

CONTEMPORARY MUSICOLOGY BETWEEN MODERNISM AND POSTMODERNISM

When around the middle of the second half of this century the “Copernican” art of modernism was surpassed by the “Ptolemaic disarmament” in the form of postmodern art, almost everything in music changed imperceptibly yet significantly.

Fundamentally of inquiring nature and inclined to experiment, the art of post-war modernism – primarily disposed to seek the full autonomy of the work of art, “full of faith in progress”, and “liberated from any ideological superstructure of possibly dubious nature,” according to Ulrich Dibelius – was first confronted with the reality of the post-modern, i. e. post Cold War period, and then also with corresponding postmodernist art, which instead of the modernist tendency to equalize life and art, offered fiction and in addition, a clear insight into the fact that “in the future too, fiction will be necessary for life.”¹

Postmodernism has redefined and reinterpreted many key views and notions of modernism. The modernistic quest for a new, universal language of art has been replaced by Baudriard’s “multitude of irreducible, utterly specialized categories and systems” just as the postmodernist unwavering search for the truth, value, meaning... has turned into the right to discover one’s own truths, value systems, one’s own meanings.² In short, while modernism implied the demand of exclusivity, postmodernism presupposes the principles of coexistence.

The most prominent and most perceptible change in the relation between modernism and postmodernism has occurred in the attitude of art toward its own tradition: modernism “rejected any historical paradigm” and was guided by “the radical demand for innovation” – as written by Heinrich Klotz, while postmodernism is characterized by the disappearance of the “general taboo” for all historic art; the historic model “has come back to the circle of references as one of

¹ The thesis about the modernist tendency to equalize art and life and about the post-modernist return to fiction has been taken over from: Hajrih Kloc, *Umetnost u XX veku* (Art in the 20th Century) / *Moderna – postmoderna – druga moderna*, Novi Sad, 1995.

² Cf.: Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, *Srpska muzika i zamrznuta istorija* (Serbian Music and Frozen History), *Novi zvuk*, 9, 1997, 15.

the creative potentials of art.”³ The negative attitude toward tradition in the music of post-war modernism implied the fear of every familiar organization of musical material, of anything which could, even in idea alone, remind one of the old ideology-influenced world of the pre-war European music. Post-war avant-gardists searching for new musical material and new modes of its organization, actually searched for a new, better, truer, non-ideological and more democratic world. The generation of creators of postmodernist orientation did not, however, believe in the possibility of the existence of that better world, and so post-modern music joined without any remorse the project of Sloterdijk’s “conscious renewal of illusion and the acceptance thereof.”⁴

That is why postmodern music does not discard its historical heritage, but rather addresses it in a creative way, understanding it, according to Mirjana Veselinović, as a “frozen,” non-historic category, whose fragments can ever be read anew, reconstructed and “subjected to new poetic centering,”⁵ in the course of which the authentic postmodernist compositional approach implies “a new aesthetization (of the chosen sample – added by M. M.) on the personal level.”⁶ Thus, the use of quotations in postmodernist music, as “a specific form of the appearance of music about music” directly confronts the modernist demand for the autonomy of the work and its self-foundation, as the true nature of the relationships between modernism and postmodernism clearly manifests. The essence of these relationships lies in the opposition between the semiological and the semantic as mutually exclusive aspects.⁷

On the other hand, it is precisely the fact that authentically postmodern music is “rooted in the mission of the signifier,” as observed and argued by M. Veselinović-Hofman in her book *Fragments on Musical Postmodernism*, that implicitly speaks about the new attitude of postmodernists toward the communicativeness of music, i.e. about the postmodernist shifting of the center of gravity from the characteristics of music itself to “its mode of action,” as noted by Ulrich Dibelius. By fetishizing the importance of a rigidly controlled compositional-technical procedure and equalizing the conception of the process with the work itself and on the other hand “rejecting already at the embryo stage any tendency to use music as a means of action,”⁸ post-war avant-gardists required from their listeners “an elite art of structural listening”⁹ – so that avant-garde

³ Cf.: H. Kloc: op. cit, 24–25.

⁴ Quoted according to: M. Veselinović-Hofman, *Fragmenti o muzičkoj postmoderni*, Novi Sad, 1997, 135.

⁵ Cf.: M. Veselinović-Hofman, op. cit., 15.

⁶ Cf.: Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, *Fragmenti o muzičkoj postmoderni*, Matica Srpska, Novi Sad, 1997, 77.

⁷ The idea is taken over from the book by M. Veselinović-Hofman, *Fragmenti...*, p. 146.

⁸ Cf.: Ulrich Dibelijus, *Komponovanje uprkos dogmatskom pritisku* (Composing in Spite of Dogmatic Pressure), *Novi zvuk*, 1997, 19.

⁹ Cf.: Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Developing Variations, Style, and Ideology in Western Music*, Minnesota – Oxford, 1990, pp. 270–271.

music was accessible only to a small musically educated group which was able to follow mentally all those complicated music processes.

On the other hand, having lost interest in demonstrating its own power by means of rigid control over musical processes, postmodernist music has at the same time returned to the traditional concept of composing and to the concept, also traditional, of immediate communication.

Naturally, the tracks of the traversed path remain – the modernist experience could not have been erased, so that the compositional procedure still has the decisive importance in the articulation of the work in postmodern music, but in relation to the work itself and its aesthetic message it has become of secondary importance: postmodern music above everything else wants to communicate.

Of course, in this “sketch” only some of the chief characteristics of modernism and postmodernism could be presented and only some of the differences between them, which, owing to the “cordial complicity of theory and practice,” as formulated by Manfred Tafuri, can be recognized even in contemporary reflection about art.

