all the enthusiasm and applause through the years is powerless when it comes to this. It's like they have never happened. The greyness is not in the city, it's in certain people. I don't think there is a collective blame. It just seems that the wagon must break before

many realise which way not to go.

The relation between the environment and creativity is a complex one, but surely you find inspiration for your own creativity in different environments, establish the necessary communication on different, global levels. Nevertheless: Do you find enough like-minded people, artists and art buffs in your environment to establish a constructive dialogue with?

The immutability of mental traps makes me turn less outwards and more towards the strict and discontented wisdom of some ancient philosophers. They turned their backs on the life of plenty and chose to preach from their barrels or huts about basic elements of happi-

ness, which can never be material or aesthetic, but always psychological. I have also found such a turn inwards indispensable. I have tried to reflect on most of the concepts I use by myself, I have tried to create a mental structure to fit the complexity of my trade, and at the same time learn how to avoid the superfluous from contaminating my mind on a daily basis.

The same goes for constructive dialogues. I don't seek out like-minded people, but I do find dialogue extremely precious and I'm always thankful to those who provide them.

Some artists, creators and other makers can never really leave their cultural environment, their knowledge is non-transferrable. Yours most probably is, at least in the majority of segments. Where, if you could and wanted to, would you most like to transpose it to, into which cultural environment?

It's true that my knowledge is transferrable in all its segments. And it can be transposed anywhere.

What should a city bearing your mark look like, or rather, what kind of a city would you like to work in? I guess the two are not separate, they are the result of a certain maturity. For now, the city lacks any vision of a cultural policy. Do you have one?

The beauty and "cultural quality" of a certain environment or city (in the sense of being or becoming a cultural city, being an interesting and prosperous city) are not judged solely by formal aesthetic standards or quantity of culture on offer, nor can they be assessed through its economic, tourist, or any similar practical advantages, but based on its ability to lift one's spirit toward greatness. Conse-

quently, the only good vision of cultural policy is to constantly seek out artists who are able to create this. And when (if) it finds them, to win them over and keep them. Turning every "hero" of this kind into eventual nuisance is a bad idea. The ideas and actions of a select few are what's infuriating with the vision of our cultural policies. I'm unable to accept many of the ideas currently on offer. Clueless statements and remarks have made my head spin, there are many things I will never understand.

You say the cultural aspect of an environment can't be measured by the quantity of artistic events (and consequently not by the number of visitors), but it must be somehow related to a city's culture? It seems there is much interest in classical music, the theatre is full ...

We seem to have no shortage of audience. The problem is that there are few middle aged and young people. The absence of the young generation is related to continuity in education and acquiring future audiences, while the middle-aged concert goers are currently at the top of their professional careers. They are busy with work, social activities - somewhere where they can use their inclinations to further the evolution of culture, in securing better working conditions or corporate funding ... Alas, they have chosen to further other points of interest - the more popular, seemingly cultural events, golf, sailing, travel ... They have strayed from art and are hard to address.

Our audience is nice, respectful, but I fear it is also somewhat passive. It doesn't articulate its viewpoints, it only consumes. When it comes to really big things - like the change in status of Maribor Philharmonic Orchestra, for in-

stance – nobody has taken a stand on that. Or at least nobody has expressed it in a clear and public way. This conveys a feeling of drowsiness, numbness. There is a lack of humanistic, critical thinking, which would reach beyond small talk over a cup of coffee. In the end this naturally means there is no way to carry the torch of truth through the crowd without scorching someone's beard.

Do you keep track of your girls once they leave, do they follow your work? Is a person who becomes an artist at a young age an artist for life? What is it that remains: a voice, an attitude toward life, an attitude toward art? What kind of an environment, what kind of a city will be built by adults who spent their young years as excellent artists?

What is left? Hours of work in different areas of our creativity make young people develop a sense of discipline when it comes to individual activities, which further grows a feeling for one's own work; the collective and active creation results in a precious feeling of self-worth on the part of the individual, which is realised precisely in the collective effort with other individuals, through action, which isn't (and couldn't be) egocentric, anti-social or even anti-humane. I guess this is what stays with them for life.

Since we live in an environment where (simplified) values are set according to results, mostly to results measured in achievements, individual success is increasingly the only one possible – one has to compete to succeed. It's a completely different feat to be successful in collaboration, as part of a larger group – this is a skill and an incredibly precious gift for any career as well as family life. I would say

that Carmina Slovenica offers a very valuable life lesson when it comes to this, one that can hardly be matched by anything safe for top group sports.

This is what makes an experience with Carmina Slovenica different from the above mentioned phenomena in our current society, which are leading to future business schemes and political calculations, market-oriented logic and loss of genuine human values. This is why I feel tremendous responsibility working with Carmina Slovenica.

What will the young people I work with grow up to be? Sensitive, I hope.

My Ego Is Not Big Enough for the Stage

Večer newspaper, October 18, 2012

The director Heiner Goebbels was also in attendance at the Slovenian opening night of *When the Mountain Changed its Clothing*, performed by Carmina Slovenica at the Maribor Theatre Festival in 2012. The winner of the International Ibsen Award and artistic director of Ruhrtriennale is anything but a moody international superstar. He handled the media onslaught during the Maribor Theatre Festival with calmness and kindness. His presence gave our 400,000-euro festival a mere rug rat compared to his 15 million-euro German one a touch of international prestige of the highest rank.

