

Sounding Slovenian: The Cultural and Symbolic Significance of the Accordion

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Abstract

The accordion is one of the most recognizable musical instruments in Slovenia today and a prominent symbol of national identity, despite its relatively late introduction during the nineteenth century. This article examines the historical and cultural processes through which the instrument became embedded in Slovenian traditional music and acquired diverse symbolic meanings. Drawing on historical and archival sources, ethnomusicological research, and case studies of folk dance ensembles, popular folk-pop music, revival movements, and diaspora communities, the study traces the accordion's transformation from a vernacular dance instrument into a national cultural emblem. It argues that the accordion functions not as a fixed marker of Slovenian identity, but as a dynamic cultural symbol whose meanings are continually reshaped through performance, discourse, and negotiation across different social and historical contexts.

Keywords

accordion, diatonic button accordion, Slovenian traditional music, cultural symbol, identity, heritage

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Introduction

The accordion (*harmonika*) is currently one of the most widely recognized and emotionally charged musical symbols in Slovenia. It is played at village celebrations, staged folk dance presentations, urban concerts and television contests, displayed in tourism campaigns and museums, and visually omnipresent on posters and advertisements. The instrument has come to signify both folk tradition and cheerful national pride. For many Slovenians, the characteristic timbre of the accordion evokes familiarity, nostalgia, and belonging; for others, it represents a stereotype of rural conservatism or a sonic emblem of mass culture. Few musical instruments embody such a range of meanings or have undergone such profound transformations in social and symbolic status.

Although introduced relatively late, the accordion rapidly reshaped the soundscape of Slovenian folk music practices. As noted by Slovenian researchers of instrumental music and dance (e.g., Kumer 1983; Strajnar 1984, 1986; Ramovš 1992), the new instrument—particularly the diatonic button accordion—quickly displaced older local ensembles and transformed folk instrumental practice by simplifying ensemble structures and standardizing rhythmic accompaniment. By the early twentieth century, the accordion player in Slovenia had become a familiar cultural figure, simultaneously admired for his vitality and dismissed as a folk entertainer. The instrument's strong presence in the soundscape of Slovenian villages, however, endowed it with an aura of tradition and authenticity.

In addition to its immense popularity, the accordion and its sound are often invoked as symbols of “Slovenianness”. As evidenced by a statement published as early as 1929: “The accordion is indeed the most popular instrument of our people” (Slike 1929: 1), the instrument was, by the interwar period, already regarded as both a beloved part of everyday life and a recognized musical emblem of the Slovenian people. This perception endures today, as evidenced by a recent online article entitled “The Diatonic Button Accordion Is the Most Popular Instrument in Slovenia” (Glogovčan Belančič 2024), and a newspaper claim that “the sound of the accordion is the voice of the Slovenian nation” and that the instrument “is almost a national symbol” (Vaš 2020).

The nationalization of the accordion's image unfolded through multiple overlapping processes. It was integrated into staged representations of folk dance, where it became a key sound symbol in choreographed performances, reinforcing an aesthetic of cheerful Slovenian rurality. The accordion's rise to symbolic centrality was reinforced by the media and the music industry, especially through the genre of *narodnozabavna glasba* (Slovenian

folk-pop music). It soon entered the national soundscape as both an icon of belonging and a contested symbol of mass taste. The symbolic reach of the Slovenian accordion has extended far beyond national borders; among the Slovenian diaspora, the instrument often became an anchor of ethnic identity. In recent decades, the diatonic button accordion has joined the chromatic (principally piano) accordion within institutional frameworks: it has become part of the curriculum in Slovenian music schools and a focus of heritage projects. The diatonic button accordion has thus moved from representing vernacular “folk” practices to occupying a place in national cultural policy, symbolizing both continuity and cultural capital.

This research draws on scholarly literature and a range of primary sources, including magazine and newspaper articles, digital ethnographic materials, and archival documents. The analysis is also informed by my personal experience of active participation in several folk dance ensembles during the 1980s and 1990s, initially as a musician and instrumental band leader and later as the author of musical arrangements. For many years I also served as a member of the expert advisory board of the Slovenian Public Fund for Cultural Activities (JSKD) that monitors and designs educational activities for folk dance ensembles, and advises on the organization of various ensemble gatherings and public presentations. I was likewise directly involved in the folk music revival movement as a participant, musician, and band leader. As both musician and listener, I attended numerous concerts, festivals and other public performances, as well as workshops and educational programs, first as a participant and subsequently as a lecturer. Furthermore, I have also maintained a long-term engagement with the music of Slovenian emigrant communities, initially as a musician involved in educational activities and later as a researcher. Independently and in collaboration with colleagues from the Institute of Ethnomusicology of the Scientific Research Center (ZRC) of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SAZU), I conducted several field studies among Slovenian emigrant communities, the results of which have been partially published (e.g., Kunej – Kunej 2016; Kunej – Kunej 2017; Kovačič 2023). For the analysis of more recent developments, this autobiographical perspective is supplemented by observation and participation in events related to the revival movement, the activities of folk dance ensembles, and emigrant music, as well as by digital ethnography.

This article focuses primarily on the Slovenian context and examines the cultural and symbolic significance of the accordion in Slovenia. Given the breadth of the topic, it does not attempt a cross-cultural comparison, although similar processes can be observed in a variety of folk music traditions worldwide. A number of relevant publications address these is-

sues, including studies of diatonic button accordions in different cultural contexts, both within their regions of origin and in diaspora communities (e.g., Simonett 2012; Ní Chaoimh 2010; Snyder 1997; Miller and Tschaikov 2001; Wagner 2001; Falkner 2022; Garaj 2009, 2019).

