

Zorica Premate

MUSIC FOR THE END OF POSTMODERNISM

... His suites, concertos and symphonic music are misplaced in various theatres. Started in one medium and seldom finished in another, all this music exists in some strange way, perhaps just like a Derridian trace, like a simulacrum of the presence that refers to itself and the remains of other signs in itself. Spent and left behind curtains and sets, these digital musics are sometimes revived, under the pressure of a commission, in the sound of classical instruments. Like an ironic twist *par excellence* which imbues Zoran Erić's latest production with nostalgia, a certain virtuosity and light cynicism: it is only "second hand" (which is the "first hand", then?) that this music inscribes itself in high art as an autonomous work. Once it has been consumed by the theatre, music begins to be consumed by sound as its original and only medium.

Erić's music "from the theatre" is, therefore, a trace of that theatre, a trace of theatrical sings and a trace of sound in them, outrageous because it must be read together with the invisible theatre in it. Once the theatre sound turns into a suite or a concerto, Erić's musical narration, which employs the classical selection of instruments, constantly bears (and endures) that surplus of its own body and its economy: on the one hand,

an abundance (of finished theatre music, ideas, realized creativity) and on the other hand, restriction (selection of instruments, concrete material, the imperative of fitting everything into an extensive classical form). This surplus of meaning, as a trace of the theatre and even the discursive language within it, is left over to music to amuse itself with, to elaborate and readopt. Erić's works, created on the basis of his music for the theatre, are formed by the deconstruction of that theatre sound within themselves, a sound that also carries the polemics of its stage creation and existence.¹ In these "post-theatrical" compositions of his, Erić mainly uses material that was already semanticized for the needs of the theatre, treating all that music as if it were new (because, finally, "music got its hands on music" and the composer's imagination can run wild), albeit counting, in a way, on a careful listener to intuit, from this "new" music, something from its previous, theatrical incarnation.

The title of Erić's latest work includes a harsh word – KILL.

I have not seen Nikita Milivojević's production of Chekhov's play "The Seagull" at the Slovenian National Theatre and it would be too risky to judge it by the traces in the music Erić composed for this occasion. Nevertheless, Chekhov's central metaphor² has been adopted in the composition and activated as

¹ Cf. Z. Premate, Šest komentara scena, *Novi Zvuk* br. 21, Beograd, 2003, 72-80.

² "TRIGORIN: – Nothing much, only an idea that occurred to me. [He puts the book back in his pocket] An idea for a short story. A young girl grows up on the shores of a lake, as you have. She loves the lake as the gulls do, and is as happy and free as they. But a man sees her who chances to come that way, and he destroys her out of idleness, as this gull here has been destroyed." A.P.Čehov, "Galeb", Rad, Beograd, 1975, 62.

the question in its title: “Who killed the seagull?”³ It has been expanded by an even more direct subtitle “You did, don’t you remember”... as if the two theatre lines, which are crucial and yet do not exist in Chekhov’s original text, suddenly came to life in the title of Erić’s composition...

Who in the first place is the SEAGULL according to Erić and who the KILLER?

Can music tell us that?

Let us start with Erić’s compositional technique, with the arrangement and the paraphrase. In the part written for twelve cellos, two themes were adopted from the music for Chekhov’s “The Seagull”: “Balkan – N.Y. Blues” (The Balkans – NY Blues) and “Kraj I čina” (The End of Act One).⁴ Since this is a work with a clear ternary structure, the aforementioned material is arranged in such a manner that the fast sections a and b correspond to “Kraj I čina”, while the slower section c corresponds to “Balkan – N.Y. Blues”. *Kolo* and blues (alongside the waltz, tango and pop ballad) are Erić’s favourite genres for toying with sense and playing with meaning, especially if they are conceived from the beginning as a paraphrase of a nonexistent

³ “Ко је убио галеба? (ти, зар се не сећаш)” (Who killed the seagull? (you did, don’t you remember)) is the full title of the composition written for twelve cellos. It was premiered by “The 12 Cellists of the Berlin Philharmonic” at their concert at Kolarac Foundation on April 17, 2005, as a commission from the concert organizer, the Foundation’s Centre for Music.

⁴ “Крај I чина“ is a melody with longer note values over banal Alberti basses with simple accompaniment, in the colour of the piano which is later accompanied by a “rhythm section”, which further underscores the mechanical beating of the pulse. In this version the melody resembles an infantile arrangement of a pop song, with the characteristic harmonic connection of two minor triads in root position at the interval of a minor second. “Balkan-N.Y.” has a jazz atmosphere and contours, with distinct colours of the piano, trombone, double bass and percussives, with an accented four-bar motive in the bass.

