

A Distinct Harmony

The Pontanima Choir and Chamber Orchestra is a project of Oci u Oci (Face to Face) Interreligious Service in Sarajevo. Founded in 1996, Pontanima's mission is to bring together people who love music and want to use the spiritual power of music to bring together the people of Bosnia.

The choir includes members from all ethnic groups in Bosnia, as well as from other countries around the world. Their repertoire includes music from the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish traditions, as well as songs from places far beyond the Balkans.

The Bosnian Franciscans sponsor regular performances at the Church of St. Anthony in Sarajevo. Pontanima has traveled throughout Bosnia, has performed internationally in Austria, Italy, and made their United States debut in Spring 2000.

*Behind the Pontanima Choir and Oci-u-Oci is Fra Ivo Markovic, a dynamic Franciscan priest from Bosnia. In Summer 1999 and Spring 2000, the **Crucible of War** team interviewed Fra Markovic. Here is what he had to say about his involvement with music and the inter-religious choir he helped found:*

I am a theologian. But my hobby is music. And, in a certain sense, I as a theologian think through music. In my theological work, I like to listen to the music that people listen to. Often I would go to buy some music and I would say, "What sells the most? Give me that." Then I look at the lyrics and then I listen to the melody. And, through that, I look at the state of society's soul.

Just before the war, in 1990, I went to Sarajevo and bought 10 to 20 records and, of course, I bought some turbofolk music. I returned to my room and I listened to it. And that was the first time that I got scared of war. What idiotic music! The idiocy of the lyrics. And the emptiness of the melody. Just pure rhythm. Body. War. Fear. In music. And that's such primitive music. Primitive lyrics and primitive melody that people listen to. Then I understood what kind of a catastrophe of soul happened after communism. That was my first feeling about war.

It is very important for being spiritual to see how the destruction of the soul through commercialization and idiotic passion could be deadly. And, of course, it is normal that behind all of that, is a whole framework of society.

One thing that we forget here in Bosnia, it is the power of quality and the power of beauty, whether that is a painting or music. And believe in it. Those are the steps which take us further.

Everything which comes out of nationalism and rises above it -- the more quality it has -- the more universal it becomes. And these singular cultures and national identities, they are good. But all of that is good if it has quality. When something is beautiful and high-quality, whether that is a picture from Islam or Orthodox spirituality, it is beautiful and it is the property of all of us. And all of us have to take it as ours. It's important that we reach these high peaks of spirituality.

I always worked with music. Always wherever I am, I have a choir of students. In Zagreb [where I spent several years in exile], I had a choir of students from Bosnia. I am always in contact with music and composing something.

Back in Sarajevo [after the war], I was thinking what to do. We are talking about dialogue. We are talking about peace. It is normal that I arrange myself in music. Then we decided to form the choir. I met with people. And I told them, "Let's not talk about dialogue. Let's make dialogue. Let's not talk about ecumenism. Let's live ecumenism. Let's call all the people who are spiritual, whether they are Christians, Muslims, Jews, Orthodox, or Buddhists. Let's take all of that as ours. Whatever is spiritual, it is good. It has quality. Whatever is on a way to God, let's take it as ours and let anybody join." And that's how we formed our choir.

There is one special spiritual discovery for me, working with this choir and this is the religious component.

There is a particular resonance within the spirit when you speak about the heart, the essence of other religions, you have to go deeply and understand their song. When I was singing their songs, Islamic songs, Orthodox songs, even songs from the Far East. You feel it in a deeper sense.

I saw myself how happy I was when I discovered how meditative one Muslim song could be when before I thought that Islam doesn't have any connection with music. Then I started listening to Jewish songs and I found out how beautiful they are. And then I realized how important that kind of music is to other people. And through those discoveries, our choir exists.

You have to enter into the other side, acculturate yourself, feel the other side, not be afraid of anyone. The same, allowing people to come your culture and sing your song without losing anything of their own. We discover one another and we grow.

We already gave a couple of Christian concerts with lots of Muslim songs. And now we are preparing a complete concert of Jewish music and a concert of Islamic music, and Orthodox music as well. We have a beautiful repertoire

It's a successful mission when people see us when we go into nationalistic areas, such as Vitez where there are a majority of Croats or in Rama on the other side where there are Muslims. When we start singing, when people hear the power of beauty, the power of soul, people become a little embarrassed and surprised and become more respectful.

It is normal that, after the war, we have problems. Often Christians say, "Why do I need a Muslim to sing in my church?" Instead of him being happy because Muslims are discovering his faith. Or very often, Muslims are saying, "Why we would need a Christian to be singing Islamic songs?" And, as you can imagine, we have lots of detractors. But we are so sure that our mission is a prophesy and righteous so we cannot give up.

Certainly we have some problems with the dynamics of the choir. That's just a sign of the sick post-war situation in Bosnia. On that path, you have to experience shocks and traumas. But, for me, it would be traitorous to give up on that path. And we will not give up.

For example, in the last three years, when I add up how much it costs the choir and the Interreligious Service, if I made a budget of how much money I would need to do this, I would never have started. Now, when I start looking through all my receipts, I get scared when I realized that I have spent hundreds of thousands of deutschmarks. What a huge goodness of people that they gave me all that money and where did I spend all that money? I don't even remember.

As you see, a person just keeps on going. And there is something in the old saying from the Bible where Jesus said "Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days." I love those kinds of projects which are open to perspective and meet the needs of people and I love to serve and be available. It always mobilizes goodness and creates a means for achievement. I experience it like a hand of God. I think that is the experience of all people involved in such projects of peace. Something that represents a human vision which all of humanity is longing for. This is just simply a mobilization of goodness and positive energy which in my opinion is something transcendental.