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### THE HISTORY OF FOUR SWEARWORDS IVAN BRKLJAČIĆ: *CUTTING EDGE*

**Abstract:** The questions concerning humor, irony, grotesque, sarcasm and persiflage in music have inspired many musicological researches and discussions. How does *Cutting Edge* as a suite/cycle of curses fit into these issues? It seems that time has come for someone to deal with essential features of hither mentality. Is cursing good (sporadic) ventilation for accumulated dissatisfaction? If this should be judged by *Cutting Edge* then the result of such ventilation is aesthetically, as well as in technically excellent. The extra musical origin of music material and ways of music flow shaping are not crucial – energy, sharpness and wits of the piece will be experienced even without reading the author's program note.

October 26. Year 2004. Tuesday.

“With each moment there is less time”, wrote Antonio Tabucchi. There are good times and bad times, as well as “troubled”, “old”, “hard”, “happy” times... No time is absolute, endless and inexorable. Moreover, times resemble people. The time fits the man. So, let us see who is faster. Some years just slip away. Afterwards a man cannot remember where he was, what he did... We struggle with time now and then, this way, that way and every way. “I'd gladly pay you Tuesday”, J. Wellington Wimpy apologizes. In the meantime, many have stopped believing in cartoons...

May 29. Year 2005. Sunday.

Ivan Brkljačić graduated in composition in the class of Professor Srdjan Hofman and did his M.A. in the class of Zoran Erić. It has been a long time since someone in Belgrade did their M.A. in composition so quickly. Ivan Brkljačić's master's thesis is entitled *JINX*, which is slang for “bad luck”. Why bad luck?

October. Tuesday.

The weather is warm, as if it were May. The Review is late, the money is late, the trains are late. We are late with life as well, but who cares? The “Osterc” Trio is at “Cvijeta”, on time. Dejan is moving the piano and arranging the stage for a rehearsal. They perform the works in order, according to the programme: Osterc, Krek, Lebič, Brkljačić...

Incredible! Hey, man, are you talking to me? *What U Hear*<sup>1</sup> is something unexpected, very direct, and dead rude. A swearword? Not one – but four. And what's more, without a word. So that the whole world can understand them. Are any additional explanations or translations really necessary<sup>2</sup>?

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<sup>1</sup> A software term for an input channel in the majority of sound cards, an output signal.

<sup>2</sup> “*Cutting Edge* was created as a commission by this year's Review of Composers, for the Slovenian trio Osterc. Inspired by discontent (as a natural phenomenon), it is based on four swearwords, that is, four movements, where one swearword is linked to each of the movements. I did not mean to be rude to the performers, much less to the audience, with this composition, my intention was rather to transfer the reality and everyday life surrounding all of

May. Sunday.

Brkljačić's wind quintet *Flobelhoffy* has never been performed in public, although it was on the programme of one of the Reviews of Composers. The piano concerto *IT!* still has not had its premiere. Is that a *jinx*? How does a composer handle the "non-performance" of his works? Is "non-performance" in fact a test of endurance up to that big "Tuesday" from the cartoon? How important is it to perform contemporary music and to whom does it matter?

October. Tuesday.

Yesterday the orchestra of Radio and Television of Serbia (RTS) performed Brkljačić's "Zavesa" (The Curtain)<sup>3</sup>. The musicians were on strike, plaster was falling off the ceiling at the Kolarac Hall, but they did the "gig". Exactly like that, same as always, it was hard going, but they did it. But on the other hand, the small "Osterc" Trio sounded like three orchestras. That is what a trio that seriously plays/practices/understands contemporary music sounds like. I would not be exaggerating if I added – and loves (contemporary music). Ivan Brkljačić writes music which is quite easy to understand and love. But it is not "easy" music.

May. Sunday.

Four movements, each lasting approximately two minutes, with tempos *Allegro*, *Moderato*, *Moderato*, *Allegro*, where the first *Allegro* is with passion (*con affetto*), while the last almost turns into a *Presto*. Only the third movement is slower in its moderation and resembles a slow movement. This is an illusion – for the obscenity is present in it the most. The mocking fortissimo on the lowest tone of the flute and under the mark for the "breathing noise" reveals the composer's real intention. This movement will be along the lines of "speak softly and carry a beagle". The swearword in the flute is in English, on two tones, but, on the other hand, the piano translates the same (swearword) into Serbian, in three syllables<sup>4</sup>. The entire movement is mostly in quiet dynamics, its form is generally binary, and in terms of its character it is – devious. (Quiet like silence, and even more silent than the quiet – devious. In terms of combining thematic elements, the third "swearword" is the most lucid and the most succinct.