The accordion's complex history makes it an ideal lens through which to examine broader questions of identity, heritage, and representation in Slovenian musical culture. It exemplifies what Stuart Hall (1990) outlined as an essential framework for understanding the complexities and fluidity of cultural identity: one that is constructed through history, discourse, and representation rather than rooted in a fixed essence. The article therefore examines how the accordion, with a particular emphasis on the diatonic button accordion, has been embedded in different regimes of value, serving as a tool of rural entertainment, a feature of stage folklore, a commodity of mass culture, and a heritage emblem in institutional contexts. It investigates how a comparatively modern, imported musical instrument could come to represent Slovenianness, and how its meanings have shifted across different contexts. The historical journey of the accordion reveals not only changes in musical aesthetics and social functions but also wider processes of cultural negotiation, in which notions of tradition, modernity, heritage, and national belonging are continuously (re)constructed.

From imported instrument to local practice: historical and organological contexts of the accordion in Slovenia

Although currently regarded as a quintessentially Slovenian instrument, the accordion is a relatively recent arrival in the region's musical landscape. Its story begins within the broader Central-European development of free-reed instruments in the early nineteenth century.

The accordion's genealogy is commonly traced to early nineteenth-century free-reed instruments associated with Christian Friedrich Ludwig Buschmann in Berlin around 1822 and Cyrill Demian in Vienna, whose 1829 patent introduced the key innovation of sounding an entire chord with a single button and gave the instrument its name: *Akkordeon*. Demian's bisonoric principle—producing different notes or chords according to bellows direction—became foundational for the diatonic button accordion. Early models were small, diatonic, and bisonoric instruments suited mainly to domestic music-making. However, subsequent technical improvements and mid-nineteenth-century mass production in Central Europe led to standardized designs, while unisonoric chromatic button and later piano accordions broadened the instrument's possibilities and became important alternatives.

Through the commercial networks of the Habsburg Empire, the new instrument also reached the Slovenian territories. In the second half of the nineteenth century, collective folk instrumental ensembles were already regarded as “an old custom”, while modern and fashionable music-making increasingly became the domain of the individual accordion player (Kovačič 2015: 88). A newspaper article from 1870 already noted that only at certain peasant weddings, “where the old customs are still observed ... and where there are still old musicians, scattered here and there like remnants of former times,” could one still find traditional folk bands instead of “a young fellow with an accordion” (Andrejčekov 1870: 165).

In Slovenia, diatonic button accordions were almost exclusively used during this period. Within folk music practices, this remained the case for several subsequent decades, and, even later, diatonic button accordions were much more widely used among folk musicians than piano accordions, which only began to gain prominence in the mid-twentieth century, while chromatic button accordions were used only exceptionally.

The diatonic button accordion’s popularity in folk music stemmed from its practicality, portability, strong sound projection, and stable tuning, which eliminated the need for frequent retuning. Its capacity to combine melody, harmony, and bass within a single instrument enabled a single player to replace an entire ensemble. The characteristic deep-sounding basses—often referred to as *helikon* or *heligon*—became, by the late nineteenth century, one of the instrument’s most recognizable acoustic features, occasionally even lending their name to the instrument itself (cf. Garaj 2019; Fabijan 2009). The natural alternation of bass and chord buttons with the left hand easily generated the rhythmic pulse essential for popular folk dances such as the polka, waltz, schottische, mazurka, Steirisch, and Ländler. The instrument proved ideal for both outdoor and indoor festivities, such as weddings, fairs, and other social events, particularly those involving dance. Among rural musicians it was also valued for its relatively simple construction and affordability compared to other types, such as the piano accordion.

Its diatonic tuning system encouraged intuitive, ear-based learning, which facilitated its rapid diffusion throughout rural areas. Traditional transmission relied primarily on oral practices, allowing self-taught musicians to develop their skills by listening and imitation, guided both by the instrument’s tactile logic and by the practical requirement that the music should “go to the feet”. This embodied connection between player, dancers, and community contributed to the accordion’s deep embedding in everyday life, explaining its emotional resonance and rendering it not a mere instrument, but a tool for creating social cohesion. As Zmaga

Kumer (1983) observed, all these practical advantages explain both its swift adoption and its acceptance as the defining folk instrument of the “modern era”.

Initially associated with folk tradition, diatonic button accordion playing became widespread across almost the entire Slovenian territory and among emigrant communities abroad. Its popularity is reflected in numerous vernacular names, such as *frajtonarca*, *meh*, *ramonka*, *gómbaste fúde*, *muga*, and *lájne* (cf. Kumer 1983), as well as in a strong domestic manufacturing tradition and extensive documentation preserved in the archives of the Institute of Ethnomusicology ZRC SAZU, which cover nearly all regions of Slovenia.¹ These archival holdings also reveal a rich diversity of local repertoires and performance styles, thereby demonstrating the instrument’s deep social embeddedness.

During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, three main variants of the diatonic button accordion were played in Slovenia: the *kranjska* or *stara kranjska* (Carniolan or old Carniolan type), the *štajerska* (Styrian type), and the *trieština* or *plonerica* (Trieste or Ploner type). These variants differed in appearance, tuning layouts, and playing techniques, each shaping local musical creativity and repertoire. With the emergence of the genre *narodnozabavna glasba* (Slovenian folk-pop music) the Styrian type became predominant. An important factor in this shift was the establishment of the Lojze Slak Ensemble in the 1960s, which was among the first to popularize the diatonic button accordion in popular music—specifically the Styrian type. As a result, this variant came to dominate, while the old Carniolan type gradually disappeared.² The *trieština* was used primarily in the Primorska and Istrian regions and was produced by the Ploner family in Trieste. Although still played occasionally today,³ it never achieved the same level of popularity as the Styrian type.

1 The analysis of field recordings shows that the diatonic button accordion is a highly dominant instrument in documentary recordings of instrumental music, both in solo performances and in various ensembles (cf. Turk 2024). It is also present on numerous commercial recordings on early gramophone records, including some of the earliest examples, recorded in Ljubljana as early as 1908 (for more details, see D. Kunej 2014; Kunej – Kunej 2017).

2 For more on this type of diatonic button accordion and its makers, see the monograph *Stare kranjske harmonike v Beli krajini* (Pezdirec 2025).

