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The String Quartet *OUT OF NOWHERE* **By Branka Popović**

Abstract: In this paper the recent piece by Branka Popović, *out of nowhere* for string quartet (2004) has been analyzed. The survey of the compositional procedure led to a musicological interpretation of the piece, revealing author's predilection for drawing a meta-narrative structure from limited sound/thematic nucleus. This process resembles making of relief incisions in sound, a sort of sound sculpting gesture within a 'conventional' medium such as string quartet.

Key words: Branka Popović, *out of nowhere*, string quartet, melodic relief, materialization, adding, contemporary music, Serbian music, Guildhall.

Last year, 18th *International Review of Composers* in Belgrade presented the premiere of the work *out of nowhere* by Branka Popović, an author who acquired experience working in Belgrade and London. She has for several years been presenting her works to Belgrade audience within our specialized, but unfortunately rare, festivals of contemporary artistic music.

The string quartet *out of nowhere* was written in 2004 in London, during Branka Popović's specialized master postgraduate studies at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama¹. This quartet movement of 162 bars, with average duration of

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1 From a conversation with the author we learn that this work was first 'sounded' in the Chamber music workshop at Guildhall, led by David Alberman, ex-violinist of the quartet *Arditti* and the leader of the second violins of London Symphonic Orchestra. However, the first official premiere of this composition was performed in Belgrade, in 2009.

approximately 6 minutes, was performed at *The International Review of Composers* by the string quartet *Gudači svetog Đorđa*.²

We are presented with the work of well laid out structure and clear composing idea. From the core nucleus, develop two thematic-facture parts, whose alternation organizes the macro-formal musical development. As well as in other, Branka Popović's compositions, this procedure is marked by succinct and constructive self-sacrifice. The entire further course of the composition emerges from the rudimentary nucleus – in this case, the tone *d3* in flageolets. Branka Popović rarely allows the 'rhetoric' to spoil this 'objectivistic' picture. Her architectural, but also refined, logic moulds the musical form like a complex abstract relief. In other words, Branka Popović is interested in the planar musical structure – how does the volume, the affective plane, the drawing, the depth, the texture, in a word, the materiality of the music itself, emerge *out of nowhere*?

Thus, the author in her quartet deals with the problem of *materialization*, but not in the sense of 'alchemic' change of nothing into something, the transformation of stone into gold, but the investigation of how rudimentary substance (materiality) is transformed into new material forms of acoustic structures.

The key word in understanding Branka Popović's composing methodology could be *adding*; she adds to the core nucleus the parameters within the marked volume, broads the expressive field, develops the texture potential, completes the sound spectre. At the end of this experimental procedure, she returns the musical picture to the very beginning, which could poetically be called the 'Ur-situation'.

The English title *out of nowhere* conceals another, more graphic than logical, pun – the word *nowhere* can be viewed as the compound of words *now* and *here*. Although, as already mentioned, I here reach for the graphic riddle (which has nothing to do with the meaning plane of this word) – it seems to me that, besides the materiality, the adding process, Branka Popović uses also another method – 'actualization', which is very 'acutely' hidden in the words here and now. The moulding of the potential of the signal structure of the beginning – this, as the score mark says, *sparkling* sound, based on the aliquot spectre of the tone *d* – is the actualization of the composing procedure and the potentiality of the given sound core. Branka Popović achieves this by rhythmization of the flageolet. Thus, instead of the held tone which is 'sparkling' its aliquot potential, here the tone is 'pulsing', materializing time. The author condenses the flow, making the initial tone develop its potential, which is above all linear, horizontal and modifying. Therefore, I mention the planarity – Branka Popović's interest in creating the sound plane whose surface is decorated with minute inlaying, but which does not reach into 'depth', that potential, saturated depth, offered by the aliquot spectre. It seems that, for Branka Popović in the composition *out of nowhere*, the verticality of

2 The piece was performed at the concert on November 18th in the Hall of the National Bank of Serbia. The members of the quartet were: Mladen Drenić, Miljana Popović, violins, Ljubomir Milanović, viola, and Srđan Sretenović, violoncello. The recording of this concert was used in the analysis of the work.

the sound flow is not crucial. However, it does not mean that it is not present. For example, in the bar 57, by the mark *In modo ordinario*, for the first time the deepest, basic tone (*D*) is reached inside the chord structure, while the culminating plane is realized in the bar 84, with the score mark *Hysterically*, where we finally see the full vertical volume of the composition (*D-d3*). In spite of that, at this moment of culmination, we are presented with a vertical *scaffolding* of the composition, behind whose support develops the horizontal, time dilatation. The establishing of the vertical, which just supports the horizontal flow,³ is additionally supported by glissandos, which accentuate the 'extension', the speed of conquering octave shifts.

