

Interfaith repertoire: A Bosnian choir sings reconciliation

by [Andrew Packman](#) in the [June 13, 2012](#) issue



INNOVATIVE PEACEMAKING: In Bosnia, where the scars of war are still evident and ethnic divisions are deep, the interfaith and multiethnic Pontanima choir is a source of hope and healing. Photo COURTESY ANDREW PACKMAN

It's a summer evening in Sarajevo, and I'm at choir rehearsal. The director is working with the first and second tenors on a sensitive contrapuntal exchange in Antonio Lotti's *Crucifixus*. They focus intently, trying to keep the tight dissonances intact.

Then a third voice pierces their subtle harmony. Undulating with an expressive vibrato, it begins to riff on an entirely different scale. The tenors' wincing eyes dart confusedly at each other, and the director finally brings the cacophony to a halt. A chuckle drifts across the room as, one by one, we realize that it's sunset and the third voice belongs to the minaret across the street, calling the faithful to prayer.

The Muslim voice's complex melody clashes with the eight-part harmony of Baroque Catholicism. But it is by no means alien to the ensemble. The choir, called

Pontanima, features voices from across Bosnia's religious and ethnic spectrum: it's part Catholic, part Orthodox, part Muslim, part Jewish and entirely Bosnian. Pontanima's repertoire places the haunting drones of Rachmaninoff's *Vespers* alongside Muslim *ilahijas* (praise songs) and the playful melodies of Sarajevo's Sephardic community.

In Bosnia, the religious other quite recently meant the invading army that leveled your house of worship and killed your father. Given this history, the proximity of these songs and these singers is a remarkable and important thing.

I got to know this small band of Bosnians when I traveled to the Balkans to study faith-based reconciliation efforts. My tradition, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), has a history of particular concern for Christian unity. Our founders railed against the scandal of denominationalism; 200 years later, we live in an interfaith world divided by racism and religious intolerance. What do unity and reconciliation mean in this brave new world?

This question led me to Sarajevo, a city that proved a great fit for me. A child of an interfaith marriage, I spent years negotiating religious difference in my own family. Sarajevo's long history of mixed marriages, and the vibrant culture that resulted, appealed to me at a gut level. The city's pluralism has been the source of a uniquely beautiful way of life—good news for a world filled with clashes between cultures.

But Bosnia's history is also pockmarked with periods of fiery violence. From 1992 to 1995, this historically multireligious country was torn apart at the seams. "Ethnic cleansing" is the official, anesthetized way of describing the last circle of hell: mass killings, concentration camps, systematic rape used as a weapon of war. What remained was a severely traumatized people—and the most ethnically segregated Bosnia in its 800-year history.

Sarajevo was hit especially hard by this trauma. In the aftermath of its brutal four-year siege, the city mourned 10,000 dead and many more wounded. A huge percentage of the population had by that time fled to places like Austria, Canada, Germany and the U.S.

The city's choirs felt these losses deeply, and not just in terms of numbers. The sharp blade of nationalism that carved the country into ethnically pure chunks pierced these ensembles as well. Multiethnic choirs disbanded. The few groups that emerged from the ruins did so under the aesthetic of segregation and purity.

Ivo Markovic recognized that the root problem was fear. Everywhere the Bosnian Franciscan friar looked, he saw people fearful of the religious other. And after four vicious years of war, who could blame them? Politicians stoked these flames, manipulating their constituencies as they vied for power. Religious leaders drew more lines than they crossed.

So Markovic approached a small Catholic choir at St. Anthony's Church in Sarajevo with an idea: invite your friends to sing, whatever their faith (or lack thereof). There weren't very many choirs left in town—or in Bosnia—and singers responded to the invitation. Soon, what began as a Catholic choir singing Catholic hymns grew into something else: a choir of many faiths singing music that reflects the natural diversity of Bosnia.

But Pontanima is more than just an interfaith choir. Markovic's vision is for a living, breathing project of reconciliation. He believes that if people learn to sing the religious other's songs of lament, praise, grief and hope, they will have come a long way toward loving one another. And if people hardened by the war can have an experience of beauty not just in spite of but based on Bosnia's pluralism, reconciliation might just begin to take root.

"When I started this project, I had this idea." Markovic told me as he took a sip of potent Bosnian coffee. "What will the relationship among religions be in 30 years? In 50 years? Let us realize it now in the music."

When I walked into my first rehearsal, I found a smoke-filled room of regular people; it seemed more like an old Chicago speakeasy than a heavenly choir healing the wounds of war. Pontanima's history is filled with spats, failed romances and the church-choir pettiness many of us know too well. But this doesn't detract from the group's work; if anything it proves that their work is real, that it is possible for real people. The reality the group aims to reveal may seem far off and even otherworldly, but it is wrapped thoroughly in the fleshiness of lived human life.

