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## Keeping Pace with the Times

*Aleš Jan*

A century has passed since the first successful attempts to transmit sounds directly through space were recorded in the history of technical inventions. With such achievements, man's ancient desire to transmit his voice to as wide an audience as possible began to be realized. Distances were shortened and the desire became reality, as sounds transmitted from a single site were received at a number of locations all at once. The chance to communicate across distance eventually moved to a higher level, when these early radio broadcasts developed into a new branch of art - a combination of literature, theatre and sound: the "audio drama," which later came to be called the "radio play".

Putting aside early attempts made prior to the first official broadcasts by Radio Ljubljana, we can say the history of the Slovene radio play began in 1928, when Slovene stage actors started performing "on air" as if in a theatre for the blind. These were mainly audio interpretations of Slovene and world-famous classical dramatic texts (Ibsen's *Don Carlos*, scenes from the *Škofja Loka Passion*, plays by Ivan Cankar), as well as adaptations of classic and contemporary novels. This "audio drama", as it was called then, soon became extremely popular and greatly enriched the cultural life in Slovene towns and, especially, in rural communities. The appeal of the new medium, combined with a regard for the artistic presentation of Slovene texts and a wish to obtain new audiences, led, in the second half of the 1930s, to the development of new dramas written especially for the radio. The earliest such attempts were aimed particularly at children (*Miki and Mikec Mice*, written and performed by Nada Gabrijelčič, Vida Juvan and Maša Slavec). Recordings were not being made at the time, so from this period only the original scripts have been preserved, but even these display an extraordinary feeling for the medium of

radio and represent valuable documents of the historical origins of this widespread artistic genre.

In the final year of World War II, the medium of radio, as a mass vehicle for addressing listeners individually, inspired the radio service of the Liberation Front partisan movement to invite an ad hoc group of actors to perform some short political and national propaganda plays.

On April 26, 1949, the first original Slovene radio play, Frane Milčinski's *The Steep Steps*, directed by Mirč Kragelj, was broadcast on Radio Ljubljana; this was also the first original recorded and broadcast radio play in all of Yugoslavia. Thus the foundation was laid for the creation and establishment of an artistic genre based on writing, the spoken word and enhanced audio processing.

The period from the end of the 1940s through the first half of the 50s was characterised by radio plays that dealt predominantly with themes relating to the war and the partisan movement, as was to be expected (V. Ocvirk: *If the Dead Were Revived*, 1952, *The Swinging Oil Lamp*, 1952, *Immobilized Peter Klepec*, 1953; F. Milčinski: *The Good Old Piano*, 1953).

In the second half of the 50s and the 60s, a new generation of writers and directors emerged, who decided to drop the ideology and pursue contemporary European literary and philosophical currents (F. Žižek: *Goldoni*, 1957; Pavle Kastrin ("Tic"): *Mikola*, 1960). Matjaž Kmecl was the first "winner" in a competition for original script; in his work (*Seclusion of the Great Theatre*, 1960), the Slovene radio play shifts its gaze from the past to the present. Apart from the novelty of its topic, Kmecl's satirical comedy *The Cars* (1962) represents a turning point in its execution, too, for it was in this work that the composer Marjan Vodopivec (the play's influential co-creator) and the actor Stane Sever established their names in this fascinating literary genre. Contemporary tendencies, which in no way lagged behind the philosophical and aesthetic trends of the time, could be seen also in the works of Smiljan Rozman (*Special Profession*, 1962), Saša Vuga (*The Sad Soča Tale*, 1953, *Little Bernard*, 1962, *The Midnight Path*, 1973), Janez Čuk and Jane Kavčič (*In Articulo Mortis*, 1963), Vitomil Zupan (*Death of a Moonbeam*, 1962, *The Worm Rebellion*, 1969), Frane Puntar (*The Speech*, 1970), Marjan Marinc (*Avalanche*, 1963, *Weekend*, 1963, *Title Page*, 1967) and Leopold Suhodolčan (*The Man Who Was*, 1965). All this led up to one of the creative peaks in the

history of the Slovene radio play, namely, Andrej Hieng's very exciting radiophonic creation *The Return of Cortes* (1967). Hieng's text is undoubtedly an important achievement in our literature and at the same time one of the most successful attempts to link Slovene literature and contemporary European trends. Some of Hieng's works were also presented abroad, not only *The Return of Cortes*, but also *The Bloody Bird*, both of which were broadcast by radio stations in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, West Germany, East Germany, Italy, Austria, and Sweden, and even as far away as Canada and New Zealand. Hieng is certainly one of the most important Slovene authors to discover the radio play's potential for realizing his artistic message.