I must admit I missed your presence on stage at the *When the Mountain Changed its Clothing* at the Styrian Autumn Festival in Graz. Now I understand *The Telegraph's* commentator after the opening night in Bochum, who wrote that Carmina Slovenica “stole your show”.

You will always find me missing from my performances. I have just finished writing a book entitled *Aesthetics of Absence*. It turns out my ego is not big enough for the stage.

Did you know about Carmina Slovenica before or did you only start to study its performances after Karmina Šilec's invitation for collaboration?

I received Karmina's invitation to compose five years ago, which was followed by writing back and forth, we managed to meet and it was in the beginning of 2010 when I first visited Maribor and listened to them rehearsing. It only took a moment for them to take my breath away, their incredible capacity, precision, the power of this chorus, which is more



than a chorus, its vocal theatre, perfecting choreography, light effects, set design, spoken word. We quickly located common ground between my way and Karmina's way of working: we both constantly strive to change the concept of our work and develop something new, something different. I have forever been tempted to challenge the stiff seated concert form in some sort of "format of constant uncertainty". I like the fact that the audience is left in the air as to whether they are watching a theatre play, a dance project, or a concert. Every five minutes there is potential for disappointment or surprise.

People familiar with Carmina Slovenica's work were less surprised by your project, as we have been following its repertoire, its

working methods for years. Don't you think Slovenian girls should consider it a compliment that you searched for the immanent in the body of work itself? The performance clearly speaks of your fascination with the phenomenon. Or am I mistaken?

You are absolutely right. This is exactly what I was pursuing. I'm not only a musician by trade, but also a sociologist, so I also find studying such collectives interesting from a sociological and not only musical aspect.

Did you find that Carmina Slovenica's multi-genre repertoire suited your needs?

A similar thing happened with the texts, they also originate in the 18th and 10th centuries. Music, images and texts are not organised chronologically in any conventional manner. They

are organised according to the development of the theme, from childhood questions, through education and towards philosophically and politically challenging discourse near the end. My question was how to “flourish during the performance, from spring to winter”, or how to transfer from Brahms to popular music. Above all, I wanted to avoid linearity once I gathered all the material.

You seemed to had been most inspired by a folk song from Rezija, *Da pa Canynu*?

It finally provided a title.

At the Styrian Autumn Festival, dubbed *Truth is Concrete* this year, even your project with Carmina Slovenica was placed in a political context. What's up with the political undertone of your performance? Even at Ruhrtriennale all the media focused on “girls from the East, Tito's regime”, etc.?

This is a problem with the Graz festival, following politics. I would never personally put such an emphasis on the political challenge of the

project with Carmina Slovenica, despite the fact that it deals with some political issues. But as soon as you are faced with an audience of 1,000 people and a performance which leaves so much open space for self-reflection, it's impossible not to react to the text politically, among other things. For me, this is more interesting than any message, least of all a political one. Never believe any political report, especially not in theatre, maybe in newspapers. Art needs its own riddle; it needs to stick to its mysteriousness. This work opens so many questions, and each member of the audience has their own answers for them. This is what excites me with theatre, that it can never be cleverer than the audience, but instead offers the luxury of time and space which one can use to reflect on all sorts of things, on who we are, where we are going, but also on political, philosophical issues. The performance at hand deals with the relationship between growing up and dying.

Western audiences would probably consider even choosing to work with a Slovenian choir, coming from the other side of the iron curtain, as a political statement?

For me it was purely an artistic choice. The invitation was challenging, fantastic, and I could never say no to it. There is no other such competent choir. I know of no other choir like this in the entire world. The show was produced by seven co-producers, Ruhr, Graz, Maribor, Paris, Amsterdam, Hannover and Luxemburg.

The Conductress First, Coca-Cola Bosses Second

She has just returned from the World Choir Games in Riga, this year's European capital of culture. And she's on her way to Seoul for the World symposium on Choral Music.

Large corporations from all over the globe have been inviting you to speak at their symposia on “leadership”. In our home country, the idea of leadership has a distinctly business connotation. Like an MBA is a must if you are to master it. Trite business concepts of leadership are long spent, many of their tycoon messengers are now in prison. Is conducting really the most complex managing task imaginable?

Leadership is a key concept for conductors, and not many people are familiar with the complexities of being a leader in this profession. Most people would never connect this role with artistic work. Nevertheless, conductors are often invited by corporations to teach their managers how to lead a group in a very direct and creative way.

In South America, I gave lectures to managers of the biggest corporations, like Coca-Cola. I was amazed by the questions and reactions of those top managers. I wonder why back home these skills are of no interest to people in the same positions. We should deal with the phenomenon of “leadership” in a more professional, not merely intuitive manner. This is why I study this field and research every known style of leadership - from American West Point to Jesus Camp. One can be appointed leader but it takes being understood as such in the minds and feelings of the led to truly become one.

Večer newspaper, Saturday, July 26, 2014



Being a conductor is an exceptional activity, a conductor always comes before the group, not only in space, but also in time. Is it a rare and somewhat schizophrenic position, to be ahead of everyone, including time?

