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**ROMAR/BOG GRADA, OR A HEALING POWER OF MUSIC?
NEW PIECES BY BOŽIDAR OBRADINOVIĆ AND ANJA ĐORĐEVIĆ**

Abstract: The text expounds on the two new works by Anja Đorđević and Božidar Obradinović. Considering that these two vocal-instrumental compositions occurred on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Stevan Mokranjac, they in a specific way speak of the affiliation between their creators, as well as the relationship of our times with the works of the great Serbian composer.

Key words: *Romar*, *The God of the City*, Anja Đorđević, Božidar Obradinović, Stevan Mokranjac, choral music, vocal-instrumental music.

The choral, or more precisely, vocal-instrumental pieces *Bog grada (The God of the City)* by Anja Đorđević¹, and *Romar* by Božidar Obradinović² were performed on October 14, 2006 during the Belgrade Music Festival-BEMUS. Hence, in this text they will be presented together, as if reflecting their joint “backgrounds” and, at the same time, a kind of powerlessness to reject their common “destiny”. Thus, the comparative approach ruthlessly imposes itself onto any interpretation of these pieces, at least on a factual level, if for nothing else but to arrive at the conclusion that the pieces in question will, in every future performance or critical interpretation, remain in some kind of inseparable/destined relation. Does this then mean that the differences which will be spotted, and as usual, query the very reason for comparison, will also be annulled by the similarities and context within which the pieces were written and performed? In other words, here we will, by means of comparison - which probably should be avoided but still imposes itself as mentioned above - make an attempt to perform a shift towards an “unexpected” result and to speak of the possible meanings and interpretations of these two pieces as “one”. What kind of vocal-instrumental “being” do they create, and in which ways does this hybrid reveal itself to interpretation?

The pieces were commissioned from Đorđević and Obradinović with the notion that Mokranjac and his music could be interpreted through and by contemporary music. In the same time, our notorious neglecting of traditional values could be called upon, as well as the opportunity to pay homage to the “father of Serbian music” and exhibit some contemporary music oeuvre features. Bearing in mind the complexity of the issues that the organizers who had commissioned the pieces decided to highlight with this project, they have at the same time inexorably “condemned” the composers and their pieces to all kinds of, perchance unjust and inappropriate, contextualization. The subtitle of the concert – “new actions”, has additionally made the composers’ tasks more difficult, provoking the greatest of

¹ The full title is *Bog grada – Choir of Souls*, duration: cca 6’. Lyrics: Georg Heim. First performance: Academic Choir “Obilić” and St. George’s String Orchestra, conductor: Darinka Matić-Marović.

² The piece on lyrics by Alen Bešić “Stihopojca kob”, duration: cca 4’ 30”. First performance: City Female Choir “Barili”, Sonja Lončar, piano, conductor: Katalin Tasić.

expectations in the listeners. For, how to respond to Mokranjac's "challenge", and how to, possibly for the first time since college days,³ compose a choral composition, and ultimately, how to fulfill all the expectations while carrying out "novelties"?

The first stepping out for which, as if by agreement, the two authors opt was the choice of the vocal and instrumental media combination. While the piece *Bog grada* was written for mixed choir with a string orchestra accompaniment, *Romar* was conceived for a female choir with piano. Whether the a capella choir was too complicated a "feat", or it simply could not provide the satisfactory sonorous panorama for the treatment of the chosen lyrics - or a bit of both - perhaps does not matter as much as the very fact that both of them needed a "broader" and "denser" sonorous space for their notions' realization. Quite a different issue is, of course, the treatment of instrumental media (which in the context of Mokranjac's tradition and Serbian choral tradition happens to be a kind of "surplus") and its relation to the vocal means of expression. In both cases, we can speak about a specific, deliberate and consistently performed "dependence" of the instrumental medium, and to reiterate, its deliberate reduction to the role of a coloristic/voluminous "accompaniment". This impression is clearly realized through the application of repetitive procedures in the strings of the Đorđević piece, as well as in the Obradinović piano part. The blocks of material in the monolithic texture, with a steady regular metrical pace (*Bog grada*) or the consistently variable regular meter (*Romar*) - predominantly in a sequential motion and of course, monochromatic - in a way position the instrumental ensemble/piano as just another voice of the (poly)choral ensemble. On the other, the coloristic/voluminous, and finally, total effect of the instrumental media inclusion contributes to the general sonority that is the reflection of the authors' sensibilities and preferences. This makes the role of the instrumental media much more important than mere "accompaniment", and in fact, rather "crucial" in the realization of the total effect and composers' interpretation of the selected poetry. It is as if the basis of both approaches consists of the same intention to "reduce" the otherwise very different, polisemic, temporally, culturally and geographically distant and differently "devised" poetic texts by Alen Bešić (*Romar*) and by Georg Heim (*Bog grada*) - to one feeling, one atmosphere, and a unique experience. It is perhaps there that the threads emerge, which on some quite different levels (generational, for instance) connect the two composers and their pieces, bearing witness to the assumption that, along with the occasion for which they were made, these two pieces could for numerous reasons constitute a unique (hybrid) example of a contemporary music discourse. Nonetheless, here the tendency to create a unique atmosphere does not lead to impressionistic solutions. Quite on the contrary, the described music procedures are on the side of a consistent and permanent "inscription" of the sound effect in the entire listening experience. Bearing in mind the sensibility, meaning, and language of the selected poetry, "expressionist" solutions (which, of course, could also create a specific atmosphere) might be expected, albeit this is not the case. It is as if the authors

