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Creation is One and Always the Same...

Interview with Dimitrije Golemović



It has been 35 years since Dimitrije Golemović, ethnomusicologist and composer, wrote his first composition inspired by folklore. This was also his first creation, followed by numerous other works in which the author managed to successfully fit together his scholarly and creative interests. In the year in which we are celebrating the 150th anniversary of the birth of Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, the compositional work of Dimitrije Golemović, which in many ways follows in Mokranjac's footsteps, once again confirms the vitality of the choral music tradition in Serbia.

Dimitrije Golemović was born in Belgrade in 1954, where he finished music high school (*Josip Slavenski*, department of oboe and music theory department). His professors included Mirjana Živković, Ana Olujić, Srđan Hofman and Ljubiša Petruševski. He studied at the University of Belgrade's Departments of Ethnomusicology (in the class of Dragoslav Dević), Composition (class of Stanojlo Rajičić, and subsequently also Srđan Hofman) and Vocal Art (class of Branko Pivnički and Jovan Gligorijević). After completing his studies of ethnomusicology and working in a music school in Ub for a year, he began working at the University of Belgrade's Music Department (1979). He received his M.A. in 1981 and his Ph.D. in 1987. He is a tenured professor of ethnomusicology at the Music Department.

Since 1998 he has also been working at the Academy of Art in Banja Luka as a professor of ethnomusicology.

Dimitrije Golemović has presented the results of his previous academic work in numerous books, the most important being *Narodna muzika Podrinja (The Folk Music of Podrinje, 1987)*, *Narodna muzika titovoužičkog kraja (The Folk Music of the Titovo Užice Region, 1990)*, *Etnomuzikološki ogledi (Ethnomusicological Essays, 1997)*, *Refren u narodnom pevanju: od obreda do zabave (Refrain in Folk Singing: from Ritual to Entertainment, 2000)*, and *Čovek kao muzičko biće (Man as a Musical Being, 2006)*. His book *Refrain in Folk Singing: from Ritual to Entertainment* will soon be published by the American publishing company Scarecrow Edition. He has also written a large number of academic studies and articles, participating in numerous national and international academic symposia in the country and abroad, as well as in research projects. He has prepared and published numerous audio music editions from Serbia, including two compact discs for the Ethnographical Museum in Geneva, while two editions under the auspices of UNESCO (*Muzika severoistočne Bosne /Music of Northeastern Bosnia/* and *Narodni muzičar Krstivoje Subotić /The Folk Musician Krstivoje Subotić/*) are currently under preparation.

In keeping with his primary orientation, Dimitrije Golemović's compositional work is marked by his interest in folk music. Regardless of whether he adopts merely the text from a folk song or he incorporates a melody, scale or some rhythmic turn into his composition, he always strives for an expression that will not disturb or clutter the folklore idiom. Therefore, the majority of his authorial compositions belong to vocal or vocal-instrumental genres: choral music (secular and church), songs, and oratorio, though at the moment his attention is focused on an opera and a cantata. Both the audience and the critics were fascinated by the mixed choruses *Zlatibore (Oh, Zlatibor)*, sung to a folkloric text (1976), *Tri narodne (Three Folk Songs, 1977)*, *Zumba (1978)*, *Pjesme sa otoka Krka (Songs from the Island of Krk, 1979)*, *Što mora biti (What Must Be, 1983)*, the female choruses *Jadna draga (Poor Darling, 1974)*, *Lazaričke (Lazaric Songs, 1982)* and *Uspavanka za majku (A Lullaby for Mother, 1975)*, *Mesec (The Moon, 1980)* and *Tajna (Secret, 1981)* composed for a children's choir. In his oeuvre, sacral music is represented by *Liturgija predeosvećenih darova (The Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, 1999)*, commissioned by the Bishop of Šumadija, Sava Vuković, and the oratorio *Hiramov zavet (Hiram's Vow, 2004)*, commissioned by the Academy of Art from Banja Luka. Two vocal cycles: *Ciganske pesme (Gypsy Songs, 1992)* for soprano and piano and *Pesme zavičajne (Songs from the Homeland, 1995)* for soprano and string orchestra, as well as the song *Jesenji ristanak (Autumn Parting, 1996)*, stand out among his songs. His compositions have been performed by many ensembles and soloists in the country and abroad (USA, Canada, etc.).