3 In 2023, the renowned music pedagogue and virtuoso on the diatonic button accordion Zoran Lupinc also published a teaching manual on how to play it titled *Trieština* (Lupinc 2023).



Figure 1 Wedding guests and musicians at a wedding in the village of Vrh in the Bela Krajina region, 1910. The accordionist is playing an old Carniolan type of diatonic button accordion. (Courtesy of the Archive of the Institute of Ethnomusicology, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts).

Initially imported into Slovenia, diatonic button accordions were soon produced by local craftsmen. By the second half of nineteenth century, a domestic manufacturing tradition had emerged. One of the earliest makers was Ivan Kucler, who began producing diatonic button accordions in the mid-1860s and trained numerous apprentices who carried on his craft (for more details, see Vrisk 2016: 78–81). In 1888, Franc Lubas became one of Slovenia's most important early producers, earning international recognition for his craftsmanship and advancing the domestic production of the instruments. Among Kucler's and Lubas's many apprentices were the half-brothers Anton and Avgust Železnik, as well as Anton Mervar, all of whom continued the tradition with notable success.⁴ In Trieste, Lorenzo Ploner had already begun producing instruments around 1862, giving rise to the *plonerca* or *trieština* line, which was continued by successive generations of the Ploner family (Ploner s. d.). After the Second World War, the Melodija

⁴ Anton Železnik began making accordions in 1928, and soon his workshop grew into an "Industrial Accordion Manufacturing Plant", which occasionally employed up to ten people. After learning the craft of accordion making, Anton Mervar emigrated to Cleveland (Ohio, USA), where he opened his own workshop and music store. He would become one of the most respected makers of diatonic button accordions among Slovenian immigrants in the USA.

Mengeš factory ensured the industrial production and widespread availability of the diatonic button accordion across Yugoslavia and beyond. In the decades that followed, numerous private workshops emerged in Slovenia, many of which remain active and internationally respected today. This continuity of craftsmanship—linking local skill, technological innovation, and symbolic identity—illustrates the enduring vitality of the diatonic button accordion in the musical and cultural life of Slovenia.

The early trajectory of the diatonic button accordion in Slovenia forms part of a wider Central European process in which the instrument symbolized modernity while simultaneously absorbing local traditions. Its arrival was not perceived as a foreign intrusion but as part of a shared cultural modernity to which Slovenian musicians actively contributed. Originating in the Austro-German environment, the diatonic button accordion reflects the musical aesthetics of the Alpine cultural area, which strongly influenced its development (cf. Garaj 2009, 2019).

In Slovenia, the instrument was tuned almost exclusively in major keys, mirroring the tonal preferences of Alpine folk traditions. The bass side, designed to support the basic harmonic functions of tonic, dominant, and subdominant, made it particularly well suited for the rhythmic, major-key dance melodies such as the polka and waltz that swept Central Europe in the nineteenth century (cf. Garaj 2009). Although its harmonic range was limited, the instrument's structural simplicity fostered directness, accessibility, and expressive immediacy in performance. These qualities were manifested in its clarity, drive, and danceability.

While the diatonic button accordion in Slovenia was initially associated with folk dance and vernacular music, it was gradually incorporated into popular musical genres, becoming a key instrument for performing folk-inspired music with a contemporary flair. With its increasing presence on the radio, in gramophone recordings, and on public stages, the instrument ceased to function solely as a symbol of rural intimacy. Instead, it came to represent a modernized form of Slovenian folk music and an essential component of the contemporary national musical soundscape, carrying different symbolic meanings across various social and cultural contexts.

Negotiating tradition and modernity: the accordion in folk dance ensembles

When Slovenian rural dance traditions were adapted for the stage, the accordion was simultaneously marginalized and valorized—dismissed as “modern” and “new,” yet indispensable for evoking the “traditional” sound of Slovenian folk dance. This paradox reflects broader ideological nego-

tiations between concepts of tradition, artistic refinement, and national representation.

Over a period of more than a century, Slovenian folk dance ensembles (*folklorne skupine*) have become established as primary platforms for the public representation of traditional folk music, dance, costume, rituals, and customs. In their transfer from traditional environments to the stage, these elements have been transformed from participatory village events into stylized presentations of a past folk tradition. Such staged performances are not direct continuations of living practices but rather reinterpretations of traditional material. Consequently, folk music and dance have been repeatedly redesigned, adapted, and arranged to meet the aesthetic and representational demands of the stage (cf. R. Kunej 2018; D. Kunej 2023).

The institutional foundations of Slovenian staged folklore were established in the 1930s with the *Folklorni inštitut* (today the Institute of Ethnomusicology ZRC SAZU) and the activities of its director France Marolt, whose festivals sought to document, reconstruct, and aesthetically present rural musical and dance traditions (see R. Kunej 2004, 2009). In this framework, vocal traditions and choreographed rituals were more easily treated as expressions of national identity than instrumental music, which was associated with local entertainment, improvisation, and everyday practice. Consequently, early staged folklore often marginalized vernacular instrumental accompaniment, often replacing village ensembles with stylized orchestral arrangements (cf. D. Kunej 2023: 76). The accordion—perceived as a relatively modern folk instrument—and especially the diatonic button accordion, which did not fit well into stylized orchestral arrangements, was largely excluded.

After the Second World War, folk dance ensembles expanded within the framework of Yugoslav cultural policy, although the diatonic accordion entered Slovenian staged performance only gradually. In the initial decades, the more versatile piano accordion, with its chromatic key arrangement, predominated either as a solo accompanying instrument or as part of the “Alpine band” model alongside a clarinet or violin and double bass. This reflected broader preferences for harmonically richer and more standardized accompaniments over older vernacular styles.

