


# Churches of the Reformation Heritage: Foreign Musical Influences, Quality of Creative Output, and Social Influences

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## Abstract

*This article considers the role of music in the churches of the Reformation heritage in the Republic of Croatia through three thematic areas: foreign musical influences, the quality of local musical creative output, and its broader social resonance. Particular attention is devoted to the historical evolution of contemporary Christian music, especially the impact of foreign performers and organizations from the mid-twentieth century to the present, and their role in shaping the local musical practices. The work is based on an analytical reading of available sources, as well as the author's extensive practical experience in the area of music in general and concert work in particular within different denominational contexts. The second part underscores the importance of excellence as a key factor of cultural influence, combined with a critical examination of challenges related to production, institutional visibility, and systemic support of musicians. The final section reflects on the social potential of church music as a means of communication of theological values in the public sphere. In conclusion, the article argues that there is a need for a strategic, interdisciplinary, and long-term approach to musical creativity to achieve a full spiritual and social effect.*



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**Keywords:** *Churches of the Reformation heritage; Christian music; foreign musical influences; quality of musical creative output; worship music; social impact of music; cultural visibility*

## **Introduction**

This article addresses the main theme through three distinct subheadings, each examined independently. In addition to surveying the present state of the field, particular attention is devoted to the still insufficiently exploited possibilities for a more systematic and publicly visible presentation of musical creativity within churches. This potential is considered in the context of contemporary historical and technological conditions, which afford distinctive opportunities. The analysis relies in part on the author's experiential knowledge gained over many years of active involvement in the development of church music. It also draws on empirical observations derived from sustained concert activities and collaborations within various denominational contexts in the Republic of Croatia (approximately 100 concerts and guest appearances annually). These observations serve as illustrative and contextual material supporting the wider theoretical discussion of issues under consideration.

### **1. Foreign Musical Influences**

The 1980s were a fertile soil for the influx of external musical influence into our region. As a communist country that maintained relative openness and, therefore, is especially interesting to Western democracies, we have seen a substantial impact from foreign Christian musicians on our local creative output. This influence manifested through several channels: visits by more well-known groups, such as Continental Singers or some lesser-known groups, including Anno Domini, or recordings of musical material by our performers in foreign studios. Among these, the Wetzlar studio in Germany proved especially significant as it provided a musical accompaniment to numerous records and cassette tapes by our singers. This recipe was quite enduring – so much so that Swedish performers Suzie and Debbie Sandstrom recorded an entire album with lyrics sung in the Croatian Serbian language, which they learned specifically for these performances. This project took place in Costa Mesa, California, at the Calvary Chapel church, employing an ensemble of resident musicians, giving the recordings a Western sound.

With the start of the war in Croatia, the number of arrivals shrank significantly. The Anno Domini group remained faithful to this region, with Branko Kovačević playing a valuable role in bringing them here. Once the war operations ceased and the war stopped, various musical groups and individual artists began arriving again on mission assignments from external organizations. These visits

were funded externally, allowing local churches to offer free musical programs. One of the most prominent figures to visit this area during this period was Bob Fitts, singer and songwriter affiliated with Integrity's Hosanna Music, an influential music label at the time. In 1995–1996, he led a seminar for Christian musicians in Crikvenica. His songs continue to be sung in the churches of the Reformation heritage (hereafter: CRH), including "This is the Day" and the one that has only recently become a hit during Catholic spiritual renewals – "He Will Come and Save You" – 30 years after its composition. In hindsight, his visit was not fully used, given his stature and influence within the worship movement in the beginning. A lasting memory from the Crikvenica gathering is a song he wrote there, later published in the *Živa Voda* songbook: "It Is Good to Praise God." Through his selection of a Psalm, he wanted to demonstrate how an original composition could be written in the national language.