Dimitrije Golemović is a recipient of numerous prizes and awards for compositional work, especially for choral compositions. We would like to single out the following competitions: *Stevan Mokranjac* of the Association of Composers of Serbia (third prize in 1975, second in 1976, and first prize in 1977), Radio Belgrade (second prize in 1976, and third in 1982), the music festival *Tetovski horski odzivi (Tetovo Choir Echoes)*, two second prizes in 1984) and the competition *Ivan Matetić Ronjgov* (second prize in 1980).

All your activities are devoted to music. When you are not studying it as a scholar-ethnomusicologist, then you are performing it, composing or simply – listening to music. Since this interview is mainly devoted to your compositional work, could you please tell us more about your beginnings in that field?

My first composition was created 35 years ago: it was a work for the violin and piano, which I worked on as a third-grade student in high school with Srđan Hofman. He invited myself and several other interested students (Bojan Barić and Pavle Medaković are the ones I can remember) to study composition. We began to meet and each of us brought five motives to the first class. Srđan then chose one of them and it was a folklorically colored melody; it served as the basis for the whole work. Admittedly, it was the concept of folklore that I had as a child from Belgrade with no previous contact with rural tradition.

Afterwards I wrote two choruses (*Dve pesme sa Kosova /Two Songs from Kosovo/*) for which I used some notes from Miodrag Vasiljević's book, a piano suite and, as a oboist (in high school), I also wrote for the oboe and the piano.

Somewhere near the end of high school, Srđan took me to see Stanojlo Rajičić. For this occasion, I prepared several compositions with my friends from school, since meeting Rajičić was a really important event. I remember that meeting to this day: I was trembling with exhilaration because he was an important authority for me. After he heard what I had written and we were alone, he asked me to improvise at the piano... That was the hardest thing for me. I wasn't happy with my improvisation, but he still decided to let me join his class. It was a great honor for me, since he didn't accept all the students who wanted to study under him.

Could you tell us about your experiences from your studies of composition?

I believe that Rajičić was a very good professor. Interestingly, he was said to be a teacher who didn't allow people to express their individuality, but his students' works speak otherwise. Look at Petar Bergam, Vlastimir Peričić, Milan Mihajlović, Mirjana Živković, Zoran Erić... their works are very different both from each others' and from Rajičić's. What

he did, in fact, was teach his students the craft, and subsequently each of them – using that craft – worked independently. None of his students wrote the same as he did.

When I was in the second year of my studies, Srđan Hofman started working at the Department - and that was an excellent arrangement: Rajičić would sometimes sit at the piano and improvise for fifteen minutes or so, on a theme I had brought to class, and he would play an entire sonata form or sonata. Srđan didn't play, he used to sit, think and make suggestions how to improve something. I remember the sonata form I was writing: there were three sections in the development, but something didn't fit... Srđan was the one who suggested switching the second and third sections and then it all fell into place perfectly. He was a master of both the sum total and the details, which suited me very well. To this day, whenever I'm working on something, I never leave the details for the end, but instead I work simultaneously on both the sum total and the details from start to finish.

My studies were a wonderful experience for me. I didn't graduate in composition, I came as far as the string quartet, but I was finishing my ethnomusicology studies and then there was vocal art as well... My professors also included Vlastimir Peričić and Dušan Skovran, and all in all, I had very positive experiences.

You began your studies of ethnomusicology and composition at the Department of Music in Belgrade the same year. You seem to have been equally drawn to both fields. How did you decide to give priority to ethnomusicology? Were there any dilemmas?