This period reached its culmination when a Slovene radio play was awarded an international prize for the first time. This was the RAI Prix Italia, which in 1967 was presented to the work *Tantadruj*, Mitja Mejak's adaptation of a story by Ciril Kosmač.

In the '70s, competitions and acclaim for the medium, as well as the radio play's high quality production, attracted new writers interested in socially critical topics (Evald Flisar: *The Court House*, 1970, *Soldiers at the End of the War*, 1970). In his first radio play (*Liquidation*, 1972), Dane Zajc explored, as the confessional core of the work, a metaphor based on the relationship between a victim and his executioner. The play's music, written by Lojze Lebič, follows the sequence of events in a formally free, musically coherent structure, which serves to complement the play's poetic imagery.

In his works, Rudi Šeligo - who had already established himself as a significant Slovene dramatist and prose writer - tackled completely different critical themes. In his radio play *Shall I Cover You With Leaves?* (based on his novel of the same name), the past and present are effectively interwoven, but at the same time the author reveals a unique world in the consciousness of two young girls, who come alive for the listener as they deal with moral and existential problems.

Gregor Strniša made a name for himself through a form of poetic expression that was particularly suited to radio. In his three *Dryads*, and especially in *A Bottle of Water* (1974), he created an interesting mixture of the realistic and the grotesque, the everyday and the fantastic. Doubts and existential need are projected through a basically humorous concept, leaving the listener with nothing but a vague sense about certain

basic truths that define our life as something quite ordinary. In addition, he introduced the science fiction genre in Slovenia with his work *Iridescent Wings*.

In our historical survey, special attention should also be given to two very prolific radio dramatists, although in terms of their style and expressive mode, they are quite different from each other. Žarko Petan (also a director of radio plays) proves himself to be a very subtle critic of people and the times in numerous works, which are usually tinged with humour (*The Double*, 1973, *The Quadrangular Triangle*, 1974, *The Author in Search of Six Persons*, 1977, *The Monologue of a Man about Women*, 1978). Frane Puntar, on the other hand, opted for a philosophical tone in his plays for adults, while increasingly concentrating, in formal terms, more on the kind of radio script that gives the production team a chance to create an abundance of imaginative sound effects (*The Speech*, 1970, *Sports Event*, 1973, *Pullover*, 1982). Both authors, however, share a great affinity for the radio-enhanced spoken word and dialogue, which can be seen especially in their radio plays for children.

Along with these authors, a younger generation of playwrights and poets began to appear on the scene who have continued the tradition of the Slovene radio play right up to the present day. Let us mention at least two names. Through his devotion to the medium, Pavel Lužan (*The Day of Mr. X*, 1973, *Trio*, 1975, *Rapping on the Wall*, 1976) introduced a very particular atmosphere in his radio plays and, with his numerous original comedies and adaptations, has brought many a smile to listeners' faces. Vladimir Kocjančič, meanwhile, in the drama *My Name is Maria* (1975), attempted to present his attitude towards the world on the basis of a disillusionment with how the medium of radio was being used. This same period was marked by Milan Jesih's early radio plays (*Comrade Peter*, 1982, *Nightmare on a Radio Morning*, 1988) including his superb *To Love* (1985), which he subtitled *Exercises for Two Voices, Female and Male*. Both voices reveal Jesih's verbal mastery, which he honed to perfection in his later works.