The introduction of the diatonic button accordion to folk dance ensembles came relatively late, coinciding with educational initiatives in the 1970s that sought to reintroduce “traditional Slovenian instruments” into stage practice (see D. Kunej 2023). This reflected both ideological and pedagogical shifts toward the pursuit of “authenticity” in folk performance. A key figure in this transition was Bruno Ravnika, who was an active collaborator with folk dance ensembles and an early advocate of the diatonic button

accordion. Drawing on his own experience as a musician and diatonic button accordion player, Ravnikar promoted the instrument's inclusion as a symbol of a "traditional Slovenian sound." In a 1974 article (Ravnikar 1974), he emphasized the difficulty of finding players, noting that the instrument was still excluded from music school curricula. His instructional text, complete with diagrams and simple scores, sought to fill this gap and train new accordionists for folk dance ensembles. The text also highlighted the considerable difficulty of integrating the diatonic button accordion into Slovenian folk dance ensembles:

"At all the seminars for the leaders of folk dance ensembles, we strongly recommended musical accompaniment on the diatonic button accordion. Perhaps we have even been successful in these endeavors, since quite a few participants have returned to us saying: 'We have found a diatonic button accordion, but, sadly, no one to play it!' Truly, it is not easy to find a button accordion musician these days, especially in the cities. The music schools consider the instrument taboo, and any curious beginners have nowhere to turn for guidance. This, of course, applies to all those folk dance ensembles whose leadership seeks tradition, and looks to include the diatonic button accordion in its performances..." (Ravnikar 1974: 15)

Ravnikar's efforts were followed in the late 1970s and 1980s by seminars and workshops in which musicians such as Mile Trampuš and Lojze Slak played an important role in popularizing the diatonic button accordion within folk dance ensembles. Scholars including Julijan Strajnar likewise underscored its importance, publishing field transcriptions and arrangements (cf. Strajnar 1986) that helped establish the instrument within the canon of "traditional" Slovenian instruments. During this period, the very use of the diatonic button accordion in folk dance ensembles symbolized a shift toward "traditional" musical aesthetics. Nevertheless, due to certain musical limitations and its strong regional associations, the diatonic button accordion could not fully replace the perceived "universality" of the piano accordion in folk dance ensemble repertoires, particularly in the performance of dances originating from other Yugoslav republics.⁵

5 My own experience confirms this situation. During this period, I began actively participating in folk dance ensembles, initially primarily as a piano accordion player. My experiences of various gatherings and festivals of folk dance ensembles confirm that the piano accordion remained the predominant

Following Slovenia's independence in 1991, however, most folk dance ensembles reoriented their programs toward exclusively Slovenian tradition, and the diatonic button accordion rapidly became their central instrument. In his early-1990s manual, Trampuš described the diatonic button accordion as "the most important Slovenian traditional instrument" (Trampuš 1993: 3)—a statement that reflected both public perception and growing institutional recognition. Its increasing popularity in popular music and among young musicians—together with its gradual inclusion in music-school curricula—further consolidated its dominant role in Slovenian folk dance ensembles.

From the 1970s through the 1990s, the diatonic button accordion increasingly came to embody "the traditional" within folk dance ensembles. Its bisonoric tone, rhythmic pulse, and tactile playing technique were interpreted as characteristic features of Slovenian rural musical practice. Subsequently, its widespread use in popular music and formal education further shaped the instrument's role. While institutionalization ensured continuity, it also risked standardizing and aestheticizing folk performance, distancing it from earlier vernacular practices.

As growing numbers of young accordionists—often formally trained or influenced by popular genres—entered folk dance ensembles, new performance aesthetics emerged. Tomaž Rauch noted that "progressively younger musicians have introduced increasingly more elements of modern playing" into ensemble repertoires (Rauch 2010: 20), prompting experts to reassert traditional styles through specialized seminars and publications (cf. Rauch 2008, 2010; Volk 2008). In response, during the 2000s and 2010s, the Public Fund for Cultural Activities (JSKD), responsible for supporting amateur cultural activities in Slovenia, organized numerous workshops aimed at educating leaders and musicians of folk dance ensembles in the use of traditional music, instruments, and performance styles. In particular, performances on the diatonic button accordion during this period increasingly revealed strong influences from contemporary folk-pop ensembles and the aesthetic frameworks of media-supported genres.⁶

The trajectory of the diatonic button accordion in Slovenian folk dance ensembles thus illustrates the shifting interplay between tradition and

instrument in Slovenian folk dance ensembles at that time, while the diatonic button accordion was used relatively rarely.

- 6 I frequently participated in these activities as a member of expert advisory bodies, contributing to the training of ensemble members and, as a juror and professional advisor at folklore festivals and reviews, evaluating and advising musicians and ensemble leaders on the implementation of traditional playing styles.

modernity. Initially excluded for being too contemporary, it was later introduced precisely because it had come to signify “tradition.” Over the past two decades, however, influenced by popular genres and mass media, playing styles within folk dance ensembles have again diverged from vernacular practice, introducing new elements of modernity into staged folk dance performance.

From popular entertainment to national icon: the accordion in Slovenian folk-pop music

The second half of the twentieth century marked the accordion’s transformation from a rural folk instrument into a sonic emblem of Slovenian mass culture. This transition was driven by mass media—including radio, commercial recordings, and television—which disseminated its sound far beyond regional boundaries. The principal vehicle of this transformation was Slovenian folk-pop music (*narodnozabavna glasba*), a hybrid genre that fused folk dance rhythms, accordion timbres, and popular-song structures. Emerging in the post-war period of socialist modernization, folk-pop music bridged rural and urban audiences while projecting an image of cheerful industriousness within the new Yugoslav society. It simultaneously continued and reinterpreted pre-war popular traditional dance music, retaining the polka and waltz while infusing them with post-war optimism and technological polish.⁷