Yes, there were. When I was finishing music high school, I didn't know which career I was going to pursue. I was interested in everything: singing, playing, composing... I suppose it was primarily my inclination towards singing that orientated me towards folk music and composition. That is my permanent orientation: I've mostly written for the voice and, even when I am writing for an instrument, I can always hear some form of singing.

However, even back then I realized that the composing I am interested in – and I already knew that I wanted to base my works on folklore – requires a good knowledge of folk music. This is possible only when a person goes out into the field and gains insight not only into the melody, but also into everything associated with it, its entire context. Ever since I can remember, Béla Bartók has been my role model in terms of how one should compose: to create an artistic composition, but a folk artistic composition.

Two main factors affected my decision. One of them was practical: the need to choose a profession that I could be involved in – there are very few composers in our country who are involved only in composing, most of them are also involved in other things. And the second factor was that, while discovering the sources of the folk melody, I also became aware of its incredible beauty and appeal. Since I have always had an inclination towards science, ethnomusicology suited me fine. Immediately after completing my studies,

I went to graduate school and soon started working at the Department. In the meantime, composing was a form of relaxing and another aspect of being involved in music.

It seems your love for music and composing can be somewhat “blamed” on your family heritage? I am referring to your namesake, Dimitrije J. Golemović, to whom, in fact you, dedicated your collection of choral compositions from 1988. Could you tell us more about your other impulses to create music?

My grandfather studied at a conservatory in Germany, in Sondershausen, prior to World War I. When he came to Serbia, the war had already started, so he joined the army, crossing Albania and ending up all the way in Tunisia. After the end of the war he became one of those intellectuals teaching in various places in Serbia: in high schools, music schools... He worked in Niš, Šabac, Loznica, Zaječar and many other places. Finally he came to Belgrade where he taught at the Sixth Male High School and *Stanković* Music School (violin).

My grandfather used to compose. He belonged to the group of post-war composers who wrote in popular forms: capriccios, potpourris, dances... smaller forms, but also for the symphonic orchestra, mostly for the *a3* setting.

I believe some of his choral compositions are also well known?

Yes, one his best choruses is *Amidža*. That chorus was performed frequently and had a lot of success. My grandfather's compositions were based on folklore and that particular chorus was also inspired by folk music.

Grandfather died before I was born, but my father always used to talk about him. My father also went to music school: he played the horn. By force of circumstances, he chose another profession, so that he never finished music school. Nonetheless, his love of music remained and once he said to me “I couldn't make it, but you will!”

I was encouraged in my compositional work by the awards I received already from the second year of school at anonymous competitions. These were open competitions in which professors and other eminent composers participated. At the age of 21 I received third prize at *The Days of Mokranjac* (the *Stevan Mokranjac* award) for the chorus *Jadna draga*. I also received awards for *Zlatibore* and *Tri narodne* – three Mokranjac awards. I sent compositions to other competitions as well, for example, to the competition *Ivan Matetić Ronjgov* in Istria; I cherish that award because composers were to submit their works anonymously. The competition was announced for a composition set to Chakavian motives – something fairly unfamiliar to me – but it had to do with folklore inspiration. And that is what attracted me: folklore inspiration and the Istrian scale. I won second prize, together with Lovro Županović, while the first prize was not awarded at all that year.

I also received several second prizes: twice in Macedonia at the festival in Tetovo, a series of awards for children's choruses - there were many competitions back then. I think the institution of a competition is a really good thing, because it gives an unknown composer the opportunity to win recognition.

How do you view the relationship between your ethnomusicological and compositional work today? The same as when you were starting out or have your views changed since?

They have not changed much. Although I've tried to discern some tenets of folk music – scales, rhythm – I was far more interested in what lies underneath, deep beneath the levels I've just mentioned. That deeper level is not just music, but also the context in which music exists. Even today I do not see folklore inspiration as the adopting of melody: you need to know how to develop it further. There are certain principles of composing a folklore melody, which I also adhere to in my works. Folk music is incredibly rich, even though it employs incredibly "meager" means.

