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**SRDJAN HOFMAN: *HADEDAS* –
PRESENTATION AND THREE DEVELOPMENTS
FOR VIOLONCELLO AND PIANO: BACK TO THE FUTURE**

Abstract: This paper deals with new piece by prominent Serbian composer Srđan Hofman who, for four past years, has been living in South Africa. So, the paper aims at specific “recovery” (through *remembering*) of data concerning Hofman’s output in order to place the *Hadedas – Presentation and Three Developments* for violoncello and piano (2005) in it, as well as at the specific “discovery” (again through *remembering*) of some new features of Hofman’s language, e.g. a turn to melody, use of some consonant intervals and tone centre, not previously present to that extent in Hofman’s pieces.

Five years after the *Nocturne for the Belgrade Spring of 1999*, we had an opportunity to hear Srđan Hofman’s new piece: *Hadedas – Presentation and Three Developments* for violoncello and piano. Not only is this piece Hofman’s first after a rather long period, performed in Belgrade for the first time (we were eager to welcome our composer’s comeback), but there are some additional reasons why this piece deserves our attention. Moreover, these reasons position Hofman’s recent piece in a somewhat specific place in the creative output of our prominent composer.

Although the chamber music genre is one of the cornerstones of Hofman’s work, it is usually characterized by larger ensembles. Also, in the last fifteen years or so, the composer’s choice of media mainly focused on electronic, treated in various ways. However, *Hadedas*, similarly to *Duel* for piano and live electronics, “rejects” the usual in the number of performers reduced to the minimum required for chamber music. In contrast to its “relativity” in the performers’ numbers (and in a few more aspects, as shall be shown) *Hadedas* is “deprived” of electronics. These basic and at first glance not very “astonishing” data already entice more detailed consideration of the circumstances in which the piece evolved, as well as the possible contexts for its interpretation. Thus, the questions that should be asked about Hofman’s new piece meet up in one point, one that enables its positioning in the context of Hofman’s output and poetics.

Surely, the reason for this kind of interpretation of the piece is the process of a peculiar “mental reconstruction” that takes place in the mind and in the ear of the “interpreter” of the piece. As Srđan Hofman has been living abroad for four years now, and because of various circumstances, in my mind, he has joined the numerous persons of my generation who are also far away, the notion that prevailed over me was that listening to his music has some similarity to the way we recall the faces and gestures of the persons we know but haven’t seen for a long time. That is why this kind of “mental reconstruction”, recalling and being reminded through listening, had to find way to include in the interpretation of the piece an essay on

deciphering the possible context in which the piece was composed. For, it is obvious that to the “face we remember” the context has added a few new facets, allowing us at the same time to see more clearly the ones we used to know.

Hence, several different answers may be supplied to the first question I’ve had while listening to the piece, which probably came from my personal preferences and has to do with the “lack” of electronic sound. The most probable one is that Hofman did not have the technical means to realise the electronic parts. Also, bearing in mind who the piece is dedicated to¹, it is quite possible that he actually didn’t want to use electronics at all, and that he decided to compose a piece that could become a part of the concert repertoire by the quality of its demanding performance requirements. Finally, remembering Hofman’s skilful remake of the *Duel* into a version for two pianos and percussion, I wouldn’t at all be surprised if he decides to produce a version of *Hadedas* with electronics. For, maybe less obviously thanks to the performing apparatus, albeit very persuasively, *Hadedas* also testifies to an important feature of Hofman’s poetics that is devoted to permanent research in the field of sound, its possible transformations and the possibilities of sound diffusion.

Another element of the context in which the piece has evolved may be discovered in the composer’s comment on the piece.² Here also do I recognise something, but of some other things I just can have a superficial notion. For instance, when speaking of the way the composition was conceived, Hofman shows again the face we all know. In *Hadedas* too, there is a characteristic harmonic cell – the basis for all further development. In respect of the rhythmic plan also, especially in shifts of *quasi aleatorico*, *rubato* sections and sections of the “more stable” metro-rhythmic organisation, Hofman’s features can be perceived. And then

¹ The piece is dedicated to the composer’s daughter Neda (pianist) and her husband Srdjan (violoncello). They performed it for the first time at a concert in the City of Belgrade Hall on February 15th, 2005. *Musica concertante*, *Duel*, *Time Machine* are also dedicated to Neda.

² The piece *Hadedas* – Presentation and Three Developments for violoncello and piano consists of four short attack movements, built by interweaving the variation and developmental compositional procedures. Although itself based on variational repetition, the first movement Presentation in fact presents in short the “main” themes of the piece that are used as reminiscences, variants, or impulses for various interpretations and developments in the following movements, thus building the macro structure of the piece. The same formal procedure is used on a micro-level – inside every “developmental” movement, as well as in their interrelations.

The harmonic content of *Hadedas* lies upon six-tone chords built mostly in thirds often presented as bichords (3+3). Occasionally they move to seventh chords or triads. The harmony progression of the chords is shaped thus to line out different curves of the rise and fall of tension, as well as the “cadencing” but it is not linked to any determined tonality.

The linear component of the *Hadedas* mainly comes from the vertical content, but it includes also the “free” development of the melody (especially in the Second Development), the various types of the polyphonic work and heterophony.

The metro-rhythmical organization of the piece moves through a stable oasis established by the repetition of a certain metro-rhythmical pattern, through a variant repetition of these patterns, to the sliding, quasi-aleatory rhythmical combinations.