Here, it is worth looking at the common practice during this period of pre-funded groups and individuals arriving from foreign missionary organizations. While this model eased the financial strain on local churches, it gradually fostered complacency, reduced discernment, and, frankly, a certain passivity in organizing such events. As a result, attendance remained modest, with audiences consisting primarily of members from local Christian communities. During this era, the band TVB (The Vocal Band) also visited, under the auspices of Youth for Christ – specifically its English branch, part of one of the world's leading youth-oriented missionary organizations founded by Billy Graham. Music served as their core ministry tool because they recognized its powerful draw among young people. Although TVB's primary activity in England was performing in schools, where they presented popular radio hits reinterpreted with clear moral and spiritual values that naturally pointed toward a gospel message, their concerts were also organized through local church communities. Later on, several TVB members participated in the recording of the album *Čekamo* (1998), collaborating with musicians from the Rijeka church.

The true and more enduring arrival of globally renowned Christian music groups into this region began with the establishment of Bono Records in 2006. This initiative stemmed from an invitation by a guardian of a Franciscan monastery – a man who spoke no English and had little familiarity with contemporary music styles, yet was eager to do something for the youth. Through this effort, prominent groups such as Delirious? and Oslo Gospel Choir were brought to Croatia.

Due to high financial risks and costs, every detail required heightened attention. All rules for organizing a musical event were followed, including: the right choice of dates, if possible, around religious holidays when people tend to be more receptive to spiritual themes; engaging local and national media; and showing respect to all relevant institutions in the Republic of Croatia, regardless of their

background, as part of the shared Christian musical landscape. The strategy to bring Delirious? – the most famous Christian music band in the world at the time – and thereby place Croatia on the map of global Christian music events, could not have been realized without additional thought. Their progressive worship albums were not available in Croatia, and the band itself was not known enough to local audiences. That is why we chose a more familiar and accessible format for a Croatian person: choir singing. For this reason, Bono Records invited Europe's most renowned white gospel choir, the Oslo Gospel Choir, to perform on the same evening. In the end, it was the Oslo Gospel Choir that truly packed the Zrinjevac sports hall in Osijek, drawing a larger crowd, despite Delirious? being, both then and now, a much bigger name. Such strategic decisions ultimately decide whether an event will be deemed successful.

In 2007, the famous London Community Gospel Choir – Europe's most prominent black gospel choir – also performed in Osijek. Following their visit, Croatian artist Gibonni expressed a strong interest in the group. I facilitated connections between them that led to unforgettable joint performances at major venues across the region.

Bono Records has continued to organize annual concerts featuring major international artists such as Hillsong, Matt Redman, Martin Smith, Parachute band, and, most recently, for the first time in the historic Pula Arena's history, an evening of worship with Matt Maher and Hillsong United, together with local performers who regularly play at Croatian Christian music events. In conclusion, I would like to add an important fact. Among the anonymous ticket-buying visitors were now leading Croatian Christian musicians, such as the groups Emanuel and Božja pobjeda, who openly credit their attendance at these very events as crucial to determining their own calling. Through these efforts, Bono Records has left an indelible mark on today's full squares and Arenas that are filled with the sounds of praise songs to the Lord.

Today, Europe's largest Christian music festival, Big Church Day Out, is led by the former keyboardist of Delirious?. In a personal conversation, he shared with me an insight into how English churches think about music and young people: their leadership isn't preoccupied with whether they will run a financial deficit this year, but rather with how large that deficit would be. They are aware that today's offer will yield lasting fruit in their congregations and broader society ten years from now. That is exactly what happened at Croatian performances featuring outstanding musicians. I want to encourage all influential individuals here not to shy away from following this path. The songs by these artists have been performed at stadiums and sports halls during major Catholic gatherings, which demonstrates how widely they have been accepted and the significant platform they have earned.

On a related note, it's worth highlighting an interesting fact that the biggest mark left by foreign Christian evangelical music was made in 1968, with the release of the album *To nije tajna* by the group Žeteoci. The group was formed by four Catholic theology students.<sup>1</sup> The record was the second rock LP ever released by Jugoton in communist Yugoslavia (following Grupa 220's debut album). The record included songs such as "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and "Blessed Assurance," which have endured and are still sung at today's gatherings – and this is because of their influence and not bands from CRH.

