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JOSIP SLAVENSKI AND HIS TIME
A collection of papers from the specialist conference marking
the 50th anniversary of the composer's death
(Belgrade, November 8-11, 2005)
SOKOJ-MIC, Editor: Mirjana Živković, Belgrade, 2006

Owing to the fact that in 2005 SOKOJ MIC had initiated and, in cooperation with allied institutions, fittingly marked the 50th anniversary of Josip Slavenski's death with a series of activities, in 2006 Belgrade saw the publication of not one but two books that complementarily, each in its own way, broaden the scope for the supplementation and revision of existing musicological conclusions, but also open up new research perspectives, to the satisfaction of the researchers of the composer's unique and provocative work and the dynamic epoch in which he had created.

The first one is the long-awaited "biography" of Slavenski written by his widow Milana, a memoir that had remained a manuscript for decades and was available to us only in fragments through secondary literature.¹ The publication of Milana Slavenski's vivid and, in literary terms, highly cultivated, but also documented recollections provided the national literature on music with an authentic testimonial of both the composer's private creative life and the entire, simmering atmosphere of music events in the region of the former Yugoslavia, and Belgrade as its epicentre.

On the other hand, the second book dedicated to Josip Slavenski published in 2006 represents an important record, first and foremost of the scientific coordinates within which the Slavenski "phenomenon" was examined at the three-day conference – organized by SOKOJ MIC, the Department of Musicology of the Faculty of Music and the Musicological Institute of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences – which, in late 2005, brought together over 20 authors, including musicologists from Russia, France, Great Britain, and Romania.

We should start off by saying that the conference *Josip Slavenski and His Time*, the first one to be held in Belgrade, was organized at a very propitious moment! There is no doubt that the greatest credit for this excellent initiative goes to the editor of the *Collection*, Professor Mirjana Živković, a dedicated

¹ Milana Slavenski's monograph *Josip* was published by the "Josip Slavenski" Music School and SOKOJ MIC (Editor Ana Kotevska). The manuscript was edited by Milana Slavenski's relatives: Mirko and Marina Bojović and Milana Đurdulov. Mirjana Živković was the editor, annotator and the author of the accompanying texts.

researcher whose past contributions to presenting and studying Slavenski's work are invaluable. As it is well known, due to the tragic war and political events in the region of Slavenski's former homeland, the collaboration between Belgrade and Zagreb on the vitally important project of publishing Slavenski's collected works was halted in the early 1990s (and has not been renewed to date!). As clearly demonstrated in the *Collection* by Milica Gajić's meticulous work (*Bibliography on Josip Slavenski...*), at the same time there was a lull (however, not a complete halt!) in the systematic study of the composer's legacy, which had been initiated in the previous decade, with marked results, by a group of young Belgrade musicologists (S. Grujić-Vlajnić, M. Gajić, J. Mihajlović-Marković, Z. Makević...) under the leadership of Mirjana Živković. Since the publication of the only monograph on Slavenski to date, namely, Eva Sedak's study,² there have been no significant attempts in Serbia at an integral, problem-oriented interpretation of Slavenski's oeuvre or any "new interpretations" from the standpoint of contemporary theories. Some time also had to pass for the uproar of nationalist and anti-communist slogans to die down before Slavenski's position could be once more examined, as it always should be in any science, in an objective, politically "indifferent" manner in the Yugoslav context, regardless of the new borders and the change in social order. In this regard, it is a real shame that the colleagues who were invited from the former Yugoslav republics, whose musical-historical developments Slavenski also belongs to, did not come to Belgrade.³ On the other hand, it was very positive that the conference stimulated the members of the middle and younger generations of local musicologists and that, in our opinion, the participation of colleagues from abroad will extend the range of interest in Slavenski's work in the future.