True, you are in the moment, with what is happening, but always also just a little bit ahead. You keep thinking about what is going to happen in music in the following seconds, and use suggestion, body language and facial expressions to anticipate what is about to happen in music, while at the same time you remain in the present, analysing its many parameters and reacting to it when the need arises. You are constantly somehow present in two worlds, in two different times. The musical score is usually full of information and the musicians are of course able to follow the written instructions, but if they have a good conductor, with enthusiasm, professional ability, zeal, energy ... they can create moments when musicians' hearts and spirits are inspired and on their way to something new. You could say that a lot of it is about creating an emotional environment which endows a rehearsal or a concert with a superior spiritual dimension. The business of conducting certainly looks very simple, especially if the conductor is not understood as a creative person adding another essential dimension to the whole thing. When the conductor is an artist, bringing an esprit, the orchestra can achieve so much more. There is a lot of knowledge to acquire, a lot to comprehend. Originality, sincerity, humour, sparkle, commitment, respect for composer's wishes, willpower, character, patience, communication skills, orderliness, perseverance, learnedness, relentlessness, tolerance, inventiveness, organisation skills, ambition, fairness and loads

of musical “craft” are all essential characteristics which determine a conductor’s success.

Conducting must be the most exacting, complex and all-encompassing musical activity; the audience often believes that conducting is God-given, while some musicians feel that it is an easily acquired skill. No matter how big your talent, it can never be enough to conduct. A conductor is never determined by talent alone, but also by many learned and developed skills: physical, motor, analytical, auditory, psychological, intellectual and philosophical.

Please, explain.

A conductor/artist can hardly exist without curiosity about the miracle of the creative process, without respect for musical scores, past intellectual achievements, the rich phantasy required to bring those scores to life in a musical setting, without in-depth knowledge of musical theory, orderly and disciplined manual technique, a clear understanding of historical performative practices, familiarity with the vocal apparatus, technical characteristics of all instruments in an orchestra ... and all the way to instinctively knowing how to place each individual musician into the broad scheme of a musical organism, as well as something we could call artistic humanity, which rises above any “self-eulogies” and ego trips.

When you received the Robert Edler Award for your “strong influence on the development of global choralism”, as it says in the

commendation, we might have become aware back home of your global influence for the first time. You joined the greats, the likes of Tõnu Kaljuste and Frieder Bernius. Awards at choral competitions are no longer a big deal, but this one was different.

Compliments from around the world, from re-known guilds, provide a reliable information on what something means. And this particular award is the highest honour the choral world can bestow on anyone. It’s not a competition award, it’s a lifetime achievement award. This is why this award is so much more special than any I received in the past, and there were many. It was awarded to me at the suggestion of an international jury, experts from all corners of the World, and encompasses my entire opus.

Did the music at some point become insufficient to make you start looking toward the performative, movement, visual, to make you invent the choregie?

By no means was it insufficient. It’s a completely different experience and this experience is the sole motivator which gave rise to choregie projects. I feel music often intrigues me in many different ways, once there are added references from non-musical contexts. During preparations for a certain musical piece, I start researching other references as well. Sometimes it’s light, a word, space, sometimes its multiple references at the same time. Another time it might happen that there are none, and in that case I decide on a concert performance. Stripped of all those references, music is much more intimate. The development from musical intimacy to choregie was a long process, taking many years.

You started to merge different worlds, all-time classics with ethnic music from various locations.

I've always liked working with ethnic music. The colourfulness of different ethnic elements, from rhythm to different tonalities, vocal techniques, harmonies, counterpoints, phrasing, social contexts – they all create an exceptional universe somehow reaching beyond classical musical scores.

I have just cooperated with an ensemble from Papua New Guinea. What could be more interesting than dealing with such an exotic musical team, encompassing traditions from Polynesia, Africa, Indonesia? Their epic poems are magnificent, their rituals radiate the ethnic in particular spaces.

My initial reasons to beginning choregie stem from working with ethnic material – from movement I studied in the Slovenian folklore tradition, from vocal techniques in the far North. I was the first to stage Inuit vocal music. In 1994 I left for Canada and staged a musical piece based on Inuit vocal technique and movements, and the project stunned audiences in its original environment.

Constant research and daring creative excursions into the unknown are a regular thing with you. Why the need for such pioneering feats?

What do other people see as valuable in my projects? They say that every project always lives to its full, that the colourfulness – from vocal productions to everything else – are so innovative. I see my work as an emotional journey, a beautiful one, a learning process and a special form of contemporary search and research. Within this field I start the real

dialogue between the sound and the sound-space, between the space and the performers, between the performers and the audience, between the audience and the sound. As the author of these projects I am most intrigued by things with multiple meanings. Sometimes I simply have no desire to reduce words – sung or spoken – to a single meaning. I find it exciting if I'm able to let the known (or unknown) material used in choregie projects offer new perspectives time and time again, various levels and even layers within them. In this way, discovery becomes a process, which makes it a great privilege. People often describe me as totally unpredictable. Maybe this is the answer.

Both in Slovenia and abroad, the avant-garde has always developed in the provinces, never in the centres. There was the Novo mesto Spring, and Pina Bausch in Wuppertal ...

As Stanislavsky once said, “all progressive ideas needed for an awakened and renewed theatre have been born in amateur theatre, never in stiff professional ones”. I believe that choregie shares the same fate. It survives in non-institutional organisations and environments. It's probably no surprise that the first choregie attempts were possible with the two orchestras allowed complete repertory freedom, spiritual youth, receptivity for new things.

I was free of any truly great traditions due to the small size and peripheral characteristic of my home environment. Traditions of the cult of the artist, great composers', conductors' and other performers' names, traditions of great theoreticians, critics and performers in our musical and cultural milieu. To put it simply: I come from a small musical environment, free from market laws. I was able to create free-



ly because I was always somewhat removed from great developments in music. This was a great privilege for my creative freedom.