## 2. Quality of Creative Output

Regarding the quality of musical creative output, a pertinent maxim would be: "Culture changes exclusively through excellence." In this context, it is clear that many productions from our church communities have remained at a semi-professional level. Frequently, one or more essential elements fall short – whether the technical and sonic quality of the recording, the visual design and branding, or the absence of consistent promotion.<sup>2</sup> Compounding the issue is often the lack of proper regard for Croatia's key institutional framework, such as failing to register authors' works with ZAMP (the Croatian Composers' Society Copyright Protection Service) or neglecting to submit albums to be included in official national music catalogues, needlessly excluding one's own creative work from the broader cultural and social space.

The attitude that "this current recording is just a temporary solution," and the belief that "one day, when we have more resources, we'll make the proper version," is not good. In reality, this rarely happens. This is precisely why it is crucial to urge musicians to approach every recording with intentionality, bearing in mind that what transpires will stand as a permanent record. The recorded material becomes a part of their story, and a chapter once closed cannot be written again.

Where genuine excellence is present, denominational background loses its importance, and the author becomes recognized as a co-creator of a cultural space. I can attest to this from personal experience: my albums featuring songs rooted in Reformation heritage have been nominated for Croatia's prestigious Porin award seven times, with two wins, competing with releases from Uskrsfest, Croatia's oldest Christian music festival, and Progledaj srcem live! No one can credibly claim that works from our tradition are somehow undervalued in our society due to their confessional background. Do it well and see what happens.

1 <https://www.discogs.com/master/512262-%C5%BDeteoci-To-Nije-Tajna>.

2 It is important to mention the excellent example of a Sisak based singer-songwriter Danko Tomanić. In 1990, Tomanić managed to gather the members of the "Tajči" band that existed at the time, and record a valuable and enduringly solid album – *Getsemani* – produced by Muc Softić.

Receiving Porin recognition did not bring me financial gain, but it granted me airtime on more than 50 radio stations in Croatia and a platform to speak about our musical heritage.

It bears repeating that culture changes exclusively through excellence. Excellence is not a novel idea in our theological thought – both the Old and New Testaments call us toward it. Protestants are known for their progressive outlook and strong work ethic, so there is no reason our musical output should fall short of the same standard. Also, high-quality songs composed by musicians within our churches can – and do – find their way into large gatherings, where they help shape the theology of the masses. One such example is the song “Duše sveti dobrodošao,” by Bruno Lincender (a former member of Riječ Života church), which has been sung in the packed Zagreb Arena. Such moments allow us to see that a genuine window of opportunity is open.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in musical education and activity among CRH. More and more young people are enrolling in, and graduating from, prestigious music institutions both in Croatia and abroad. Nearly every denomination includes educated and musically gifted individuals, so some progress has clearly been made in personal competence. However, is there systemic institutional support that would enable a more visible and sustainable platform for their public work? Musical releases created in church communities are rarely registered with relevant cultural and media institutions and usually remain limited to the local church context, with minimal presence in the wider public sphere. At the same time, opportunities to use international distribution channels and collaborations remain largely untapped. In this sense, it is worth noting that the earlier periods of church music creation – particularly in the 1980s – tended to follow the standards of musical production and distribution more closely than is frequently the case today.

Talented musicians are readily available in our churches, and many feel a deep sense of mission and calling when it comes to creating these albums. Notable examples include the participation of high-caliber musicians in Ivan Špićak's projects and the involvement of experienced production professionals in Vlado Hobla's albums – both showing careful attention to every detail of the recording, with the knowledge that it will endure for generations. October Light stands out as a particularly strong case, whose quality extends well beyond our national borders, serving as one of the clearest indicators of quality. Church alliances can encourage already prepared individuals to present our heritage to our people in the very best possible light.