Between the above mentioned parts, which, through gradation, achieve the musical as well as affective vertical, there is a calmer, conditionally put 'more melodious', segment, with the score mark *Mysterious* (bar 21, bar 72, bar 131). In this 'attempt at melodious sketch', also in the flageolet, clear and oversensitive sound situation, there is another form of the existence of *nowhere*. That is the actualization based on trying the surrounding, limiting tone heights around the tone *d* – the tones *E flat*, *C sharp* and *e*, which represent the majority of tones, used in the composition *out of nowhere*. In other words, from the tone *d*, through the nucleus *d*, *E flat*, *C sharp*, *e*, as well as rhythmization, verticalization and various texture positioning of these tones within different registers, the music flow was created *out of nowhere*, almost *out of nothing*, as Branka Popović moulds her tones which take over the role of the gesture, authorial score, the seal. In a certain way, metaphorically speaking, the composition *out of nowhere* reminds me of an ancient stele, of a 'cuneiform writing', of the play of shadow and light on the surface of the carved stone, emphasizing the materiality of the object. Through her method and her composing skills, Branka Popović is not trying to present something else behind the materiality of the sound, or to seduce with the fullness of the aliquot experience⁴. The author shows us instead something we rarely see – the *acoustic scaffolding* – the temporary supporting structure of the music organization, thus baring her very own composer's logic, discipline and method.

Another point of interest is that, in spite of discarding the usual musical narrative, in the composition *out of nowhere*, Branka Popović succeeds in showing the narrative nucleus. This proto-narrative of the composition is shown mainly in the mentioned procedure of adding and varying of the temporal or horizontal structures. In the sense in which the narrative is synonymous with organization of the time structure of the experience, the quartet *out of nowhere* shows the wonder of

3 In some other époques of classical music, the harmonic structure was subject to horizontal development. But, in Branka Popović's composition, the vertical and horizontal music principles are reduced to their materiality and are not exponents of the meta-meaning, that is, representations.

4 This 'seductiveness of the aliquot specter' is, in my opinion, one of the problems of the 'spectral music'. The quality and studiousness of the composing-researching process notwithstanding, the results are often just segments of almost 'neo-impressionistic value'.

the moment when 'speaking about something', *out of nowhere*, becomes an event and the creation of one's very own artistic world. This enables the listener not only to witness but also to 'hear', the very act of creation which interests Branka Popović. The listener is invited to 'hear' how the author 'hears', how she 'transforms into music', that is, shapes the time by the sound. In other words, the author shows us her reflection, her hearing, writes that process down, and shows us the *plasticity* of the hearing and of the musical narrative. This is a precious invitation, which offers immediate insight into the singularity of Branka Popović's method – the procedure which shows the rhythm, de-multiplication, and reprising⁵ of her acoustic self-understanding, which, in the case of the quartet *out of nowhere*, acquires a very particular form of composition – the form of the *musical relief* of delicate scores and the precise, minute and abstract musical gesture.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović

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Бранке Поповић

САЖЕТАК

У раду је представљена и интерпретирана композиција Бранке Поповић (1978) – гудачки квартет *out of nowhere* (2004) – која је настала током специјалистичких студија ауторке на Guildhall school у Лондону. Музиколошка анализа открива опредељење композиторке да развија апстрактне наративне структуре из минималног тематско-звучног нуклеуса. Овакав поступак указује на специфичну пластичност њеног композиторског писма, које подсећа на стварање музичког рељефа, минуциозне и апстрактне звучне гесте.

Кључне речи: Branka Popović, *out of nowhere*, гудачки квартет, мелодијски рељеф, материјализација, додавање, савремена музика, српска музика, Guildhall.

5 I am using the words of Jean-Luc Nancy from the text *Ascoltando*, the introductory essay from the book by Peter Szendy, *Écoute, une histoire de nos oreilles*, Paris, Les éditions de Minuit, 2001. And I also add – each listening is always and only auto-reflexive, but, as listening can not be limited, it is always also an invitation for others to listen.