For almost 15 years, Markovic has taken this message on the road. The choir has made a career of going to difficult places, often choosing the cities and villages that caught the brunt of ethnic cleansing and that remain deeply segregated today. I traveled with its members to Belgrade, the Serbian capital and the place from which the war was orchestrated.

Belgrade has come a long way since the 1990s, but its population is still bitterly divided. As we drove down the wide boulevards, I noticed a stenciled image spray-painted on buildings and storefronts throughout the city. Eventually I recognized it as the face of General Ratko Mladić, the *genocidaire* of Srebrenica. When I deciphered the words *national hero* stenciled onto each image, the need for Pontanima's message became frighteningly clear.

The night of the concert, we arrived at the Gallery of Frescoes, a stately museum dedicated to Serbian Orthodox art. Under the holy gaze of the icons, Pontanima performed music never heard there before. Along with the familiar selections from the divine liturgy, those gathered felt the syncopation of the Sephardic melodies and the raw power of the *ilahijas*.

Pontanima's message can resonate with even the most difficult audiences. While people bombarded with propaganda can build up a resistance to hearing the other side, music operates through different channels—it vibrates on frequencies below the mind's filters. It can seep into the hardest hearts and strike a note that rings true. The choir's members report that it's often the songs that are most other—those that, by the logic of nationalism, should disgust audiences—that bring listeners to tears.

Shortly after the war, Pontanima performed in a large Catholic church in the Sarajevo neighborhood of Bistrik. Vijeko, a Bosnian Catholic, told me that he went to the church that night expecting to hear traditional Catholic hymns. When the choir leapt into the hauntingly expressive *Allahu ekber*, he was shocked. "How could they sing these words in a Catholic church?" he asked. "But when I stopped to think what these words mean, simply 'God is great,' I thought, why *shouldn't* we sing this in a Catholic church?"

As Vijeko's eyes filled with tears and his knees began to shake, his mind drifted to think of his wife, Azra, who is of Muslim descent. He thought of all the tension between Muslims and Christians in his country, and yet he realized too that this difference was one that he and Azra nurtured and celebrated in their own marriage. "I realized then," he tells me, "just how pointless this whole war was."

But is this enough? Do sentimental feelings count as reconciliation? Bosnia remains segregated, and nationalistic vitriol still parades as political discourse. What good is a small choir in a place where political theorists still deem reconciliation to be

impossible?

While having coffee with several choir members, I heard Josip “Pepi” Katavic, the group’s director, murmur something about success. I asked, “What does success look like for Pontanima?” Katavic replied in his native tongue; there were chuckles around the table and a lot of nodding heads. Someone finally translated for me: “That we exist—that is success.” Given what these Sarajevans have been through, the statement means something. By existing and performing amid a hostile political reality, Pontanima points to the possibility that the way things are is not the way they need to be.

Perhaps the best explanation of Pontanima’s reconciling potential comes from Mirsad. The Sarajevan physical therapist exemplifies the lighthearted quality of Bosnian culture. He is constantly telling jokes. While these usually draw a raucous response from any Bosnian within earshot, I respond with a look of confusion, since I only understand every third word or so. Once the laughter cools, someone slaps him on the back and tells him to fill me in, and Mirsad happily obliges.

But on this occasion, his tone was more serious. “The politicians make the rules here,” he said. He looked down the street and shook his head as if thoroughly disgusted. He spoke of the great emptiness he feels when Pontanima tours across the politically carved carcass that once was Yugoslavia.

A native Sarajevan, Mirsad was raised in a religiously mixed home, his very existence a testament to Bosnian pluralism. But now, “when the choir went to Mostar, for example, you can see that the Catholics live on one side of the bridge, the Muslims on the other.” This kind of segregation tears at the heart of who Mirsad is. So he and Bosnians like him are left empty, while the politicians whose careers depend on segregation fill their coffers.

“The politicians make the rules here.”

“But what about Pontanima?” I asked. “Don’t they play by different rules?”

“Pontanima is an illusion,” he said. “It is an illusion because it is not the way things are here, where politicians make the rules.” He paused. “But it is the way it could be.”

Illusions beg the question of what is real. But they can also poke through the mess of idols that pass for reality. The specter of Hamlet's father cannot exist in the empirical world of all that is "rotten in the state of Denmark." But he can influence that world—by compelling Hamlet to action in the name of truth and justice. The parables of Jesus hit listeners' ears with dissonance, yet also with an uncanny ring of truth. Those with ears to hear can find themselves reoriented toward that impossible reality called the reign of Christ.

By calling into question the very reality of Bosnia's supposedly impossible political situation, Pontanima provides an entirely different frame through which to see life in the Balkans. Life does not have to be a zero-sum contest between rival ethnicities. Artistic beauty does not have to be based on ethnic and ideological purity. Pontanima points to an alternative reality, a world in which redemption is found in conversation, cooperation and the pursuit of beauty together.

When politicians say that reconciliation is impossible, that compromise is untenable, or that greater division and partisanship will dominate our world, perhaps this sort of illusion is exactly what we need.