There is always something un-ambitious in the question of why you insist on remaining in Maribor. How do you deal with this stereotype? You bypassed Ljubljana by going to study in Zagreb.

I would never characterise this as un-ambitious. It might have been a different decision, but maybe it was this decision which provided

freedom and opened new dimensions. Pina Bausch is a small-town phenomenon, as is Suzuki in a tiny Japanese village, now a pilgrimage site for so many artists. The only thing these names have in common is that there was a moment of dialectical leap, when the local environment congealed and institutionalised the individual quality. Four years ago I felt like I could achieve something similar. That was when we started the project Choregie: New Music Theatre. I hoped for the leap which could bring different working conditions and

an established position. Working on enthusiasm alone is exhausting and there has to come a point of stability, however partial.

Maribor has a history of eliminating anything out of the ordinary: the Five were disbanded, Pandur's theatre crumbled. You stated for the newspaper Večer in 2005 that Maribor is "a city where every hero becomes a nuisance". Yet you persist ...

I still stand by my statement. And at the same time, I persist in this city. In recent years I have worked with many foreign artists on the international scene, like the project with Heiner Goebbels, *When the Mountain Changed its Clothing*, and I am about to embark on another one in New York. If I was dependant on my home environment alone, there would be no Carmina Slovenica as it exists today. But we must never forget, that producers come once you have a product which can compete at the international level. It takes certain conditions to create such a project.

A quick comparison: considering what the Vienna Boys' Choir means for Vienna, how do you feel about Carmina not even being mentioned in Maribor's latest cultural programme?

When speaking about references, there can be no professional dilemma. My work has definitely been approved by professional circles at the world's most exacting venues. Performance-wise, we were awarded in the category Music Beyond Opera in Berlin (competing with Berlin opera house Unter den Linden and the Paris opera house) for *From Time Immemorial ...* This proves we know what we're doing. I don't know exactly what else is needed so we

can stop providing 50 pages of references for each grant we apply. Should we be already a reference itself? Why is it our job to notify the authors of the city's latest cultural programme of our existence, why do we have to raise our hands to let them know they have forgotten about us? I will never be able to comprehend this. I see it as a curse, as there is nothing rational about it. We have everything – media presence, quality, continuity, and tradition. This is turning into a farce. Every new set of people somehow "misses" us. There is something interesting about this curse, but every time I get dealt a slap in the face at home, there comes an offer for collaboration abroad – last year it was an initiative from the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, just in time to find me writing appeals to the Municipality of Maribor regarding latest grant decisions, this year it's New York ...

Culturally we feel most unease in musical art. Why are our sociologists so hell-bent against this artistic genre?

Our society still bears the marks of post-socialist egalitarianism. We still haven't decided whether we want to take responsibility for our own lives, we haven't yet established a relationship with our country, clearly stating that we are its building blocks. We have never accepted responsibility for the way we're living, for what we do in our lives, we always feel the need for an external enemy. We've never really grown up, we remain eternal adolescents. As soon as something happens, our first instinct is to grab our mothers by their skirts. If something so much as smells of an elite tradition, we fear it. We equate elitism with the external enemy at the level of collective subconscious-

ness. Our base was never presumed elite, it was always in the service of something. This archetype remains present in the major part of our society. Even our modern nobility refuses to be openly noble. Being successful is a sin. The more artfully we hide our success, the less enemies we make. Maybe this is the answer.

You are constantly involved in some sort of teaching relationship. How do you raise people in time and space where everything has crumbled - church, politics, economy?

It's difficult, because keeping up motivation, both external and internal, is a problem. Let me explain: I was told why the renowned Philippine Madrigal Singers were so good. Because in Manila, a city of millions of people, it's such a privilege to be part of it, to get food, to go on a long trip maybe for the first and last time in one's life, that individuals are willing to invest a decade of hard work just to receive this privilege. El Sistema from Venezuela is a similar phenomenon. Our lives are still comfortable enough and consequently we don't feel the need to overwork ourselves. On the other end of the spectrum you will find the Scandinavian nations and other more affluent societies, which have a much more enthusiastic, active and respectful attitude toward art and culture, despite their standard or maybe precisely because of it. We have found ourselves at a middle point which calls for attention and action, unless we want to slip over the side.

Our lives are governed by a severe form of passivity. When I work with ensembles from

other countries, it is a completely different experience for me, easy, almost like a children's game. At home, I have to move mountains to achieve the same effect. I often feel like dragging a Boeing 747-8, strapped to my shoulders. Why does it have to be like this? Nothing is left to inertia, every, even the most basic thing is a problem which needs to be solved. We are somehow unable to create the casual continuity which could help direct our energy towards important things.

Is it your opinion that we haven't hit rock bottom yet? Do you find it normal that mothers and daughters listen to the same music?

There is a hierarchy in every society, and it is built along certain principles or wisdom, maturity, experience. When a society lacks such a hierarchy as well as respect for its more mature, wiser individuals, this means the end of civilisation. No one is sacred here anymore, not a teacher, a priest, a doctor, a politician, an artist. We do feel the need for small gods, though. We have crossed so many Rubicons. Some restrictions need to be enforced if anything is to get done. We have been stifled by a strange form of social permissiveness. Even Benjamin Spock, the psychologist behind the idea of permissive upbringing, admitted the flaws in his model two years ago, at the same time apologising to the public. We, on the other hand, are becoming increasingly permissive not only in education, but in society as a whole.

