
AUTOPOETICS

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MY VOCAL MOSAICS¹

Abstract: This text features the status and importance of poetry in the output and opuses by Dejan Despić, based on the composer's view that "poetry is, in fact, merely unsounded music, that is to say, that music is, in fact, merely unspoken poetry". Transposing poetry into vocal shapes and achieving a specific mosaic-type dramaturgy will be explained on the example of turning miniature texts into music – *Ozon zavičaja* [The Ozone of the Homeland], op. 105 (a cycle created to the verses of Desanka Maksimović) and *Krug* [The Circle], op. 61 (composed to the verses of *authentic* Japanese poetry).

Keywords: Dejan Despić, Desanka Maksimović, mosaic-type dramaturgy, *Ozon zavičaja*, *Krug*

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¹ Sound examples are available online at the official New Sound YouTube channel. Please find the playlist here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZt_2SKutBY&list=PLNFG-wrMs0-Xzo9GYGsuBaxxOc6704_IUJ

Taking stock of my music today, after more than six decades of continuous work shaped in 246 opuses of different kinds, its relatedness with poetry is quite apparent, one might even say striking and characteristic. Ever since my early youth, my high school days, I have been extremely keen on poetry, and felt as if it made life more beautiful, deepening our experience of the world, making our emotions richer and stronger. I still recall many verses I was attracted to in those days and I even made attempts at writing such a kind of poetry. When I started composing, it was, therefore, quite natural for me to relate some of my first attempts to poetry, feeling that **poetry was, in fact, merely unsounded music**, that is to say, that **music was, in fact, merely unspoken poetry**. Whether I transferred poetic creations directly into *vocal* musical shapes, or used them – also very often and gladly – only as a *template*, undertone, or a motto (literally – a *driving force*, a source of musical inspiration) for *instrumental* compositions, this relatedness has always been and after all remained consistently present and perceptible in my musical creation. Moreover, it is as if its presence and importance grew more and more in recent decades, presumably due to the increased feeling of the fleeting nature of life drawing towards its inevitable end. Eros and Thanatos, as two timeless symbols and the most powerful inspiration of all art, at all times, figure most prominently in my selection of poetry: *love* and *death*, especially the *death of love*; in different variations, they particularly pervade the conception of vocal cycles, which, rather than merely being an organized series of songs, have the dramaturgy of a whole – which is not hard to analyze and understand, and is quite important from the standpoint of their interpretation! The need for a dramaturgical thread imposed itself particularly when I used miniature haiku-type texts or similar ones from ancient Japanese poetry, which often attracted me with their delicate wealth of images and thoughts, expressed with concise, multiple-meaning metaphors. Just as instrumental miniatures “require” joining into cycles since individually they can hardly last as an independent whole, so it is also particularly true when they additionally carry the text, which, in its part implies wider moves in terms of content and development. With this always in mind, I built specific *mosaics* in the series of my musical pieces, selecting texts from the same mental/emotional circle and combining them into a bigger ‘picture’ afterwards, even when such a technique contradicted the very style and tradition of the original! This is the case with Desanka Maksimović’s *Ozon zavičaja* [The Ozone of the Homeland] (op. 105) – the whole book of “à la haiku” poetry containing quite a few related thoughts and images which simply ‘offer’ themselves to be linked meaningfully, although haiku’s unique style and its strict syllable structure lie exactly in its *miniature size*. In this case, the wholeness of the cycle is achieved through tens of individual haikus forming a specific mosaic of thoughts and feelings. It goes like this:

This morning the windows are shedding tears – what is happening in the street?

I am watching black mushrooms sprouting from my window.

The morning sky has tucked itself into black shawls.

This morning the windows are shedding tears and looking at me gloomily.

It has stopped raining. The meadow is drying its hair in the breeze.

Despite its shallowness, a pond reflects the whole sky in itself.

The moon has fallen in the pond, yet never extinguishing itself.

It has stopped raining and the gutters are now humming a lullaby.

The evening has given a golden kiss to the western skies.

A quiet evening breeze is whispering something to me with a human voice.

You have risen from the tomb of oblivion. It's springtime!

The sky has unfolded a gossamer blue marquee over my garden.

The shepherd wind is chasing a restless flock of sheep in the sky.

Drifting aimlessly, a cloud ran into the sun.

White butterflies from the heavenly garden are dying fast.