In addition to several commemorative texts, the collection *Josip Slavenski and His Time* contains a total of 18 musicological papers that form a kaleidoscope of partial, differently methodologically founded, more or less inspired, in-depth and topical analyses of the composer's legacy, the context and reception of his work, his creative attitude towards folklore and, particularly, the problems of his status, in terms of style and significance, in the dense network of national and international, diachronic and synchronic music trends in the 20th century.⁴

Let us first take a look at the texts which topicalize the delicate issues of the composer's identity. While creating a sketch for the "Yugoslav portrait" of Josip Slavenski, Mirjana Živković records with precision the web of political and social factors that inspired Slavenski's "resistance to the cultural imperialism of Europe" and opened the door to his everlasting devotion to the idea on which the state of the

² *Josip Štolcer Slavenski, skladatelj prijelaza*, Zagreb, 1984.

³ However, to the satisfaction of the hosts, the conference was attended by guests from Čakovec, the composer's home town, where in the 1980s the results of research into the life and work of this giant of Yugoslav music had been presented at several "round tables" and subsequently published.

⁴ Each of the works of local authors is accompanied by a summary in a foreign language (English, French), but unfortunately the quality of the translations is uneven. It is also a shame that the Serbian texts in the *Collection* (especially particular ones) were not edited, which, presumably, is a consequence of the publisher's limited financial resources.

South Slavs, which he considered to be his spiritual and musical homeland, was founded in the Balkans after the First World War. Recognizing contemporary interpretative strategies of perceiving the Balkans, Biljana Milanović goes a step further by underlining that the author's attitude towards Yugoslav and Balkan ethnicity, as well as towards the Orient and the visions of the primeval and the cosmic, is integrated into a deliberately alternative modernism as the broadest stylistic framework of the composer's specific European identity. In an attempt to approach Slavenski's oeuvre from the broadest point of view as a "integral entity", the author disputes E. Sedak's discourse on the topic of the "authenticity" and "originality" of individual works, suggesting an interpretation according to which each work in itself is "a specific alternate of the oeuvre's identity. It is interesting, however, that the results of a meticulous formal analysis, carried out on a microsample – versions of *Svita sa Balkana (Suite from the Balkans)* – led Anica Sabo to the opposite conclusion: "the new version of a work is not a mere transfer of music content into a new medium, but instead a creative act of producing a new one", whereupon "the processes of modifying the initial model ensure the individualization of each new version".

In addition to the paper by Nadežda Mosusova, who minutely writes out the "identity card" of the theatre music for Antonije Panović's play *Pečalbari (Migrant Workers)* and underlines that Slavenski occasionally used "the ostinato and minimalist technique", and the research of Vesna Mikić, who convincingly discusses Slavenski's continuous search for the *new* sound and rightly ascribes modernist attributes to his (unfortunately!) as yet unperformed work *Muzika u prirodnom tonskom sistemu (Music in the Natural Tonal System)*, the texts that contribute to expanding the horizons of knowledge about Slavenski's creative oeuvre include the mature papers of the three youngest participants of the conference – M. Vasiljević, I. Radeta and D. Špirić – which clearly articulate the need for a revision of certain ingrained views on the issues of influences and, particularly, of the stylistic designation of Slavenski's music. It is well known that the composer himself is mainly responsible for spreading the myth about his "autochthony"! However, even though Slavenski's contemporaries deliberately avoided the issue of his "references" and later researchers observed a similarity with Bartók, Busoni and Stravinsky, and furthermore, even though the scale of stylistic designation of Slavenski's oeuvre shifted from romanticism towards expressionism, most of the works in the *Collection* from the Belgrade conference (including Laura Manolache's paper on the importance of Enescu's model for the preservation of national identity in southeastern Europe!) talks about Slavenski within the stylistic coordinates of modernism, that is, within modernism as an epoch. Thus, for example, Maja Vasiljević concludes that by composing *Haos (Chaos)* and *Muzika 38 (Music 38)* Slavenski directly became part of "the post-Schoenbergian discourse of the twelve-tone technique" as "a modernist concept of a music work", without abandoning "the auditorily recognizable aspects (...) of his previous poetics". Igor Radeta also takes a step further towards examining elements of the constructivist procedure as "rational control over music structure" in Slavenski's string quartets, applying the efficient methods of the set theory in

his analysis. Proceeding from Adorno's theses, Danijela Špirić identifies the typical characteristics of the *modernist discourse of challenging* as a criticism of bourgeois society and threadbare art formulas of the West in the hybridization of Slavenski's music language, the fragmented texture of his compositions and his use of folklore material.