The appeal of the medium, an openness in the programming policy, and a systematic search for new writers attracted virtually every important name in Slovene literature from all generations. Of these, we should mention Franček Rudolf and

his comedies, Uroš Kalčič, Goran Gluvić, Drago Jančar and Jaša Zlobec. We should take special note also of the two writers who, after Hieng and Puntar, have garnered the most foreign honours. The plays of Svetlana Makarovič (*The Willow Boy*, 1985, *The Elders*, 1987, *Dancing Like a Dragonfly*, 1993), especially her very popular *The Dead Man Comes to Fetch His Mistress* (1987), are probably the Slovene works most frequently broadcast abroad, for through her rich poetic language she is able to make her unique themes from Slovene folklore and literature resonate with everyone, no matter what their background is or where they live. Meanwhile, Lojze Kovačič, through his original use of Slovene folk motifs, expressive writing, and ancient storytelling techniques, delighted Japanese audiences with his play *Tales from Beehive Front-boards* (1992).

In the radio play *Scratches on the Back* (1992), a psychological drama about youth, Andrej Blatnik, one of the younger Slovene writers, dealt with such existential themes as the struggle to survive, to make a place for oneself in the modern urban environment, where overpopulation has led to shortages in both housing and employment. Writers who today follow in this tradition of excellence include, especially, Vinko Möderndorfer with his detective stories, Nina Novak with her entertaining short plays, Peter Semolič with his socially personal themes, and Cvetka Bevc with her probing tales of family life.

The most recent generation of writers proves that as a literary genre the Slovene radio play is still very much alive and growing. With all due respect to Slovene writers, we can say that there is practically none, no dramatist at least, who has not had at least one radio text, either an original script or an adaptation, produced and archived at Radio Slovenia.

Slovene radio plays for children have continually kept pace with the development of adult plays, always managing to maintain a high artistic level. The creative team of writer Frane Puntar, director Rosanda Sajko, composer Urban Koder and sound editor Metka Rojc is today recognized as one of the best in the world.

Of course, the dramatic text would remain nothing but paper covered in words, of interest solely to comparatists and literary historians, were not the ideas, words, and concepts it contains embodied in vivid radio-produced images.

In this, the radio artists have the historical advantage. Actors, directors and composers, together with music and sound designers, very early became aware of the creative potential of the new medium. Some devoted themselves entirely to radio, while others invested only a part of their creative abilities in the medium. Over the years, radio chiefs France Koblar, Vasja Ocvirk, Emil Smasek, France Vurnik, Ciril Zlobec, Borut Trekman, Aleš Jan and Goran Schmidt have ensured that programming policy makes room on the schedule for radio dramas. Meanwhile, dramaturges Tone Sojar, Djurdja Flere, Emil Smasek, Malina and Goran Schmidt, Alenka Bole Vrabec, Pavel Lužan, Ervin Fritz and Vilma Štritof have taken charge of selecting and preparing texts for radio. Directors from all generations have lent their creative powers to radio, staging every possible sort of radio play (radio dramas, popular plays, entertaining plays, documentary plays, short plays, serials, adaptations, soap operas, experimental and artistic works), thus bringing the Slovene radio play into homes throughout Slovenia and even well beyond our country's borders. We are proud to remember the work of directors Fran Žižek, Vladimir and Milan Skrbinšek, Mirč Kragelj, Tugo Tory, Silva Danilova, Maša Slavec, Marjan Marinc, Hinko Košak, Frane Milčinski, Jože Tiran and Dušan Mauser; their quests and achievements laid the foundation for radiophonic expression. Today's new technologies and aesthetic advances help to inspire the restless minds of current radio-play directors, such as Rosanda Sajko, Metka Rojc, Gregor Tozon, Aleš Jan, Elza Rituper, Irena Glonar, Igor Likar, Jože Valentič, Barbara Hieng-Samobor, and Ana Krauthaker, all on staff at the radio, as well as many visiting artists and guests, as they search for deeper and more demanding directorial concepts and approaches, which can be realized only with the help of sound engineers who have supplemented their technical "craft" with expertise in sound design so as to achieve their enviable status as world-class professionals.

There is also another phenomenon involved with the Slovene radio play, one that makes the genre suitable material for musicologists wishing to study the history and development of Slovene scenic music. For we can readily say that there is hardly a Slovene composer who has not tried his hand at writing for radio drama at least once. Each generation of composers brings their own mode of expression, their own ideas

about music and music design, about musical interpretation, whether vocal or instrumental.