The breakthrough came with the formation of the Avsenik Brothers Ensemble (*Ansambl bratov Avsenik*) in 1953, led by Slavko Avsenik on piano accordion and his brother Vilko as clarinetist and arranger. Their numerous public performances, recordings, and frequent radio broadcasts defined a new sound model that dominated Slovenian and Central European popular folk music for decades. Combining accordion, clarinet, trumpet, baritone, and guitar, the ensemble created a bright, layered timbre that retained the rhythmic drive of folk dance while appealing to urban audiences. Following this model, numerous similar ensembles emerged,

7 Scholarly engagement with Slovenian folk-pop music has only intensified during the past two decades. This delay can be attributed to several factors, most notably a long-standing lack of academic interest in “mainstream” popular-music genres, as well as historically conditioned and institutionally embedded reservations toward folk-pop music, which was often regarded as aesthetically inferior (cf. Kovačič – Šivic 2023). One of the earliest comprehensive accounts of the genre was provided by Ivan Sivec in two monographs: the first volume (1998) is titled *The Development of Folk-Pop Music from Its Beginnings to 1973* and the second (2003) *The Development of Folk-Pop Music from 1973 to 2003*.

structuring their quintet formations around the piano accordion; such ensembles remain highly popular within Slovenian folk-pop music to this day. Their success redefined the image of the accordionist from a village entertainer into a national celebrity and cultural ambassador.

Parallel to Avsenik's polished, orchestral sound, Lojze Slak and his ensemble, which was founded in 1963, developed a more rustic and intimate approach that placed the diatonic button accordion at the center. Slak's virtuoso playing of the diatonic button accordion and his warm vocal delivery embodied the ideals of sincerity and modesty associated with the folk musician. Through frequent public performances and radio and television appearances, his songs became household staples, embedding the instrument's timbre into the auditory memory of generations. Slak's ensemble (*Ansambel Lojzeta Slaka*), structured as a trio of instruments—diatonic button accordion, guitar, and string bass (e.g., double bass)—also influenced numerous other ensembles that followed its model. In such a trio, the diatonic button accordion was the central instrument. Its popularity increased further in the 2000s, when it began to be incorporated into ensembles oriented toward more contemporary and pop genres. Today, many ensembles also combine both formats: a quintet modeled on the Avsenik Brothers Ensemble and a trio modeled on the Lojze Slak Ensemble. When performing, they often alternate between these formats, thereby adding variety to their programs.⁸

By the mid-1970s, the sound of both the piano accordion and the diatonic button accordion had become one of the primary auditory markers of Slovenian identity in mass culture. While state broadcasting played a crucial role in constructing this sonic landscape, television further reinforced its symbolic prominence. Family-oriented programs presented smiling musicians against idyllic Alpine backdrops, with the accordion serving as the visual and sonic centerpiece. Such imagery stabilized a national narrative of harmony, diligence, and rural cheerfulness. This process also “nationalized the accordion” (cf. Kovačič 2015) by aestheticizing it as a timeless tradition, while obscuring its hybrid, transnational origins. Consequently, the accordion became at once a populist and an officially sanctioned instrument—celebrated in state media yet regarded ambivalently by academic elites.

Competitions and festivals associated with Slovenian folk-pop music codified a stylized form of “Slovenianness,” assessing performers not only by their technical accuracy but also by their phrasing, articulation, and the

8 Based on my field observations of concerts and public performances and on an interview with a member of a local folk-pop ensemble (N.K. 2026, interview).

expressive attributes deemed nationally characteristic. This institutionalization paralleled a broader shift from intuitive local musicianship to formalized, teachable technique (cf. Jeram 2022), turning the accordionist into both a cultural hero and a custodian of national style.

By the late 1990s, the accordion, and especially the diatonic button accordion, had become a fully established cultural symbol, appearing on postage stamps, in tourism and political imagery, and at sports events and state ceremonies. Its timbre condensed associations of cheerfulness, perseverance, nostalgia, and belonging, making it highly effective for media branding and cultural diplomacy, yet vulnerable to sentimentality and cliché. In the following years, the instrument continued to mediate between nostalgia and modernity: folk-pop and pop-crossover ensembles flourished, boutique makers marketed the diatonic button accordion as a luxury heritage product, and “authenticity” became a form of market value.

Over the past two decades, folk-pop music and its central instrument have increasingly entered the discourse of national representation, with leading performers receiving high state honors and the genre becoming entangled in ideological and party-political debates. Its inclusion in Slovenia’s Register of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2017 officially confirmed a paradoxical trajectory: music once criticized as commercial was institutionalized as heritage, thereby reaffirming the accordion’s dual identity as



Figure 2 *Harmonika Slovenka*, a type of diatonic button accordion designed by Klemen Rošer—a European champion diatonic button accordion player, teacher, and president of the Association of Diatonic Button Accordion of Slovenia (cf. *Harmonika Slovenka*, s. d.). In promotional materials, the instrument is often described as a “symbol of Slovenian pride” or as an accordion representing Slovenia’s “rich cultural heritage and pride” (*Harmonika Slovenka*, *Mojastoritev* s. d.).

vernacular tradition and professionalized art, and its status as one of the most resonant musical symbols of Slovenian popular identity.

From contested tradition to fluid identity: the accordion and the Slovenian folk music revival

While Slovenian folk-pop music became the dominant sound of Slovenian popular culture, its success also provoked strong intellectual and artistic resistance. One such response was articulated through the folk music revival movement. From the late 1970s onward, new generations of musicians and researchers sought to reclaim the notion of “traditional” folk music through this developing movement. Appearing in a form similar to folk revivals elsewhere in Europe, the Slovenian folk music revival drew inspiration from both ethnographic research and international movements, positioning itself as a counterbalance to what it perceived as the commercialization and aesthetic simplification of national traditions.