How do you deal with hyper-permissiveness the girls bring to the group?

We have to teach them every essential virtue. They are not set in place, they haven't been acquired in other settings, or are only present as



an exception to the rule, which is not enough to ensure team success. I'm talking about a whole set of key values, the ones persisting in Western civilisation for the last two millennia or even longer. For instance, how do you successfully pull off a month-long tour of Japan, with all the changes of venues, cities, hotels, concerts? Achieving this requires disciplined individuals who will keep up their stamina, emotional balance, energy. It takes years of work prior to the tour to achieve this, otherwise we could not face such strenuous tasks and stress of performing for large audiences. If a group doesn't work like a stable instrument, there is no way we can perform at the Saint Petersburg Philharmonic, the site graced by so many of the greatest artists before us. There can be no quality if something is not perfected back home. Performers need to be mature and responsible, starting with attending rehearsals on time, or adopting the right attitude even for the most insignificant performances, which begins at the start of the construction process. A pianist and a skier must both work like crazy to achieve tangible results. It's the same when one works with a group, with the added difficulty of passivity, which usually manifests itself sooner in a collective setting, where the effort and responsibility of an individual is proportionate by default.

What is the reason for such a broad failure of "project Slovenia"?

My work allows me to anticipate future developments in our society, as I work with young people, and their understanding of the world lets me see what is about to happen in a few years' time. I also experience their parents' generations and see the changes in their val-

ues as well.

What is it that you see?

There is a lack of motivation, there is no authority, no humility or gratitude, no more modesty. Things could be different if we had a politician, a leader who would work to motivate people. Every now and then we wag our Catholic finger, but to no avail, as this is just another authority we left behind. We have never experienced "national team building" in the true sense of the word. We poke fun at patriotic projects, despite their often beneficial effect on society. We avoid everything involving collective work, cooperation. We focus only on the individual, on ourselves. We dismiss anything connective, anything giving power to the masses, we underestimate it, we poke fun at literally everything. None of our actions are aimed at building some sort of identity. We can joke all we want about nationalisms of different kinds, but there comes a moment when a Croatian will be supported, his Croatian community would open the door, regardless of where they go, they will open some doors for him. The Slovenian community finds this much harder to do. We set very distant goals and this is no way to work. People can only be content when they have small goals which are easy to realise, and the level of success is constantly being pushed higher.

Let's suppose Slovenians are one giant choir, singing out of tune. What would you do as its conductor?

There is nothing secret about collective dynamics. In a mass of people, responsibility dissipates, there is either danger or horrendous passivity. If you witness a fight or rape in the street as an individual, you will use your mo-

bile, get involved or run for help. If there is a crowd of people, they all observe passively and none reacts. That's why there is always a need for a leader and systematic work with a group, with a mass of people.

Masses have their laws and a nation is, of course, a mass. Masses harbour power and characteristics which far surpass the mere sum of psychological and physical traits of its individuals. I am somewhat familiar with this concept, as a choir represents the highest level of integration among its members, a higher level of integration with its social environment, and at the same time serves as a model for formation of a group identity. Singing in a choir has become one of the rare human group activities which doesn't depend on money or power for motivation. In a choir, one goes beyond intimacy. Shoulder to shoulder we join others to give voice to our deepest desires. We support each other, even share each other's strength. Singing in a group provides an opportunity to let go of control and bring down the walls which separate us from others, from life. When we give in to singing in a group, walls between "me" and "you" disappear. This rule can be applied to any group activity, which a nation certainly is.

What is needed is a set goal with clear instructions, priorities and all necessary steps. We need to make people aware of the personal sacrifice required on the way to the goal instead of hiding it, thus avoiding disappointment and frustration later on, which can often end in individuals leaving the team. Then the baby steps come.

Through the years, you've dealt with a lot of misogyny, there have been many comments

about feminism in art. With this in mind, what were your thoughts on the first woman prime minister in the history of our country? Media analysis focused heavily on the print and length of her skirts. When she spoke in less than perfect English on CNN, the entire country giggled, while there were no such reactions when former president Kučan spoke in a similarly awkward manner at the UN.

Is there a similar focus on the below average image of the German chancellor? I don't think so. Because she doesn't possess eros, she is somehow genderless. She is the most powerful woman in the world, but her sex has nothing to do with it. Alenka's sex-appeal was a problem for both men and women. I couldn't say.

My so-called feminist projects, which are of course anything but, for instance Musica Inaudita featuring music by nuns, only made me persona non grata in my home church environment. I was able to push historical boundaries with the same programme at St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican, where Carmina Slovenica performed next to Bernini's dome during Papal mass as the first women's choir ever. Our Maribor concert was held in the monastery of the School Sisters of St. Francis, without male clerics present. You need some courage to take on borderline projects like this one, with its risks and challenges.

Have you ever been compelled to decline a tempting offer from abroad due to deficient organisational structure of Carmina Slovenica?

Of course. I live a somewhat schizophrenic life. When a production house from another country attempts to come to terms about our visit with my technical director, I have to

make an excuse, saying he's not available at the moment, for instance, and the same happens if they like to speak with the PR department. I can't afford to explain that this is not something we can afford. I have to resort to diplomacy. By the way, both job descriptions are rightfully expected for what we do. I have only experienced abroad the offers as "we like it, and we want to support it". And they did so. At home, such an offer has never reached us regardless our efforts. The malnourished production results in much fewer activities than we have invitations, especially those at the highest level, as those are the ones where most professional support is needed.