But of course, all the efforts of radio artists would be of no avail had not listeners taken a fancy to the genre of the radio play. A stage play may well be able to exist without an audience, but audio art, and in particular, the radio play, without the listeners' participation remains nothing but electromagnetic waves in the ether. Each listener, after all, listens to his own radio play, creating for himself all details of content and form, which the audio fiction can merely suggest. The listener thus becomes an active co-author in the creative-communicative circle, which is brought to a close with the listener's own imagined show.

Today, the archives of Radio Slovenia contain more than 4,500 recordings of radio plays, whether for adults or children, by Slovene and foreign authors, and this number increases each year by about seventy new works. The archives also preserve texts and scripts by virtually all major Slovene writers and adapters, as well as the voices and creations of Slovenia's greatest actors, our directorial triumphs, the original scores of composers, and recordings of theatrical performances.

Slovene radio plays, including works for children, have not only been well received by listeners; they have also enjoyed much critical acclaim. Their creators have been awarded many prizes at all kinds of competitions and festivals at home and abroad. The most important of these are: a 1967 Prix Italia for *Tantadruj* by C. Kosmač and M. Mejak (directed by M. Kragelj, with original score by M. Vodopivec and sound editing by D. Mauser); a 1978 Prix Italia for *A Day In the Life of Dennis Ivanovitch* by V. Kocjančič (directed by A. Jan, with sound editing by J. Culiberg); a 1980 Premio Ondas for *The Bloody Bird* by A. Hieng (directed by B. Trekman, original score by U. Krek and sound editing by M. Rojc); a 1988 OIRT Prix Warsaw for *The Dead Man Comes to Fetch His Mistress* by S. Makarovič (directed by A. Jan, with music by J. Vidakovič and sound editing by M. Rojc); a 1996 Prix Ostankino for *The Apostles, or The Horror Collectors* by I. Likar (directed by the author with sound editing by M. Marinšek); and a 2006 award from Zikanabar, the 7th International Festival of the Islamic Republic of Iran, for *A.T.L.* by I. Svetina and A. Jan (directed by A. Jan, with music design by D. Hlavek and sound editing

by S. Janež). All together, more than 190 international and national prizes have been received by Slovene radio artists, including Slovenia's most prestigious cultural awards, with the Prešeren Award going to F. Žižek; Prešeren Fund Awards to M. Kragelj, E. Smasek, F. Puntar, A. Jan, M. Rojc and S. Verč; and the Župančič Prize to A. Jan.

Through direct exchanges on managerial and programming levels as well as at festivals, the Slovene radio play has contributed to world culture, as well. The works of Slovene authors have been broadcast on radio stations in most European countries and translated into many languages (German, English, French, Russian, Spanish, Slovak, Czech, Hungarian, Croatian, Serbian, Macedonian, Icelandic, Swedish, Norwegian, Italian, Japanese, Basque, Polish, Belarusian, Dutch and Flemish).

This may be one reason why the European Broadcasting Union, as part of its program for the Promotion and Protection of the Cultures of Smaller Nations, selected the Slovene radio play for the European radio cycle of 1995, urging all its members to include at least one work by a Slovene author in their scheduling for the 1995-1996 cultural season (or to replay an already recorded Slovene work from their archives). This provided the Slovene radio play and its creators with an even greater opportunity to penetrate the wider international cultural arena. Thanks to the EBU action, around 250 million listeners were able to enjoy Slovene radio plays in all the many languages of Europe. Indeed, not only is the radio play very important to Slovene radio, its producer; it is also among our nation's most precious cultural offerings. Considering its depth and breadth, the international exchanges, promotional actions, professional conferences, and the many audiences it has reached, the Slovene radio play, in both literary and audio form, is our biggest exporter when it comes to Slovene verbal creativity. We are very proud of the fact that, through the genre of the radio play, Slovene radio has become the producer and mediator of our nation's most widely distributed spoken culture and art, helping to shape the cultural sphere both at home and abroad.

*Translated by Henrik Ciglič*