original, a kind of Balkan petty bourgeois disco-folk (Example 1). The first of the mentioned materials is a sequential melody, punctuated by rests and worn out by pizzicatos, a melody that grows into its own “fatal” pathetic variant in section a1. While the line was descending in the first phrase, it ascends sequentially in the second in order to attach, with pomp, a Picardy triumphant smile to its own minor physiognomy. The Balkan 7/8 blues and “*Meno mosso*” mark section b in which the melody sings, in a Mozartean combination of pizzicatos and mini-*arco* phrases, weaving itself from itself in a combinatorics of tones of a rhythmized gypsy scale. Everything is transposed one third higher, so that the gypsy scale is transformed into Scriabin’s second mode, but with Erić’s favourite shifting of rhythmic accents which strangify this grotesque blues and inform us that such a self-combinatorics of the initial motive is an analogue of Wittgenstein’s pun of sorts...⁵, particularly since this entire section develops over a four-bar ostinato descending “blues” phrase in the bass. While from “above” it looks as though coherent music phrases are strung together, from “below” one can see that it is fact the stringing of phrases whose length does not correspond with the four-bar bureaucracy of the bass. Instead of a speech – babbling, instead of seriousness – facetiousness, instead of rationality – euphoria, instead of a great tragic story of a murder – an idiolect-story, a comedy. Like Chekhov’s play which, after all, bears the indicative subtitle “comedy”, even though it does not really contain much to laugh about. On

⁵ Erić’s favourite manner of conceiving the phrase is for its duration and accents not to coincide with the metrics and the accents of the pulse. In this case, the phrase is shorter than the four-bar model by a quaver, which, when it continues onto itself without a rest, strangifies the flow by shifting the accents, while the melodic flow “slides” over the pulse.

the contrary (and that is where music perfectly captured the essence), Chekhov shows the petty-bourgeois mentality and triviality of common people who wish to or do in fact engage in something they call art, people engrossed in unrealistic dreams, lost in their own ambitions (art, love) which will ultimately cost some of them their lives. This discord between the melodrama being acted out on the stage and the comedy suggested by Chekhov's subtitle (and by some scenes with light irony and grotesque) is perfectly supported by music and its little inner paradox.

Erić's music is a light parody of a fable about folklore as a legitimate continuation/substitute/supporter of inspiration. That is why its fake folklore is dressed in petty bourgeois attire, washed and combed, well known and yet difficult to recognize, a surrogate which our art music still cannot seem to do without. The same as, after all, many of our guardians of culture, who want to "save us from assimilating" into Europe by "fostering our roots", cannot do without folklore as the divine sutra. These "guardians of bridges", guardians of borders", "saviours of tradition", these Arkadinas and these Trigorins – they are Erić's "seagull killers" who do not remember their crime. They are personified by the sublime and smug a1 and a pantomimic combination of blues and the gypsy scale in b. This is also witnessed by the strangifying general atmosphere of this music, its internal paradox: smooth melodic cheerfulness above the forced actions of the internal texture where the seagull awaiting its death seems to be trembling, gnashing its teeth, moaning and shivering. The important action of this music, the one that is not distorted by cynicism and melodically creased sound, takes place in the lower layers of the texture where the consonances do not seem sentimental, but are frightening instead with their *con legno* procedures, their noisy tremolos and *pizzicato* shivers, while the pedal tones and ostinatos are not sublime, monumental musicality, but a certain statics of horror. While light parodic transpositions of disco-folk and Balkan-blues lounge around on the surface of this composition, misfortune, apathy, hopelessness and wicked squirming of the guardians poised to kill are suggested in its deeper layers. On the surface – farce and the melodic smile of music, while, at the same time, in the depth – symbolification of drama and ghastly expectation. (Example 2)

After all, the rule that a music work is created solely from sound has long been invalid.

Here Erić is in his own field of “flickering esthetics”⁶ which is one of the basic characteristics of his sonic speech: never completely only on one level of communication, he is both genuinely excited and cynically overdosing that excitement, he skillfully arranges false quotation marks along the score while he simulates that which is known and likeable and demonstrates that it is still capable of being art. He tries not only to save the Seagull (or at least avenge his death) by uncovering the crime and the general unworthiness of his killers, but he also wants to restore honour to the melody, which is infinitely tarnished by the fingers of these patriots who, singing it and playing it over the public-address system, gathered, under their flag, new flocks of seagulls to shoot.

The seagull on the stage is ritually stabbed with twelve bows in order to postpone the death of beauty by talking about it.

And also in order to make it clear that a culture of a new age, realized precisely by the destruction of that new age within itself, is being constituted in our country.

Translated by Dušan Zabrdac

⁶ “The reader never knows in advance whether this or that part of the text is original or a quotation, honest or parodic, because the degree of the author’s identification changes from line to line, from word to word”, M. Epštajn, “Postmodernizam”, 131, Zepter, Beograd, 1998.

Example 1 – part a

Violoncello 1



Example 1 – part b

Violoncello 1



Example 2 – part a¹

A

Violoncello 1 *ff*

Violoncello 2 *ff*

Violoncello 3 *ff*

Violoncello 4 *ff*

Violoncello 5 *ff* pizz.

Violoncello 6 *ff* col legno simile

Violoncello 7 *ff* col legno

Violoncello 8 *ff* pizz. simile

Violoncello 9 *ff* pizz. simile

Violoncello 10 *ff* simile

Violoncello 11 *ff* pizz. arco pizz. arco

Violoncello 12 *ff*