The Slovenian folk music revival movement⁹ initially comprised only a few ensembles, but the scene expanded in the following decades, particularly after Slovenia’s independence. Early groups such as Trutamora Slovenica, Trinajsto prase, and Istranova, followed by many others, sought to reinterpret folk heritage through research-based performance, often combining fieldwork and archive sources with creative experimentation. They sought to reconstruct local repertoires, old modal systems, archaic instruments and soundscapes, while also reviving traditional musical practices that had disappeared from everyday use.¹⁰

The revival movement thus positioned itself as a moral and aesthetic alternative to folk-pop music. In contrast to the composed and stylized cheerfulness of this accordion-centered genre, revival ensembles employed fiddles, flutes, whistles, double basses, and various homemade instruments,

9 For a more detailed account of the history and activities of the Slovenian folk music revival movement, see D. Kunej 2025a, 2025b.

10 As the founder of one of the early and highly influential folk music revival groups explained, their aim was to base their repertoire on the folk traditions of the entire Slovenian territory, with particular emphasis on its peripheral regions. These areas preserved vibrant musical traditions characterized by more archaic and distinctive sonic features, which were markedly different from the stylized forms of folk music commonly promoted by the media. For this reason, their repertoire focused primarily on lesser-known dance melodies. His vision, shared by other members of the group, was to establish a revival ensemble grounded in the soundscape of the early nineteenth century—a period preceding the widespread dominance of the diatonic button accordion in Slovenian folk music (R.R. 2025, interview). Similar principles guided other revival groups.

deliberately avoiding the accordion to distance their sound from folk-pop music and its associated mass-cultural stereotypes.¹¹

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, not only the folk revival movement but also Slovenian cultural discourse more broadly was characterized by heated debates over the legitimacy of folk-pop music. Many critics—writing in magazines such as *Glasbena mladina* (GM)—derided the genre as “poor quality and uninteresting music” (Kozmos 1973: 2), “musical folk kitsch” (Jakša 1983: 21), “fake folk-pop non-music” (Bašin 1979: 19) and the “bargain bin of unoriginality and bad taste” (Jakša 1983: 21). Folklorists, ethnomusicologists, and other intellectuals frequently viewed the rise of the accordion-based popular style as a degradation of traditional culture. Omerzel-Terlep described it as the “bargain bin of Slovenian creativity and identity” (Omerzel-Terlep 1988) and as “the emptying of a nation’s spiritual life (identity?) and evidence of integration into the materialistic worldview of the European individual and the entertainment industry” (Omerzel-Terlep 1991: 17). Other commentators dismissed it as a newly composed music based on “quasi-folk elements” (Ravnič 1986: 3).

Both the piano accordion and the diatonic button accordion, which had been associated primarily with traditional music in previous decades, became the sonic emblems of Slovenian folk-pop music (cf. Kovačič 2015; Kovačič – Šivic 2023) and, for many intellectuals, a marker of “fake tradition”: a mass-mediated form of quasi-folk expression designed more for entertainment and commercial purposes than for the maintenance of rooted cultural continuity.¹² As one commentator observed, “in the ‘kingdom’

11 One member of a revival group recalled that, in the early stages of the ensemble’s activity, considerable time was devoted to searching for an appropriate sound, which also guided the choice of instruments. Initially, the ensemble’s sound was based primarily on the use of two violins and a small string bass, with additional instruments introduced later. At that time, the violin was only rarely represented in folk dance ensembles and in the folk-pop music genre. By foregrounding it, the group also sought to consciously distance itself from the so-called Alpine sound, characterized by the accordion as the central instrument and dominant both in media representations and in popular perception (T.R. 2019, interview).

12 The experience of one prominent musician associated with folk music revival movement is also revealing. As a child, he studied the piano accordion at his local music school and later, as an active accordion player, regularly participated in folk dance ensembles and community events, occasionally performing as the lead musician at weddings. Through these experiences, he developed an appreciation for the social function of live dance music—an orientation that later informed the activities of the revival group in which he participated. However, within this group, he never performed on either the piano or the diatonic button accordion, despite his background as an accordion player (T.R. 2019, interview).

of the accordion, folk instruments [...] are a real rarity" (Ravnič 1986: 3). Despite such criticism, the instrument's omnipresence—above all in the media—made it impossible to ignore. In Slovenian folk-pop music, its sound had become the "voice of the people," even for those who questioned its artistic legitimacy.

The debate surrounding the accordion and Slovenian folk-pop music reflected deeper ideological tensions in socialist and post-socialist Slovenia, mirroring broader social hierarchies between "(contemporary) popular music and folk culture of the recent past" (Muršič 2000: 308), as well as those between rural and educated urban milieus. The accordion straddled both worlds: it symbolized grassroots creativity and collective participation, while also embodying mass-media production and commercial success. The instrument thus functioned as a double emblem—of inclusivity and unity on the one hand, and of commercialization and bad taste on the other.

By the 2000s, amid processes of globalization and crossover trends, the boundaries between folk revival and popular music began to blur. Younger performers increasingly experimented with genre fusion, incorporating the timbres of the diatonic button accordion in particular into jazz, rock, and world-music contexts. These hybrid projects reflected a postmodern sensibility that questioned the very notion of "pure" tradition. In this context, the accordion once again underwent a symbolic transformation—from representing "fake tradition" to embodying the fluidity of Slovenian cultural identity.

The sound of homeland and happiness: the accordion in the Slovenian diaspora in the United States

The symbolic reach of the accordion extends far beyond the borders of Slovenia. Among emigrant communities, particularly in the United States, it served as a sonic bridge between the homeland and New World. Within these diasporic spaces, the accordion mediated between memory and adaptation, evoking nostalgia for the lost home while expressing the optimism of new beginnings. Its sound thus became both a recollection of the past and an affirmation of belonging in a new cultural environment.

Music was a central part of social life among Slovenian immigrants in the United States, and accordionists were a source of pride within the community. In many families, there were several members who were able to play the instrument, often taking a leading role at social events where they performed folk songs and dance tunes from the homeland. These familiar melodies inspired spontaneous dancing and collective celebration, creating a sense of a "home away from home."