Hugues Seress's systematic efforts to conduct a comparative harmonic analysis of pentatonic melodies in the compositions of Bartók and Slavenski by using neo-Riemannian analytic methods were also aimed at a better understanding of the process of "hybridization between the western tonal and the limitrophe modal worlds". It is interesting to mention here that Bartók believed that pentatonic melodies, typical of the Međumurje region, belonged strictly to the Hungarian tradition. This, alongside other, political reasons, holds the key to understanding the violent controversy that flared up in the Belgrade press in the mid-1950s over the publication of Bartók's study on Serbo-Croatian folk songs, which Sanja Radinović discusses in detail in the *Collection*. Branka Radović establishes that it was precisely thanks to Slavenski that the rich music heritage of Međumurje inspired significant pages of the work of the much younger Nikola Hercigonja, while Ivana Medić's paper, which is also dedicated to the creative echoes of Slavenski's music, contains the author's initial findings about the little-known oeuvre of Ludmila Frajt and, especially, about her work *Ekloga (Eclogue)*, composed in 1975 to mark the 25th anniversary of the composer's death.

Special attention should be paid to the texts on the latest contributions to the research of manuscript material and the reception of Slavenski's work in our country and worldwide. Analyzing topics from the author's correspondence from his "most productive years" (from 1926 to 1939), Tatjana Marković presents interesting details which complete the existing image of the international context of his work, while Ana Kotevska comments with inspiration on some twenty published and twice as many unpublished texts and notes by Pavle Stefanović, arriving at the conclusion that the aesthetician's writings "create (...) a change-riddled path from vivid experience to the aesthetic perception of Slavenski's music". While Roksanda Pejović states that by the early 1960s there were no more critics in Belgrade who disputed the status of Slavenski's work as a "constant value" of the current music scene, Elena Gordina, a proven supporter and expert on our music, informs us that Slavenski's music, same as the music of most Yugoslav authors, remained completely unknown in the Soviet Union until the end of that same decade. In the context of the fact that the majority of the "eminent" historical reviews of 20th-century European music in the West suppress information about the music of the Balkans, it is encouraging to know that in Moscow, owing to Gordina's dedicated research and long-time pedagogical work, Slavenski's name is included in the list of leading representatives of "national schools" of the last century.

An important record of the latest, extremely positive reception of Slavenski's music in Great Britain in 2005, at the Conference of European Piano Teachers Associations, was left to us by Miloš Pavlović, whose paper, dedicated to the high didactic value of the composer's piano works, has been included in the final set

of commemorative texts in the *Collection* (“O Slavenskom danas – sećanje i refleksije /On Slavenski Today – Recollections and Reflections/). The same group of texts also include Dušan Plavša’s documented recollections of the beginnings of Slavenski’s international recognition and of his pedagogical work, the inspired sketch with poetic overtones by Ivana Stefanović, who skillfully “frames” the images of her “fractal” recollections of Slavenski from her childhood years, as well as fragments of the story *Moja pesma (My Song)*⁵, where the reader is given the opportunity to learn how significant moments from Slavenski’s life were interpreted in Borislav Čičovački’s essayistic prose. The rich and informative collection of papers from the conference *Josip Slavenski and His Time* is concluded by the warm words spoken by academician Dejan Despić on the eve of the conference, at the unveiling of the memorial plaque on the house in Sveti Sava Street no. 33 where Slavenski had spent his last two decades in Belgrade. The memorial plaque was put up “with gratitude and reverence” by SOKOJ, SOKOJ MIC, the Legacy and the Music School that bear his name.

Translated by Jelena Nikezić

⁵ The story was published in its integral form in Amsterdam in 2003, in the author’s collection entitled *Nedopisane biografije (Unfinished Biographies)*.