What parts of Slovenia do you present in foreign contexts?

When faced with a question, who is our most famous composer, I find myself in a fix. Because in Slovenia, it's not ok to answer such a question. We use the phrase "one of the best", "one of the leading". If we were to say, the leading composer of our time is ..."

... Lojze Lebič.

Those are your words. I feel the same and there are some others in the field who agree. But in reality we decide to put a certain artist in promotional focus for a few years, and during this time, they receive the highest level of support. But once they make a name for themselves, once they become a brand, like Arvo Pärt has become one for Estonia, others will follow. They can open doors for others. But for this to happen, we need to be ok with individuals being promoted, based on a clear set of

criteria, of course.

Are there any other Slovenian flagships you would like to mention?

Slavoj Žižek. He is the only Slovenian with a shelf in every bookstore in the world, except in Slovenia. We can feel critical about his attitude toward Slovenia, his views, but we need to play it smart and be proud of him as our philosophical superstar. Instead we dislike him, we mind that he holds a professorship at the University of Ljubljana, we care, whether he puts in hours there or not. Everything is branded today, even smarts. And if you are smart, you know how to use your brand wisely. Where on the University of Ljubljana's website does it say that Žižek is one of their full professors? Nowhere, he is listed as the last among the teaching staff. Right, right. Because his surname starts with a Ž ...

You have just come back from Riga, this year's European Capital of Culture, and the World Choir Games. You were one of the judges. What does this Olympic approach to choral music mean for a long-time member of the "Olympic Committee"?

The Games' concept is different from other contests where almost anyone can apply. This is not about bringing together the topmost performers who appear in multiple categories, this pyramid includes a very broad amateur base. The World Choral Games started in 2000 in Linz. That year Carmina Slovenica was invited to perform a gala concert for the first time. The programme featured *Vampirabile*. So I have been part of this Olympiad since the very beginning.

This year's choral games were held in the European Capital of Culture and promised an

additional bonus of escaping to other interesting events which the ECoC hosted. But during my time in Riga I realised that the capital's policy was redirected to a very different concept from the one we witnessed at ECoC in Maribor. The Latvians were practically competing with themselves; I was told. So they organised one grand event and focused all the attention, funds and infrastructure on this one event. No wonder it was so successful and gigantic. There were 27,000 singers from 76 countries in Riga. This is a giant feat, there was so much logistics and complicated visa procedures. The Games' concept was remarkable and I'm still in shock after everything I heard and saw there. There were so many amazing groups.

This was not your first time in Riga. Did you find it different now that it is the European Capital of Culture? What can you draw from a comparison with Maribor in 2012, which Carmina Slovenica informally supported with Placebo project?

Riga has the same vibe, it has always been a vibrant city. I was speaking with a high official of their ECoC, and it turned out all their larger infrastructure projects were realised outside Riga. Concert halls and theatre houses were built in two other Latvian cities. They saw the point in decentralisation, while Riga enriched its existing top-notch events with a hint of ECoC. So it would be next to impossible to compare Riga and Maribor. I find the Riga 2014

concept reasonable, because the ECoC will not leave the city devastated and impoverished.

It's quite interesting to compare the development of the three Baltic States with our own country. We began our transition at roughly the same time, with the added fact that their starting point was much worse than ours in every aspect. But their value system was significantly stronger due to worse repression they had been experiencing. The same is true of their choral music. Ours has been on a terrible decline lately, while the Baltic States are aware of the power and the masses a choir brings.

Latvian choral music has always been superb, even in times of Russian rule. What is it that makes them so special?

Latvians and Estonians are known for their large choral festivals even from the times under the Russian rule. This was their only form of expressing their identity. Large stadiums were built precisely to host choral events, bringing together tens of thousands of singers. And while Slovenia has Stična, which is tiny in comparison but with a similar concept, we have never been able to achieve anything extraordinary which would encompass every generation. Instead, an event in Stična is reduced to the lowest level of amateurism and the older generations. It's a shame we are not able to work our greatest potential in the way Estonians and Latvians do. When such a mass of people joins in such a noble communal pursuit of creativity, they inevitably leave their mark on society. Indeed, there is a different

attitude among people and toward people.

Regardless of the GDP, which is much higher in Slovenia than it is in Latvia, the care the Baltic States take of their choral culture is significantly different.

With such a strong base in the value system of society a lot of things are easier to construct. When there is no one cutting away at your base, like here in Slovenia, there are beneficial effects in the long run in every field. An Olympiad, a choral one for example, exposes the strength of a society's core in different countries. Choral music is certainly one of its defining values. Why else would a 250-million-strong Indonesia have so many choral groups it's hard for us to even imagine, not to mention the amount of money the country invests in them? There was so much invested all over the world in this kind of socialising, networking, spreading of knowledge. There are so many new countries entering the world choral map, with no historical choral tradition to speak of.

Which countries are you talking about?

Turkey, for instance. Singing did not play a similar role in Islam as it did in other cultures, and there was hardly any choral singing. A modern relaxed political and religious atmosphere brought these forms to their country, too. There was also a choir from Iran in Riga.