October. Tuesday. The concert.

*Cutting Edge* begins like a boxing match. First Dejan, then Liza attack (the married couple Prešiček), while Nina (the sister, sister-in-law) runs around them like a referee. At one point Nina makes a break, the piano remains alone in the silly cadenza of repeated chords. The fight continues until the first knockdown, when Nina separates them once again and occupies the ring a little longer than the first time.

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us, and by extension the presence of swearwords, regardless of how hard we try to stay immune to them, into the music material and thus turn them into sound. A trio consisting of instruments that are fairly different from one another (flute, baritone sax and piano), in which each struggles for its integrity, seemed very suitable for this.

This composition was also to some extent created as a result of previous experiences with domestic festivals."

(Ivan Brkljačić, the programme booklet of the 13<sup>th</sup> International Review of Composers)

<sup>3</sup> "Kada se sedam puta digne zavesa" (When the Curtain Is Raised Seven Times) for symphony orchestra, October 25, Kolarac, opening of the 13<sup>th</sup> Review of Composers

<sup>4</sup> Brkljačić does not state anywhere which swearwords he uses in the composition. However, any similarity with existing swearwords is intentional.

Nevertheless, the second round has a slower tempo, the participants dance rather than actually hit each other. Liza seems more confident to me, I think she will get more points. But “oh my God, can it be true”, the referee is once again in the foreground! Nina bangs on the piano, plays nonsense, keeps repeating one and a half chords. What a finale...

May. Sunday. Evening.

The saxophone dominates the second “swearword”. This is due to a combination of flutter-tonguing and downward glissando repeated impudently by the sax throughout most of the movement. The flute plays a slightly less important material, sometimes as if it were simulating the piano “Alberti basses”. The piano is also quite lapidary in the solo parts, sort of in the style of a “modulation over the unison”. (The piano solo, with an overtone of dominant seventh chords and their unexpected resolutions, is an important common feature of the first and second swearwords.) The tempo in the second swearword is somewhat slower than in the first one. The principle of constructing the form is variational – an intelligent series of ornamental variations. Since Brkljačić’s harmonic language is based on tertian texture, it is no wonder that the thematic, melodic motive of the third (the sixth in inversion) is also very important. The tonal harmonic language significantly contributes to the easier communication of Brkljačić’s composition between the audience and the performers. Further proof of this is *Cutting Edge*, which the “Osterc” Trio still plays as part of its regular concert repertoire. (There is another “lethal” composition of Brkljačić’s which is often found on the programmes of European ensembles, namely “Žaoka” (Sting) for clarinet, double bass and piano.)

May. Monday.

In the last swearword everything is very furious. The percentage of joint playing is highest. The trio resembles a three-headed panting beast. I sense that this swearword is extremely offensive. It can be heard in the saxophone and nothing can disguise it. The form is precise,  $abcc_1c_2dc_3$ , where  $\underline{d}$  contains the motivics of  $a$  and  $b$ . Unlike the previous swearwords, which ended at the right moment, but in an odd place (mainly on the unaccented beats), this one ends too soon, by a furious and superficial gesture. This too was to be expected. One of the triggers for a swearword is anger. One cannot think, plan, control or be tactful in anger. Anger is a heightened state of discontent, immune to advice or sedatives and life-threatening.

Are swearwords a good (sporadic) way of venting accumulated discontent? If we judge by *Cutting Edge*, the result of this venting is excellent both in the aesthetic and the technical sense. The nature of the extra-musical origin of music materials and ways of contemplating the music flow does not seem to be of crucial importance. The energy, acuteness and humour of the composition will be felt even without reading the comments.

After all, swearwords are very well accepted in the theatre and on film, so how then are we expected to believe that it is so desirable “to be nice”? It certainly does not pay off around here...

Tuesday.

The themes of humour in music, irony, grotesque, sarcasm and persiflage, initiated a great deal of musicological research and debate. How does *Cutting Edge* fit into all that, as a suite/cycle of swearwords? It seems that the time has come for someone to work on the essential characteristics of our mentality. Brkljačić is the “boy next-door”, highly educated, with good manners and urban interests. He played in a band, wrote theatre music and was always good at picking up the *vibes* of his surroundings. If he claims that the time has come for the swearword in music, then this is something that requires serious consideration. For, what is a swearword if not revolt, rebellion, revolution?

Look for the answers to the questions posed here in the next issue...

Translated by Jelena Nikezić