You did not write autopoetic texts expounding on your principles as an author. However, in the footnotes and parenthetical notes of your ethnomusicological works, there is a lot written by the composer himself. Could you define your creative attitude towards folklore?

On one occasion, my chorus *Zlatibore* was performed in Vrnjačka Banja. After the choir had finished singing, a man said to me: "But this is just like from my native Zlatibor!" I always follow that thread. The superstructure must not spoil the original. The superstructure must come from the original, it must not be a burden. The important thing is to know the material.

Were you inspired solely by Serbian folklore? Were there any situations in the field whereupon you "recognized" your song, realizing at that very moment that it would be the right inspiration?

I was mostly drawn to Serbian folklore, although the already mentioned *Pjesme sa otoka Krka* were based on Croatian folklore. However, in the case of Serbia, I used folklore from various parts of the country. They were mostly songs I had recorded in the field.

I cannot remember "recognizing" songs. I went to the country for the first time when I started my ethnomusicology studies and it was a revelation to me. I was truly fascinated by the atmosphere, the openness of the people... As a composer I was initially searching for melodies, choosing those that suited me most, but later I gave up on that. An example is the love song *Nit ja spavam nit ja dremam (I Can Neither Sleep Nor Slumber)* to a text from Bosnia, sung by Radmila Smiljanić. I wrote the music without any quotations. Her comment, "This is a true Bosnian melody, even though I don't know where it comes

from”, was a great compliment to me. I have to admit that doesn’t happen often to me. I want to form my own style, but I’m always afraid whether I will succeed in creating something of the same standard as I wrote before.

Is there a folklore dialect that inspires you in particular?

Of course there is, it is the polyphony of the Dinaric variety, nowadays present in western Serbia and Šumadija. Two-part singing in seconds has always been very inspirational to me. Generally speaking, that attitude of Serbian “art” music towards folklore is interesting. Take Mokranjac for example: he used to take a town song and arrange it, because neither he nor his environment were prepared to accept the second as inspiration and harmony. It was only later that older layers of folklore heritage surfaced, so that the oldest one appeared last as inspiration. I believe that my chorus *Zlatibore* is one of the first compositions written in Serbian choral music with that kind of treatment of the second, like in traditional singing. This exists to some extent in Radić’s work as well, but he took one-part melodies from Vladimir Đorđević’s collection and then worked with them, enriching them in a folkloric manner.

In recent years you have shown increasing interest for larger genres. While you used to write mostly choruses and songs, now you have focused your attention on liturgical cycles (Liturgija predeosvećenih darova), oratorios (Hiramov zavet) and the opera for children and adults you are currently working on (Dečak koji se ničega nije bojao /The Boy Who Was Not Afraid of Anything/). How do you explain this change of genre focus?

I suppose it’s my maturing. Now I think of choruses as parts of my future compositions: choruses in opera, oratorio, cantata...

There is one more thing: it requires courage, and courage is acquired over time, with experience. When 14 years ago I started writing an opera, something stopped me. At the time, I had written a libretto of about six hundred lines, in six scenes. Incidentally, the entire text was also translated into German. The libretto is based on a fairy tale, but I changed the content slightly. Now I’m preparing to return to it. I think now I’m mature enough to complete it and hope it will be finished by spring of 2007.

In your compositions you often adopt folkloric texts, though not the melodies. How much attention do you pay to the texts to which you write music?

They are the most important thing to me. They are what inspires me and moves me, even though in folk songs text and melody are often at some kind of strange variance. The folk music people create by simply adding new words to a melody: to them it does not matter if the melody is cheerful and the text sad. In fact, folk texts inspire me. Take, for

example my last chorus from 2002, written to the text of four folk proverbs about peace: *Mirnoj reci obale su u cvatu (If a River is Calm its Banks Are in Bloom)*. If they originate from the same milieu, folk melodies can also be quite similar.