Speaking about Olympic spirit in music seems a little counterintuitive at first, but in reality choral music is almost a sport considering how many people are active in the field on the global level.

Choral music connects the youngest and the oldest, the healthy and also the handicapped.

There were Alzheimer choirs in Riga, there were homosexual choirs. There was also a wide qualitative range, almost unbelievably so. It's difficult to place such a wide range in a society. This is why an Olympiad such as this matters, because it provides a cross-section of the entire field. It allows you to feel the magnificence of choral music.

Portrait '15

Carmina Slovenica has the reputation of “Cirque du Soleil” in the world of vocal theatre. And this compliment was not achieved only after last successful appearances in New York. There was another ground-breaking development in the reception of the group from Slovenia, the only cultural export product and recognisable trademark of otherwise depressed city of Maribor, following their “Big Apple” experience.

Ever since Karmina Šilec appeared on a commercial TV network in the same reporting segment as Goran Dragić from the USA, or Anže Kopitar receiving the NHL Stanley cup with the LA Kings, there have been no more taboos. She has become more than a superb artist, distinguished in small circles of connoisseurs. She finally achieved “big b(r)and” status according to today’s media standards, a status which makes Katarina Čas’s acting minute in the latest Hollywood blockbuster seem almost inconsequential.

Once relevant media outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *France Presse* allotted entire pages and front pages to the Slovenian artist, as they started comparing her to Pina Bausch (“Carmina Slovenica is a musical equivalent of the innovative concept of Pina Bausch’s Tanzteater”, wrote *The Opera*

World), with the renowned magus of contemporary opera Peter Sellars, with Metropolitan Opera’s productions, any remnants of Slovenian complex evaporate. Her launch into the global musical orbit finally brought home her importance even in the minds of those who used to trade in the Maribor group with a 50-year-old tradition and permanent presence on the international stage for Perpetuum Jazzile. Because they can feel an entire stadium. Incomparable? As far as quality, for sure.

The latest comparisons between Carmina Slovenica and the greatest musical names, even legends, are very exciting. As we read about Carmina Slovenica’s production capabilities, which are apparently comparable to those of the Metropolitan opera, and when we compare production conditions, the only possible reaction is a naughty, yet sardonic scoff. New York is famous for its concentration of the most cited media. “When I gave an interview for the front page of *The New York Times*’ culture section, the organisers of the Prototype festival were ecstatic, as they were much more aware of the importance of such coverage. It just now becomes clear to me that these articles are being recapped and reported around the globe, as we are receiving feedback from all corners of the world. I’ve become aware of this scope,” the portraiture said upon her return from the USA.

“Vocal theatre utilising a large group, as is the case with Carmina Slovenica, is a very special form, extremely modern and very old at the same time, most closely comparable with the Greek tragedy. *The Ultimate Collective Experience* is about a special relationship between performers and the audience. The choir-group functions much like a mirror for the audience,



while at the same time it suggests their emotional response. It could be described as 'interpassivity', akin to professional mourners or canned laughter in TV series," she explains.

At the zenith, after 50 exciting seasons, Carmina Slovenica arrived to the *Toxic Psalms*, a heart-breaking auditory and visual experience which swept the most difficult New York audience at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn off their feet. One of the most arrogant audiences, which is famous for leaving the theatre before the final curtain, rewarded the Carminas with long, standing ovations. *Toxic psalms* were such an attraction that every single show was completely sold out, which is no small feat in New York. Reactions on social media continue to multiply.

The breath-taking multimedia suite, encompassing centuries and the entire world, is a perversely charming, provocative pastiche, as the American media put it, and obviously managed to capture the zeitgeist - violence. Just days prior to the Charlie Hebdo massacre, the thirty-member collective of Carmina Slovenica shattered the audience's minds with their majestic, harmonious judgement of "people who kill for the glory of their psalms".

Where do they go from here? Paradoxically, new challenges following great successes at difficult levels are even more difficult and hard to attain.

The choir used to be welcomed by the protocol of the municipality of Maribor as they returned from important tours. This might not be a key, as a sincere welcome from family and friends is of course paramount. It is the reflection of how cultural a certain environment is, but most of all it reflects its values. Where did they go?

2009

Vicinities

/.../

each plate will be small, worthless,
each bowl shallow.

— Marina Tsvetaeva

Greeting Card '12

Dear Karmina,

As I spent time with you on the night St. Petersburg sky
listening to tango music in the Russian winter
and the white pillars of Shostakovich Philharmonic Hall shook, shook in your rhythms and harmonies,
and I put on your stage shoes
to jump over ice-covered puddles of a distant suburb
and the illuminated bronze Pushkin
instinctually drew me towards those crazy avant-garde Russians in the museum,
I once again felt
incomparable, unbeatable, un-exemptible –
gratitude, pride,
just something superior,
something altogether rare,
which I have to (now that I am older and wiser) cherish –
I actually feel quite a little traitor,
only to realise this really and fully on each August 30 (or the night before).

I might not be poetic enough,
but there is no need to quote others,
as I read all of YOURS
like the most precious poetry, prose, drama
of my, of our life.

Thank you.

And, as I have been saying for years, may it last.
I feel like it has already been lasting and lasting and doesn't stop lasting.

(I tried to find a line from a poem of my favourite Tsvetaeva for you,
but they all seem banal in comparison with reality.)



But so be it, to end with:

I OPENED MY VEINS. Unstoppably
life spurts out with no remedy.
Now I set out bowls and plates.
Every bowl will be shallow.
Every plate will be small.