Particularly, in contemporary musicology coexists a wide spectrum of orientations located in a vast space between modernism and postmodernism. Nevertheless, to tell the truth, we must say that at the basis of contemporary musicology lies a modernistic concept of science, rooted in structuralistic methods of research and in the dialectical principle of viewing phenomena. This is what Sloterdijk’s “Copernican knowledge” is all about, and even in postmodernist science that knowledge does not lose “the factual integrity and efficiency” but rather represents the foothold for the individual poetic centering of phenomena regarded by postmodernist, that is post-structuralistic science.

On the other hand, the postmodern era has introduced even into modernistically oriented science a certain amount of suspicion about the reliability of universal knowledge and the possibilities of acquiring “an ultimate, global insight into matters,” so that even in modernistically oriented musicological studies a certain measure of relativization can be spotted.

Contemporary musicological thought is predominantly “corresponding with its object”¹⁰ which actually means that both among modernistically and postmodernistically oriented studies, the least common are the ones that assume the radical and rigid positions of either orientation.

That is why on this occasion we commit ourselves to the investigation of some specific properties and differences between the predominantly modernistically conceived book by Rose Rosengard Subotnik, titled *Developing Variations, Style, and Idea in Western Music* and the predominantly postmodernist book by Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman – *Fragments on Musical Postmodernism*.

¹⁰ This phenomenon has been observed by M. Veselinović-Hofman, op. cit, 6.

Of special interest for us in the book by Rose Rosengard Subotnik are considerations connected with contemporary, modernist music, with respect to which the author – an advocate of Adorno's dialectical philosophy – manifests noticeable affinity and a high degree of empathy. The author deals, very competently and complexly, with the problem of the autonomy of the work in modern music, particularly emphasizing the precarious position of music as the consequence of its autonomy; then, its lack of communicativeness as the direct consequence of the complexity of its structure and many other problems connected with the historical situation of contemporary music.

However, on this occasion of more significance than the problems themselves is the book's evident modernist orientation, conspicuous already at the level of terminology in which the most important places are occupied by general, universal notions such as truth, ideology, rightness, morals. It is perfectly clear that in the context of the consideration of contemporary music, these notions function as unambiguous signifiers of modernist ideology.

The pronounced dialectical discourse of the text, the tendency toward all-comprising consideration, the explicitly stated quest for "a methodology which would, for truth's sake, make possible the investigations of the relationships between ideology and art" as well as the quest for a musicological methodology which would reconcile the structuralist analysis of the work with the estimation of its ideological value, also reveal an individual modernistic musicological concept. Nonetheless, in some of the opinions expressed in this book within modernistic considerations of the chosen problems, it is possible to discern an indelible mark of post-structuralist knowledge: the awareness of the impossibility of establishing universal scientific methodologies and the inevitable fragmentariness of all scientific contributions.

Quite differently from this one in conception and realization is the book *Fragments on Musical Postmodernism* by M. Veselinović-Hofman.

Concentrated on the phenomenon of postmodern music, the book is based on the theoretical reflection of "the attitude toward tradition in music after avant-garde" and the framework of the problems discussed is, as indicated by the author in the introduction, "the musical and theoretical realm between the end of modernism and the return to some of its elements."

Starting from the use of quotations, i. e. intertextuality as the dominating determinant of postmodern music, the author focuses her investigations primarily on the theoretical, fundamentally semiological definition of the concept of the paradigm in music, so that the relation toward the musical paradigm, along with the contemporary structuralistic musicological analysis, becomes a methodological pivot of the considerations of individual postmodernist musical poetics in this book.

On the other hand, with respect to the theoretical thought on the problems of modernism – postmodernism relationships, the author assumes, according to her own words, the attitude of "a postmodernist composer" who introduces into his own work only chosen musical – in this case theoretical – "material traces."

The complex methodology of this book, which in the manner of postmodernist "second modernism" unites in itself the "Copernican knowledge" of the modernist science of music and the postmodernist attitude toward the global "sample" in consideration, is most clearly revealed in its concluding chapter. In this chapter, the author, among other things, expounds Molino's tripartite theory, which in a specific way converges to her individual understanding of the same problem. The communication scheme: *sender – message – receiver* is viewed by Molino "from the aspect of the *process* of the origination and reception of the message as a 'material trace'," where "the process which is referential for the sender is called poetic (in the sense of *poiesis*), while the process of receiving the trace is aesthetic (in the sense of *aesthesis*)." Within that theory, the author lays a special emphasis on Molino's indication that "the *process* is not only directed from the material trace to the receiver, but also from the receiver to the material trace," which for the author implies the fact that "reception at the same time reconstructs the message" that is, aesthetic and poetic processes do not necessarily correspond."¹¹

The central point of Mirjana Veselinović's conclusion is based on a thesis only implied by Molino's theory: the composer's reception of a material trace consists of his personal, creative reaction to it, namely, the reinterpretation of the aesthetic process into the poetic occurs at the level of composing. The equalization of the aesthetic process with the poetic one (both processes in the sense as described above) is applied in this book also to the musicological discourse, which is now comprehended as "the result of personal creation as the reception of two types of immanent domains: musical postmodernism and the theoretical discourse on it."

Taken out of the context of the book, the conclusion of Mirjana Veselinović can be understood in a much broader sense: as a conscious approach of the postmodern science of music to the concept of creation, which essentially represents the most authoritative balance to the basically inquisitive modernist concept of art which in its search for the social assurance of its existence approached the intangible concept of science.

From the aspect of this hypothesis, a conclusion imposes itself whereby contemporary musicology, i.e. its part which "lives" in the space between modernism and postmodernism, moves freely in it – combining or mutually excluding the paradigm of science and the paradigm of art.

¹¹ Cf.: M. Veselinović-Hofman, op. cit., pp. 150–151.