Writing verses also inspires me a lot. A verse can draw out of me a sense and a story I would not be able to recount in prose.

As you've said, you write the librettos for your works by yourself. So far you have written librettos for an oratorio and an opera and you might write for other works in the future. Why?

Many writers say that writing a libretto is extremely demanding and difficult. I decided to try it myself, thinking – maybe I'll manage, maybe I won't, but I've got nothing to lose. Writing a libretto still has one drawback: when writing to someone else's text you can keep your distance and view it more objectively, you simply have a different kind of inspiration than when you are using your own text.

What are your plans for the future after the opera?

I want to write a cantata inspired by Balkan folklore, a sort of Balkan *Carmina Burana*. I am interested in archetypes. The simplest approach is to introduce the tamburitza or bagpipe into a composition, but I want to approach the folk melody in a "Bartokian" way, to "turn the violin into the bagpipe", that is, to make the violin resemble a folk instrument. I search for archetypes on the vocal level, on the instrumental level.

Now I compose at home on the computer, which makes my work a lot easier. At the same time, it also provides good sound control of what's written. I used to compose at the piano, which I'm very familiar with even though I started playing it late in life.

Your performing activity is also very well known. How would you describe its place in your overall music activity?

When I graduated in the oboe, I realized I was not sufficiently attracted to that instrument. I missed practical music-making, so I started studying vocal art. I had serious problems at first, but I made such good progress in the following three years that I was able to enroll into university.

Even later on, I used to sometimes take a break, leave everything and spend an entire month preparing a concert. I performed with Vesna Šouc, we used to organize up to ten recitals at a time. I must have had thirty concerts across Serbia and I also sang at the small hall of the Kolarac Foundation. I am particularly familiar with the *lied*, I do also like the opera, but not as much as the *lied*. I like Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Tchaikovsky and our song in particular. There are so many beautiful pieces written in our country.

It was back then that I also came across our choral music. At the time I discovered many important compositions. Generally speaking, our composers of choral music don't get the respect they deserve. Consider composers such as Radomir Petrović and Kosta Babić, who make up the music elite, and not only of choral music at that, and yet their works are disregarded. It is with regret that I think about Dušan Radić's *Gungulice*, Toma Prošev's *Musandra*, and many other beautiful choruses which are not performed today.

How do you see composing?

I see composing as a personal act in which a man reveals himself fully. It's a very important issue for me. Creation is one and always the same... It is about making a good plan and then doing everything possible so that no one notices it was done according to a plan. That's the difference between craftsmen and real artists: in a craftsman's work the plan is recognizable, while in the work of an artist no one even thinks to look for structure. But that doesn't mean that craft is not important: both inspiration and talent are useless without it.

I always sing when I am composing, even though Rajičić was mistrustful of themes that can be sung. Actually, he was wary of triviality. It is not easy to create a singable melody that makes sense and doesn't sound banal. However, I think that authors do not differ in *what* they do but *how* they do it, that is, not in the motives they use, but in their treatment.

You belong to a group of composers which consider the contact with listeners as being very important. You also believe it is important for performers to enjoy interpreting your music. Is there a particular work you would single out in that sense?

I imagine composers who don't care about making a good impression on the audience don't exist. Perhaps not on everyone, just on a particular group of people, but there is not an author to whom this does not matter.

Liturgija was received well by the audience, the choir enjoyed singing it, the conductor enjoyed conducting it and I believe I achieved my goal.

Let us finish this interview with the inevitable question for a composer writing for the choir in Serbia: how would you define your attitude towards Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac?

Many puppet masters made puppets, but there was only one Geppetto. Using the material he had, Mokranjac did something others were not able to do before him. It seems to me that no one since has managed to reach those heights.

Translated by Jelena Nikezić