I have been climbing the same hill for the tenth time. My heart is pulling me.

A stranger is echoing my words on another hill.

The wings of unknown joy are propelling me up among birds.

Although old, a nightingale sings of love all night long.

The nightingale has sensed a man in love and is singing to him all through the night.

A nightingale is singing a serenade to me the whole night long, thinking I am a bird.

A nightingale wanted to comfort me with its song, but made me cry instead.

What used to bring us joy when we were young, makes us sad in our old age.

I used to tread the rainbow bridge; now I'm left with only a plank-bridge.

A twilight gloom descends onto the plains and my soul.

A gloomy thought has veiled my sight like twilight.

You are nowhere to be found – either in my dreams or in reality. It's a desolate world.

Yet, a nightingale is warning me: you do exist somewhere.

Birds are singing. Those buried lost their hearing a long while ago.

Hawthorn and willow have blossomed. The deceased can't smell them.

A raging thunderstorm. It doesn't matter to those in graves.

A bell is ringing, nightingales and the river are singing. Only the dead are silent.

The church smells of incense. The cemetery – of violets.
By the church, there's a tombstone draped in lichen. The dead are draped in oblivion.
One sleeps peacefully in one's homeland, near the bones of one's ancestors.²

² Original:

Jutros prozori rone suze – šta li je na ulici?
Sa prozora gledam nicanje crnih pečuraka.
Jutarnje nebo u crne se šalove ubundalo.
Jutros prozori rone suze i u mene setno gledaju.

Prestala kiša. Livada suši kosu na povetarcu.
Oplića bara, a nebo celo-celcato u nju je stalo.
Upade mesec u baru i u njoj se ne ugasi.
Prestala kiša, a oluci uspravanku sada pevuše.

Veče poljubi nebesa na zapadu zlatnim poljupcem.
Nešto mi šapuće ljudskim glasom večernji tih povetarac.
I ti ustade iz groba zaborava. Proleće je!

Razapelo nebo tanak, modar šator iznad moga vrta.
Nemirna stada ovaca goni nebom pastir vetar.
Ploveći nasumce, oblak se sudari sa suncem.
Brzo umiru beli leptiri iz vrta nebesnog.

Već se deset puta penjem uz isto brdo. Srce me vuče.
Nepoznat neko ponavlja moje reči na drugom brdu.
Krila radosti nepoznate gone me među ptice.

Mada star, slavuj cele noći peva o ljubavi.
Nasluti slavuj srce zaljubljenoga, i svu noć mu peva.
Svu noć mi slavuj peva podoknice. Misli: ptica sam.
Slavuj je hteo da me pesmom uteši, ali me rasplaka.

U starosti nas rastuži ono što nas je mlade radovalo.
Išla sam nekad mostom duge, sad samo – brvnom.

Spušta se seta sumraka na ravnice i na dušu.
Sumorna misao, poput pomrčine, zastre mi vid.
Nema te nigde, ni u snu, ni na javi – opusteo svet.

Jedan me slavuj, ipak, opominje: negde postojiš.
Ptice pevaju. Oni pod zemljom već davno ništa ne čuju.
Procvetali glog i vrba. Mirise im mrtvi ne osećaju.
Zla nepogoda. Njih u grobovima to se ne tiče.
Udara zvono, pevaju slavuji i reka. Samo mrtvi ćute.

Miriše crkva na tamnjan. Groblje – na ljubičice.
Ukraj crkvice ploča obrasla lišajem. Mrtvi – zaboravom.
Mirno se spava u zemlji zavičajnoj, uz kosti dedova.

I composed another extensive text by using only a little larger varied ‘squares’ of similar images and thoughts, feelings and associations, setting them in a kind of mosaic – and this time I took them from *authentic* Japanese poetry. It is my cycle titled *Krug* [The Circle] (op. 61):

My flowers have withered in the long night rain. I travelled the world absorbed in myself, in vain...

Am I to spend this long night alone, like a long tail of a golden pheasant being trailed along the hill?

The mountains are still covered in snow, but spring is coming slowly. Soon the tears frozen in the nightingale’s eye will melt.

Cherry trees have blossomed in the sandy valley! I just hope fog does not descend from the nearby mountains!

Will it last long? Who knows what is in your heart? I woke up in fear and my thoughts are entangled like my black hair...

Why even today, when the spring sky is so calm, are restless flowers wilting?