The hadeda is a big, extremely fast bird of the ibis family. *Hadedas* in South Africa like to live near and in inhabited places. They usually fly in flocks of 4 or 5 and communicate constantly in very loud and typically rhythmic and screeching sounds. The sudden landing of a flock of *hadedas* has an intimidating effect.

Srdjan Hofman

suddenly, there is the title of the piece, more precisely, its first part and the composer's explanation of the term *hadedas*. Since I have never seen/heard *hadedas*, all I can do is imagine the ways in which they inspired Hofman. What I do know is that, as he himself points out, he was fascinated with the sound, moreover with the rhythm of their "song", and then I assume that Hofman worked with that sound as he always does in his electronic pieces, treating it like a sample of rhythmicised sound. So, for those hoping – nothing of Messiaen's influence! And for those who know that with Hofman they'll always have trouble recognising the source of the sampled sound if he chooses not to reveal it – joy of recognition of the procedure!

However, the joy of recognition only starts at the level of contextualising the circumstances in which the piece was written. The next level, realised through listening and analysis supplies an additional apparatus for the "reconstruction" of Hofman's composer "face". I've mentioned already the inspiration with the sound that is the basis for the choice of the basic chordal and rhythmical structures, as well as the treatment of the instruments, and consequently for the crucial variation procedure. Neither the sonorities of the piano and violoncello, nor the rhythms of the *hadedas* are factors that make this piece of Hofman's unique in this respect. The procedures for "exchanging" the roles of the instruments are fascinating, not least in exchanging the material (for example, the score signatures A and C of the *Presentation*³), but more so in the moments where a *pizzicato* violoncello sounds "like a piano" (for example, the score signatures E and F of the *Presentation*) and the piano "like the cello" (beginning of the *Second Development*, *pizzicato* piano and hands on the strings). With a moderate preparing/deafening of the two lowest string of the piano, this instrument gains a sort of percussion quality. In respect of the register treatment Hofman wisely and gradually conquers sound space, from low (yet not silent or quiet) to higher and highest, starting from *Presentation* to *Third Development* in the end. Is this the "intimidating effect of the *hadedas*' landing" or maybe a surprising "reconciliation" of the actors of this quasi duel?

These questions should be understood only as a poetised introduction to the argumentation of the following feature typical of Hofman's output, which here, as in other works, is raised to the level of a "trademark". I've mentioned already the similarities to the *Duel* for piano and live electronics. They go beyond data concerning genre and performers to whom they are dedicated, as well as beyond the occasional characteristic "swinging" of the tempi between quasi aleatoric and *a tempo* sections. The beginning of the piece already irresistibly recalls the beginning of the *Duel*, in the nature of the relation of the two actors, one of which (piano) has chord structures and the other (cello) short descending passages. The resemblance is even more striking in the continuation of the *Presentation* (score signatures B and C), in the characteristic sequential repetition of the irregularly rhythmicised and then broken chords. The culmination of the development of these materials happens in the last section of the piece. But, there are more similarities with

³ Here it is enough to mention the *Presentation* since this movement, judging also by Hofman's comment on the piece, contains the essence of the piece and this also concerns the aspect in question.

Hofman's previous pieces. Some moments of the piece have Hofman's specific kind of "déjà-vu" effect, with a touch of nostalgia, something of his own "reconstruction" of childhood and past, and we've heard these in *Musica Concertante*. Thus, the piano sounds like a "music box" in the 12/16 measure section of the *First Development* (score signature B) and like a "children's game" (or, maybe it is the *hadedas*' in conversation) coloured with somewhat grotesque *secco* seconds in the higher piano register in one of the sections of the *Presentation* (score signature F, bar 6).

Finally, Hofman's need for a stable formal scheme of the piece is also something we are able to recognise. It seems that this time it is the result of the variation procedure, through which emerges the in detail crafted formal scheme in which all the "pieces of the puzzle" fit into their place at the end of the piece. The same procedure could be followed in the separate movements of the piece. In this respect, Hofman's piece is a breakthrough in his handling of the microform plan. With the same enjoyment and seemingly easily, because everything sounds as if this is the only way it could sound, yet again thanks to the perfectionism with which he handled every detail, Hofman achieves a breakthrough (or maybe, a "comeback") into the "melodic" and "harmonic" in the conventional sense. Beside the fact that chordal structures are mainly made of thirds and that there is some kind of centralization "in D" at the very end of the piece, the gradual embracing of the melodic aspect may be seen especially in the *First* (piano) and the *Second* (violoncello) *Developments*. Such broad melodic developments are certainly among the new and specific features of *Hadedas*. They might be explained in terms of the variation procedure, as well as the engagement of the violoncello. Its "lament", especially when the piano accompanies it with higher register chords, is truly a Bartókian pearl. It is interesting however that only in this respect I called upon a 20th-century master. Did I have to do that? Does Hofman's music need comparison with a "real other" for the "reconstruction" of which I was talking to be successful? I would say not. And I say it glad for the fact that as I came to know Hofman's new piece I not only enjoyed recognising the features I once knew, but also the potential it has in its own and in the context of Hofman's opus in general. Does the fact that I'm able to speak of one piece of music without comparing it with other composers' pieces and procedures mean that Hofman has reached a point where he, in his typical elegant, refined and seriously-humorous way, realised his own canon? Does this, then, mean that I will always be able to reconstruct the face/sound of his music?

Translated by the author