And overflowing their rims,
into the black earth, to nourish
the rushes unstoppably
without cure, gushes
poetry ...

— Marina Tsvetaeva, 1934
(translated by Elaine Feinstein)



Sutras, Perspective East '13

The event was unique, it can never be repeated as it was. Your uniqueness should be treated in a special way. Your gradations, accumulation of rhythms and harmoniously-disharmonious (but mostly harmonious this time) passages reminded me of the passing and addition of time, of the charming search and finding in the (sonorous) labyrinth ... To be able to present such an ancient tradition of such remote civilisations with such force as you manage to, time and time again, is baffling and it is becoming increasingly clear to me, that no comparison with the verbal "divine" memory, no other performing, meta-para experience, is even possible. Your latest work is based on the physical-physics, as paradoxical as this might sound - spiritual blindness and beauty contained in one of the songs is the axis at once lifting and carrying away ... I'm not awakened in a Zen Buddhist way, of all the Indian knowledge I've always been most interested in - khm - *Kamasutra*, all the other sutras didn't catch my attention, but your music makes me feel again and again that I get it, right there, in the right way ... Completely crazy, isn't it?



Nocturno '15

As the world around me more or less crumbles and I'm surrounded by accidents and improprieties, you manage to heal the wounded soul with your priestesses. You are such a comfort and consolation! After long months, as your sounds fill the rural sacral suburbs and I pick up familiar chords and feel through your musical tapestry, every song links to an exciting memory, a faraway landscape, smell, light, colour ...

The songs echo all the distant landscapes inside me, where we followed you with gratefulness and curiosity. And this mosaic is increasingly organic.

I know this is sentimental on my part, that I'm probably overcome by melancholy, that you will think I'm exaggerating or turning into a tearful old lady. But I am overjoyed to be part of your "exploratory". (How did you come up with such a perfect expression?)

You are able to establish so much in every one of us, that we should invent a fresh vocabulary for you. It is overwhelmingly beautiful to follow you along pebbles in the mosaic of the past. I'm only fully aware of this now, after so many years. With hedonistic passion and the seriousness of a mature and responsible follower.

Salve '16

I apologize, but I have to say that the level of general critical universe in your field is horrendous and I'm still having problems accepting it. In fact, I find it hard to believe.

You touched me and decoding everything you laid before us in your meta-performance holding so many meanings still haunts me. I can't get over how one can manage a collective subject to such a degree, how one can direct all the sonorous and visual strands with such laser precision, how one approaches the most difficult things in life and aspects of history with such playfulness ...

Maybe it's a shame that you happen to live on this defined, limited and closed scene, where you are judged according to rigid, beaten, conservative standards. There is obviously no room for the avant-garde in our musical institutions. To put it differently, you have proven that there is a way to create a novel artistic biotope even in these conditions, the problem is that some run out of oxygen before they even dare enter it.

I felt blessed at your many (auto)references and the joy of reading them was immense. I felt privileged while deciphering your contexts, stemming from your decades-long opus ... from the monumental discovery and knowledge of your artistic maturity and beauty. Beauty ...

Remain steadfast ...



To write of world and home seems like a pretentious lie, reflecting hours of arduous writing and deleting and searching for the right words which would describe these passages - between there and here. Searching for words which will not promise too much, which will not ignite envy, which will not cause bitterness. Which will bring joy and openness, which will speak and show.

Melita Forstnerič Hajnšek

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Led by artistic director Karmina Šilec, the Carmina Slovenica is an ensemble renowned for its original, top-level and research oriented approach to music. It has established itself in both Slovenian and international environments as one of the most important, inventive and widely recognized artistic corpuses. It brings freshness to the musical scene, opens new spaces of expression, intensiveness of experience and communication. It has expanded the field of choir music with its daring, provocative and scholarly approach to the most complex creative space of comprehensive multi-genre piece of art. As a production house, Carmina Slovenica has been active in several different fields: stage and concert production, the Choregie cycle, the Attacca programmes, the CS Publishing and the CS Choral School.

Every CS production has been present both home and abroad, populating the most prestigious places of global artistic music - from Teatro Colón and the Saint Petersburg Philharmonia to the Metropolitan Art Space in Tokio and the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris. More than 140 concert tours over the entire world, 122 national and international awards, over 1,500 members, excellent expert evaluations in the most prominent world media attest to surpassing every possible boundary and the high standing of this unique artistic corpus.

Accompanying one of the best choirs to six continents meant writing our own Lonely Planet or Travelling Planet on those journeys together. Landscapes, real and imaginative, are mixed together, they fuse into an exciting universe, where realistic distances between Spell by Lojze Lebič in the Andes and Drumlca in the largest concert hall in Tokio or Adiemus from the window of the University of Ljubljana and Benedicamus in Spanish Las Huelgas disappear. They are all merging into a densely populated, authentic, unique Planet Carmina. Travelling with Carmina Slovenica brings a different point of view, stepping onto the greatest stages from the backstage, mixing with audiences of all countries, breathing with them, observing the phenomenon in microscopic and telescopic view all at once. It is outward and inward, an oscillation, co-undulation, co-habitation with a delicate seismograph. It is demanding, passionate, euphoric. It is dealing with special laws of the collective which the uninvited cannot and should not ever fully penetrate.

— Melita Forstnerič Hajnšek