Oh, cherry tree, stop the one who’s leaving, even though he is aware of my love! Let your petals fall down to conceal his path.

I ran out all the way to the sea to see him, to tell him good-bye. But the tears filled my throat, so I said nothing...

Ever since I parted with him, as icy as dawn still pale from moonlight, there’s been nothing sadder for me than morning.

No, folks – you never get to know his heart! But in my homeland flowers smell as they used to.

Hey, you, cherry tree on the hill, we should look upon each other with compassion: apart from you covered in blossoms, there’s no one dear to my heart...

I have always thought that flowers of oblivion grow only in gardens, among roses. Now I know they also bloom in the heart without love.³

³ Original:

Cveće mi svenu u dugoj noćnoj kiši. Prošla sam svetom zagledana u sebe, uzalud...

Ovu dugu noć, kao dugu kao dugi rep zlatnog fazana što se vuče po brdu, zar da provedem sama?

Planine još leže u snegu, ali lagano dolazi proleće. Uskoro će se istopiti suze, smrznute u oku slavuje.

Procvetale su trešnje u peskovitoj dolji! O, sad samo da ne padne sa obližnjih gora magla!

Da li će to trajati dugo? Ko zna šta je u tvome srcu? Probudila sam se od straha i kao moja crna kosa zamršene su mi misli...

Zar i danas, kad je proletnje nebo tako mirno, nemirno cveće opada?

Onoga koji, znajući za moju ljubav, odlazi, zaustavi o, drvo trešnjino! I neka padnu tvoje latice da zametu njegov put.

It goes without saying that when one allows oneself to develop new shapes of one's own and different wholes based on *someone else's* material, such a person tries to do it as meaningfully as possible, guiding his thought as a dramaturgical thread along new paths of meaning and associations, with each single 'square' inspiring other, new solutions, making this kind of text highly motivating for finding various answers. It is not hard to see how in these cycles (*Ozon zavičaja* and *Krug*) 'squares' can be composed, linked and grouped in a wide variety of ways, or separated as an emotional focus, while others are more picturesque, but still have a latent meaning and feeling, sometimes even painful: "You are nowhere to be found – either in my dreams or in reality. It's a desolate world." By contrast, "[t]he wings of unknown joy are propelling me up among birds", is immediately followed by "[a] gloomy thought has veiled my sight like twilight", after which joy comes again – "[c]herry trees have blossomed in the sandy valley!", along with anxiety: "I just hope fog does not descend from the nearby mountains!". Then again, words come softly: "Although old, a nightingale sings of love all night long."; etc. The state of loneliness is particularly felt: "Am I to spend this long night alone...?"

However spacious and varied the mosaic of these thoughts may be, it seems an overall gloomy and melancholy worldview prevails in it – sadness, death and oblivion, and only sometimes, consolation and resignation. However, pervading it all is a fascinating, powerful beauty of poetry, which attracted my attention and motivated my composing – in the described or similar way – of a series of other vocal pieces. Since I also feel an inclination towards such a worldview, particularly in these 'golden years', I guess this must be the source of my affinity for building vocal mosaics of this unusual kind, as well as for the selection of suitable poetic templates.

Da bih ga videla, da bih mu rekla zbogom, otrčala sam čak do mora. Al' su mi suze grlo napunile, pa nisam ništa rekla...

Od kad se rastadoh od njega, ledenog kao zora još bleđa od mesečine, za mene nema ničeg tužnijeg od jutra.

Ne ljudi – nikad se njino srce ne upozna! Ali u mom rodnom kraju miriše cveće kao i pre.

Treba da se gledamo za sažaljenjem, trešnja na brdu: osim tebe cvetne, nikoga dragog nemam...

Uvek sam mislila da cveće zaborava cveta samo u vrtu, među ružama. Sad znam da ono cveta i u srcu bez ljubavi.

Summary

Starting from the view that “poetry is, in fact, merely unsounded music, that is to say, that music is, in fact, merely unspoken poetry”, the author points to the significance of poetry in his output, that is, to the ways of transposing a poetic text into a musical one. This process, based on a specific mosaic-type dramaturgy, is explained on the example of the vocal cycles: *Ozon zavičaja* [The Ozone of the Homeland], op. 105 (created to the verses of Desanka Maksimović) and *Krug* [The Circle], op. 61 (composed to the verses of authentic Japanese poetry).

Translated by Aleksandra Čabraja and Stela Spasić