Within the Slovenian immigrant community—especially before the Second World War and among migrants from rural regions—the diatonic button accordion was the most popular instrument. This preference persisted in later decades, as many musicians, including prominent leaders of Cleveland-style polka bands,¹³ began their musical careers on the diatonic button accordion (often referred to in the United States as the “cheesebox” or “button box”). Once the instrument had been mastered, advanced players typically transitioned to chromatic instruments, most often the piano accordion (cf. Dolgan 2006: 10–19).

In Slovenian diaspora communities, however, the accordion’s sound was more than mere entertainment; it functioned as a mnemonic device preserving emotional ties to the homeland and to ancestry. Community events regularly featured accordion performances as markers of ethnic continuity. For the first generation of immigrants, the instrument’s melodies evoked memories of family gatherings, church picnics, and village festivities, symbolizing both community survival and moral integrity. For their descendants, the same sound came to represent cultural heritage, identity, and pride.¹⁴ Today, youth ensembles and cultural schools teach accordion playing as part of heritage education, while professional musicians incorporate it into fusion genres that connect Slovenian roots with contemporary global sounds.

The history of the accordion in the Slovenian diaspora in the United States is closely tied to the rise of Cleveland-style polka music. Polka music emerged among Central and Eastern European immigrants as a hybrid popular genre that blended familiar European dance forms such as polkas, waltzes, *schottisches*, *mazurkas* and others with American entertainment culture. By the early twentieth century, these tunes, once linked to village

13 One such figure was the renowned Frankie Yankovich, who was initially an accomplished diatonic button accordion player and only later gradually learned to play the piano accordion (Dolgan 2006: 11). He rose to national prominence in the late 1940s with records that sold in their millions, earning him the title “America’s Polka King”. He thus symbolized the integration of Slovenian musical heritage into the broader landscape of popular music in the United States.

14 The experience of a folk music revival group that toured Slovenian diaspora communities in Argentina is equally telling. Presenting older forms of traditional Slovenian music, the group was generally well received, and the tour was considered successful. However, some audience members expressed disappointment, finding the music unfamiliar and, above all, noting the absence of the accordion sound they associated with Slovenian traditional music. For these listeners—shaped largely by folk-pop music and media representations—the accordion functioned as a dominant marker of Slovenian musical heritage (T.R. 2019, interview).

festivities, had been modernized and commercialized for dance halls and radio. Rather than constituting a single style, polka represented a fusion of folk idioms from various ethnic communities, transformed through the social and technological conditions of immigrant America (cf. Greene 1992).

Among the immigrant groups that shaped this genre, Slovenians were particularly influential. Cleveland, which by 1910 had around 15,000 Slovenian residents, became a major center of Slovenian-American musical life. Music was integral to social gatherings, and the accordion—particularly the diatonic button accordion in this period—served as its defining instrument. The rhythmic energy and danceable character of the music suited the new community halls, such as the Slovenian National Home on St. Clair Avenue, built in 1924, where hundreds of young immigrants danced and socialized, blending folk heritage with urban modernity (Dolgan 2006: 12–14).

Instrument making and the early recording industry were crucial in defining this sound. The craftsman Anton Mervar, who arrived in Cleveland in 1913, opened a music store and, in 1921, founded his own accordion factory specializing in diatonic button accordions, producing high-quality instruments that became popular throughout the Slovenian community (Debevec 2014: 104–105; see also Anton Mervar 2024; Anton Mervar s. d.). He also facilitated the first gramophone recordings of accordionist Matija Arko and his Hoyer Trio, whose lively performances on 78 rpm discs popularized Slovenian dance styles among Slovenian and other emigrant communities in the United States and helped lay the foundations for Cleveland-style polka (cf. Kunej – Kunej 2017).

One of the key figures in refining this sound was William Lausche, a dentist and pianist who combined Slovenian folk melodies with elements of American jazz and swing. His compositions and recordings from the 1920s and 1930s bridged traditional and popular idioms, influencing a new generation of accordion players and band leaders after the Second World War, such as Johnny Pecon, Eddie Habat, Lou Trebar, Johnny Vadnal, and Frankie Yankovich, who began to favor the piano accordion. As Yankovich himself famously declared, “Polkas make you forget your troubles. [...] It’s the happiest music this side of heaven” (In Memoriam 1998; cf. Dolgan 2006: ix), a statement that perfectly captured both the optimism of postwar immigrant life and the cheerful spirit that made the Slovenian polka music a lasting emblem of joy and community.

Over time, the Slovenian-style or Cleveland-style polka developed into a distinctive American genre—accordion-centered, rhythmically propulsive, and melodically bright. Old Slovenian tunes were adapted, renamed, and reinterpreted for new audiences. Through this process, Slovenian immigrant

music not only survived but also helped to shape the sound of working-class festivity in mid-twentieth-century America, transforming the accordion into both a symbol of homeland and a marker of joyful belonging.

Within Slovenian diaspora communities in the United States, Button Box Clubs represent a distinctive institutional form closely associated with accordion playing and Cleveland-style polka music. These associations bring together performers of the diatonic button accordion and operate not merely as sites of musical practice and social interaction, but as key arenas for the negotiation and reproduction of cultural identity. From a theoretical perspective, they can be understood as participatory communities in which musical performance functions as a form of embodied cultural memory, sustaining affective ties to the homeland while simultaneously adapting to new social contexts. Such clubs have been particularly active in regions with strong Slovenian-American populations—most notably Ohio, Pennsylvania, and the Chicago area—where they organize jam sessions, festivals, and social gatherings that reinforce communal belonging.

Through these activities, Button Box Clubs contribute to processes of heritagization, in which selected musical practices—especially polka repertoire and diatonic button accordion playing—are framed, codified, and transmitted as markers of ethnic continuity. At the same time, they exemplify what Turino (2008) terms “participatory music-making”, emphasizing collective engagement over formal performance hierarchies. The production of recordings (LPs and CDs) and the informal transmission of repertoire further extend these practices beyond immediate social settings, enabling both preservation and transformation. Fieldwork observations¹⁵ confirm that such clubs function as dynamic cultural nodes where nostalgia, social cohesion, and creative reinterpretation intersect, allowing Slovenian musical heritage to be continuously rearticulated within the diasporic experience.