³ The fact is that choral composing is not in the focus of these two composers, and that they have had to compose for the choir during their first year of studies at the Department of Composition and Orchestration at the Belgrade Faculty of Music.

are trying something different from what is expected, and are gradually “pulling” us into the atmosphere with their repetitive technique. Especially Anja Đorđević, with her choice of text by one of the most prominent German expressionists. Her treatment of the text “lets down” all the expectations of the conventional treatment of expressionistic poetry. That, of course, does not mean that her treatment lacks expressivity. Actually, due to the minimalistic devices and repetitive technique, she succeeds in leading us into the uneasiness of Heim’s verses. And with the formal dramaturgy of the final solution, which by following the text results in some kind of strophic form, the composer realizes dynamically-sonorous waves that in a film-like manner gradually position the “spectator/listener” into a “procession of souls”. In reality, the evolving and devolving of drama based on dynamics and textural procedures (e.g., a successive adding of choir voices from the lowest to the highest ones at the beginning), as well as a temporary insistence on the repetition of certain words and a final whispering fade-out, make one as much of a spectator of the procession that “goes by” as a participant, due to the culmination points and short final “zooming” (e.g. the repeating of the word “devour” in the whole choir and an additional final “zooming-in” into the mezzo-sopranos and altos). It is enough to add the rhythmical rigidity of the music flow to the anxiety and even horror of the Heim lyrics - this is the best testimony of the impossibility to break free from the chains of daily urban life. Still, the diatonic language, homophony and chords build on thirds, the “whiteness” of the melodic flow and warmness of the human voices-strings combination, are in no way a conventional musical solution for the states of anxiety and horror. The easiest thing would be to connect these to the “female”, “lyrical” principle. But Obradinović refutes this kind of resolution. For his piece is, already at first sight, more “female” by the choice of the ensemble and yet it is both diatonic and repetitive. Maybe less “warm” in color, thus probably less dramatic. Namely, its dramaturgy is more “straightforward”, the form through-composed and treatment of the text even more free (in combining opening and closing verses at the beginning, verse repetitions, etc.) while, as already mentioned, the metrical changes are common. Also, the poem that Obradinović uses - “Stihopojca kob” (“The Poetaster’s Omen”) was written in a kind of archaic language that automatically, and especially because of the introductory section of the piece with sequential upward step-motion shifts of the opening block, seems like a liturgy simulacrum. If we add to this a constant piano “chiming”, the light colors of the female voices, the imitative treatment of their parts in the middle section, and the subject matter of the poem that is as individual as the collective one, we get an angel’s song that could heal the suffering souls of poetasters.

What is emblematic for both pieces is flirting with tone painting. While in *Bog grada* a sea of dark towers “sways” in a downward thirds’ motion of the imitative voice succession, and the whisper at the end is being transformed into the sounds of a city morning which, albeit belatedly, still breaks, the verses of Beševic “... eha mu ne” (“... and there’s no echo”) still reverberate in the imitative play of female voices in *Romar*. Why do we say flirting? Because we cannot claim that the composers’ concern was a strict adhering to the text, or the concrete meanings that verses produce. Rather, they are provoked by the verses’ general ideas, messages, and atmosphere. Only some distinct meaning or an occasional

sound quality of the words produce the described procedures, though still not convincingly enough to motivate the need for the contextualization of these pieces in the realm of the history of vocal-instrumental music conventions.

Still, if we should for a moment address this issue, perhaps we would come to conclusion that no matter what devices were used, these pieces, as many other vocal-instrumental pieces before them, support and promote the ideological positions of their creators and “speak” of the times in which they were created. Maybe here lies the possibility of discussing both as “unique” pieces. For, it seems the problems the two composers are facing are the same and their solutions alike. Confronting the fact that their pieces will be presented with those of Mokranjac, the composers at the same time had to face both Mokranjac and his history, along with their professors, and their own “reality”. Hence, they decided to solve the task by pointing to the problems of that very moment, while adjusting in a specific manner their discourses to the demands of the task, and thus maybe to the ideological framework in which Mokranjac and his oeuvre have been understood for decades. But, by not entering into a direct dialogue with Mokranjac, they still do not succeed, even in the last echo of the interpretation, to resist the “learned” notions of Mokranjac’s work as a “healing” one, which in moments of crisis creates a sanctuary for the suffering souls of his compatriots and gives comfort and inspiration to “poetasters”.

Of course, in the case of the works of our two composers, this notion could be examined on a somewhat more general level, one from which we can talk about the healing powers of music in general, and within which Mokranjac, his disciples and their music are just another one of many possible therapies. The symptoms of the crisis our two composers have found themselves in are in much the same way general, or more precisely, global. And they have searched and found the remedy for their and our anxieties in musical solutions which are based on antiradical methods of diagnostics and therapy, not baulking from the possibilities of alternative healing methods.

Translated by the author

Summary

ROMAR/BOG GRADA OR HEALING POWER OF MUSIC? NEW WORKS BY BOŽIDAR OBRADINOVIĆ AND ANJA ĐORĐEVIĆ

Since the occasion of the first performance of *Romar* and *Bog grada* by Božidar Obradinović and Anja Đorđević respectively, was also the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Mokranjac’s birth, it turned out that the easiest way to expound on these pieces was in a single review. Thus, these pieces continued to share their mutual, twin-like, hybrid destiny. We tried to detect their similarities and differences, and to construct the possible meanings which the two pieces produce. One of these could be that the “secondary” nature of references on Mokranjac’s oeuvre speaks of it as a “healing one” in the rough times we are living in.