Over the years, spiritual music and its role within church life have gone through significant changes. In the Catholic Church, a growing trend sees prominent speakers collaborate with music groups that regularly follow them, giving those groups working continuity and visibility. Such a model, blending high-

quality speakers and musical accompaniment, has proven especially appealing to younger audiences. In urban areas, such as Zagreb, weekday gatherings regularly attract many young people precisely around this simple, but effective format. The combination of a clear message and good quality musical performances has been recognized as a relevant and sustainable form of pastoral and cultural engagement. According to an internal survey conducted within Catholic circles on the topic of spiritual music in the Republic of Croatia, the 2008 album *Kao ruža* by the group Kristina, released by C/Works (Switzerland) and Bono Records, is listed as one of the foundational works of contemporary worship music in the Croatian context. The album was created thanks to the enthusiasm of individuals from a local church community, and it made a lasting impression on the cultural space. It upheld key elements of professional music production, including song selection attuned to the era's musical context, high-quality production, and the visual identity of the release. This effort paved the way for the development of many other musical initiatives and bands, shaping further development of spiritual music in Croatia.

The theological emphases and ecclesiological practices of individual church communities have a significant influence on the musical practices of their members. In this regard, it can be observed that the pronounced unobtrusiveness and local community focus, characteristic of Churches of Christ, often lead to musicians who are content to remain within their own church environment, resulting in very limited visibility in the broader public sphere. On the other hand, the intense zeal and missional orientation typical of Pentecostal churches encourage active individual engagement in musical ministry. However, sometimes the lack of formal musical education proves to be a limiting factor for longer-term, more widely recognized public impact. Baptist churches, meanwhile, often prioritize personal discipline and systematic work, which tends to produce musically educated individuals. Yet, a lower orientation toward cultural and social contexts outside church formats can reduce their visibility and missional potential in the public domain. These differences reveal a multi-layered relationship between theology, church practice, and musical activity. They also open up space for exploring the value of an integrated approach – one that would combine theological depth, musical competence, and social relevance.

### **3. Social Influence**

If you were to ask an average Croatian citizen what comes to mind when they hear the word “Baptist,” they would frequently say they associate it with a Baptist church choir in a movie. At the same time, Baptist churches in Croatia have not produced even a single choir that has achieved a significant impact or made good use of the general public's perception. This has instead been accomplished by the

choir Agape from the Adventist church. They regularly perform on talent shows and consistently mark their anniversaries with sold-out concerts at the prestigious Vatroslav Lisinski Concert Hall, where they often feature guest musicians from the show-business world as well as other prominent choirs such as Izvor and Sv. Mihovil.

The Pentecostal movement has swept across the world, igniting it with contemporary Christian music. 50,000 people gathered at the Maksimir Stadium sang songs that originated in those communities, and those songs accounted for 80% of the repertoire at that landmark event in the history of the Republic of Croatia.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, in our country, we do not have even a single band from Pentecostal churches that has managed to influence, or “infect” the broader Croatian religious scene in the name of their own denomination. This has been done by bands such as Božja pobjeda, Emanuel, the Husar sisters, or Halužan sisters. Of course, music knows no borders, nor should it. Placing a denominational label before a musical work runs counter to the very idea of music. However, this raises a question: Could we have done it better? Here are some constataions and some questions.

- Numerous experts in religious and church education, especially within the Catholic Church, point out the importance and pedagogical value of Sunday school and a systematic approach to children’s upbringing in the CRH. Despite this, one observes a lack of musical recordings that would holistically encompass songs intended for children’s work in those communities, while simultaneously including musically trained church members, who undoubtedly exist in those places.
- The already mentioned perception of Protestant churches as “singing choirs from some American movie” remains deeply embedded in the general cultural awareness of our people. Do we have any significant choir albums that bring together the best voices from our churches, alongside instrumentalists already identified within our churches? These range from Jurica Lazar from the Church of Christ (a former member of the Croatian Armed Forces Orchestra), the Kovačević brothers from a Baptist church (currently members of Gibonni’s band), the married couple Skračić from the Christian Center in Šibenik (jazz and fusion musicians who converted a few years ago), Petra Mikulić and Ivan Špoljarić from the Pentecostal Church (both educated in Christian music in England and Croatia), the strongest musicians from CCE, to choir directors such as Petra Horvat and Nada Matošević (the latter a former intendant of the Croatian National Theater Ivan pl. Zajc in Rijeka), the pianist Kristina Bjelopavlović Cesar and many, many others who are worthy of mention.