One of the most distinctive expressions of Slovenian musical identity in the diaspora, centered on the accordion, is the Polka Mass, a liturgical adaptation that emerged in the 1970s under the leadership of Father Frank Perkovich in Minnesota.¹⁶ The innovation combined the structure of the Catholic Mass with the rhythmic idiom of Slovenian-American polka. In this version, the piano or diatonic button accordion replaced the organ, while sacred texts were set to familiar polka melodies and rhythms. The Polka Mass arose from the desire to merge ethnic culture with spiritual practice in the wake of the Second Vatican Council’s reforms. For many

15 I conducted field research within Slovenian diaspora communities in Ohio in 2010, in Ohio, Illinois, and Pennsylvania in 2015, 2016, and 2018, and in California and Minnesota in 2024.

16 For more on the Polka Mass, see Kovačič 2023.

participants, this fusion represented an act of creative resilience: the same music that once accompanied weddings and dances could now accompany the Eucharist. Although controversial—some clergy criticized it as a profanation—it became a powerful symbol of ethnic perseverance and religious inclusivity, uniting joy and devotion in a single sonic expression.

In conclusion, the story of the accordion in the Slovenian-American diaspora exemplifies how music functions as a vehicle of memory, adaptation, and identity. The accordion (especially the diatonic button accordion, once a marker of rural life in Slovenia) became an instrument of transnational belonging, equally at home in Cleveland dance halls and Minnesota churches. Its sound continues to embody the emotional dialectic of nostalgia and joy, symbolizing both the endurance of Slovenian heritage and its creative transformation within the multicultural landscapes of the United States.

Conclusion

The accordion in Slovenia is a story of movement—across regions, genres, and meanings. From its nineteenth-century origins in Central Europe to its present status as one of the symbols of Slovenian identity, the accordion reflects the broader dynamics of cultural change that it has both mirrored and helped to shape. For nearly two centuries, it has mediated between tradition and modernity, local practice and national imagination, emotion and performance, intimacy and spectacle.

Throughout the twentieth century, its meanings expanded and often conflicted. In the interwar period, it embodied both vitality and modernity; under socialism, it entered the nationwide soundscape through folk-pop music, merging folk idioms with popular entertainment. Through the reach of radio and television, and with the help of gramophone records and other sound media, it became aural shorthand for “home” and “the people,” even as critics dismissed it as overly commercial or insufficiently traditional.

Different symbolic meanings persist today. Placed in a wider Central-European and global frame, the Slovenian accordion reveals both shared patterns and a unique intensity. Similar instruments in Austria, Germany, Slovakia, the Czech lands and some other countries followed parallel paths of popularization, but in Slovenia one instrument came to define the national sound more fully than in many comparable contexts. In folk dance ensembles and other forms of staged folklore, the accordion signifies both tradition and national pride, although it is often detached from its vernacular roots. Institutions and music schools have ensured its continuity, yet in doing so have also formalized what was once an improvised practice. The shift from oral to written modes of teaching has preserved—and in

many respects advanced—technical proficiency, but it has also reduced the spontaneity and diversity that once characterized traditional music-making. In diaspora contexts, the instrument continues to serve as a “sound of the homeland,” connecting memory and belonging across generations.

Contemporary forms of identification make these dynamics particularly tangible. The following examples highlight the significance of the diatonic button accordion, which in the past two decades has carried especially strong symbolic meanings. The public memory of Lojze Slak and his inseparable association with the diatonic button accordion is curated not only in the museum complex at Mirna Peč (cf. Muzej s. d.), but also through monuments such as the memorial on Trška gora (cf. Spomenik s. d.) and his grave, marked by a tombstone in the shape of a diatonic button accordion (Lojze Slak 2025)—sites where private remembrance intersects with public iconography. Major competitions continue to reinforce the instrument’s prestige. Slovenia’s long-running *Zlata harmonika Ljubecne* (Golden Accordion of Ljubecna) celebrated its 44th edition in 2025, with media coverage and official sources presenting it as the country’s leading national event (cf. Zlata harmonika 2025). Several Slovenian musicians have also earned the prestigious title of World Champion in diatonic button accordion performance at international competitions. Mass-cultural events and popular television shows further extend the instrument’s symbolic reach. In the 2024 season of *Slovenija ima talent* (Slovenia’s Got Talent), a diatonic duo received the Golden Buzzer, accompanied by the judges’ comment: “[...] you two are modern, contemporary, so universal, so unique ... what a party you created!” (Kakšen žur 2024), while accordionist Luka Konečnik reached the finals (Luka Konečnik 2024)—an illustrative example of the instrument’s continued popularity and visibility in mainstream media. In 2025, popular culture, endurance sport, and heritage quite literally converged when musician Anže Zavrl ran the 42-kilometer Ljubljana Marathon while playing the diatonic button accordion, which was reported in the national media as a Guinness-World-Record first and was enthusiastically celebrated as an achievement (cf. Loboda 2025).

Such cases show how symbolic value is created in everyday life as much as on curated stages, and the instrument’s endurance demonstrates that heritage is a dynamic continuity. Meanings remain situational: for some, it evokes humor or nostalgia, vernacular forms of identity and belonging, or even commercialization and mass entertainment; for others, it signifies tradition, virtuosity, or innovation. The accordion’s power lies in its productive paradox—at once foreign and familiar, popular entertainment and heritage emblem, personal keepsake and national symbol. Rather than embodying

a fixed essence, the accordion offers a soundscape and repertoire through which identities are continually negotiated.

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List of interviews

- Interview with N.K., 19 March 2026, Ljubljana, interview conducted by the author.
- Interview with R.R., 3 March 2025, Ljubljana, interview conducted by the author.
- Interview with T.R., 20 July 2019, Beltinci, interview conducted by the author.