3 This refers to the sixth concert “Progledaj srcem,” that took place on June 4, 2022 at the Maksimir Stadium in Zagreb.

The social influence of religious music would be significantly greater if it were led by a clearly articulated shared vision, rather than relying solely on individual initiatives and personal leanings. Music is often described as one of the most powerful art forms because it deeply permeates everyday life and enables the fast transmission of messages and values. In that sense, CRH have a tremendous opportunity to present their theological convictions more systematically and visibly through music – relying on competent individuals and high-quality production. In the contemporary context, characterized by the evolution of digital media, music content created within church communities is already reaching broader audiences, often beyond the institutional frameworks from which it emerged. This development creates a need for churches to engage consciously and actively in shaping cultural and theological discourse, especially through music as a medium that can contribute to a greater understanding of religious heritage and exert a lasting influence on the identity formation of future generations.

In situations where CRH in Croatia lack their own radio or television stations, it is important to strategically leverage existing media outlets that are receptive to broadcasting Christian music. Within this context, Croatian Catholic Radio, Radio Marija, and Laudato TV stand out in Croatian media as rare platforms that consistently feature such content in their regular programming. Collaboration with these media organizations constitutes one of the few avenues for securing a sustained presence of Christian music in the public sphere. In contrast, the other media – particularly those at the local level – tend to provide only one-time album presentations or brief segments, rather than ongoing exposure of music. In today's media environment, marked by rapid content production and an incessant flow of information, the lack of a proactive strategy leads to diminished visibility and influence. Consequently, it is essential to systematically and responsibly employ available media platforms to render existing cultural and spiritual content accessible to a broader audience, in accordance with their original purpose of sharing and communication.

## **Conclusion**

An examination of musical influences, the quality of creative output, and the societal reach of spiritual music within CRH in Croatia reveals considerable, but insufficiently utilized, potential. Historical precedents bear witness to the enduring benefits achieved through strategic moves, an investment in excellence, and openness to broader cultural engagement – both within church communities and wider society. At the same time, many contemporary challenges, including fragmented initiatives, a lack of institutional support, inconsistent production quality, and limited media presence, point to a need for a more mature, responsible, and

sustained approach to musical creativity as a meaningful mode of theological and cultural witness.

In a time when technical, educational, and communication possibilities are greater than ever, the absence of a clear vision and a common strategy represents a missed opportunity. Music, as a powerful carrier of a message and shaper of identity, can be a bridge between the church and society, but only if it is approached with seriousness, professionalism, and an awareness of its long-term impact. It is therefore necessary to encourage collaboration between denominations, to connect musical excellence with theological depth, and to actively use existing media and cultural platforms. Such an integrated approach would not only advance the visibility of the musical creative output of CRH but would also do its part in forming a healthier, more open, and more spiritually sensitive cultural space in Croatian society.

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### **Crkve reformacijske baštine: strani glazbeni utjecaji, kvaliteta stvaralaštva te društveni utjecaji**

Sažetak

U ovome članku razmatra se uloga glazbe unutar crkava reformacijske baštine u Republici Hrvatskoj kroz tri tematska područja: strane glazbene utjecaje, kvalitetu glazbenog stvaralaštva te njegov društveni doseg. Posebna se pozornost posvećuje povijesnom razvoju suvremene kršćanske glazbe, osobito utjecajima stranih izvođača i organizacija od druge polovice 20. stoljeća do danas te njihovoj ulozi u oblikovanju lokalne glazbene prakse. Rad se temelji na analitičkom pregledu dostupnih izvora, kao i na autorovim dugogodišnjim praktičnim iskustvima u glazbenom i koncertnom djelovanju unutar različitih denominacijskih konteksta. U drugom dijelu naglašava se važnost izvrsnosti kao ključnog čimbenika kulturnog utjecaja, uz kritički osvrt na izazove vezane uz produkciju, institucionalnu vidljivost i sustavnu podršku glazbenicima. U završnom dijelu razmatra se društveni potencijal crkvene glazbe kao sredstva komunikacije teoloških vrijednosti u javnom prostoru. Zaključno se ističe potreba za strateškim, interdisciplinarnim i dugoročnim pristupom glazbenom stvaralaštvu kako bi se ostvario njegov puni duhovni i društveni učinak.