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**IRENA POPOVIĆ: ZMIJSKI CAR KOJI JE POJEO SLONA  
(THE BOA CONSTRICTOR THAT ATE AN ELEPHANT)**

**Abstract:** The paper deals with orchestral composition *Zmijski car koji je pojeo slona* by Irena Popović, performed on 13<sup>th</sup> International Review of Composers. Work is stylistically determined in framework of postminimalism and considered from analytical point of view. The research on the composition leads the author of the article to the conclusion that, although we are dealing with a student's work which is, by its nature, limited from various technical aspects, Irena Popović rules the score with certainty and shows a clear and individual music expression, which makes her artistic poetics fresh and new, modern and contemporary, and at the same time impressionable, popular and familiar to professional as well as average amateur listener.

Although the 13<sup>th</sup> International Review of Composers passed under the shadow of serious organizational-financial problems which at one point brought its very existence into question and finally had a decisive influence on the concept and content of the festival, the organizer nevertheless managed, with a great deal of effort, to maintain the continuity of this event which had once been renowned worldwide. Consequently, a total of 19 compositions heterogeneous in terms of style and character were presented to a sadly ever-decreasing audience. The fact that several, mostly domestic, authors withdrew before the opening and even in the course of the Review, resulted in a greater number of compositions by foreign authors being performed. Domestic music production was presented by younger authors, with a noticeable shortage of composers of the middle generation.

It was the composition *Zmijski car koji je pojeo slona* (*The Boa Constrictor That Ate an Elephant*) by Irena Popović<sup>1</sup> that stood out among the few high-quality works by our young artists. This work is in fact the composer's graduation work, which she defended at the Department of Composition and Orchestration of the Faculty of Music in Belgrade in the class of Professor Zoran Erić in September 2002.<sup>2</sup>

The very first impression formed on the basis of a cursory examination of the score is of two striking features: complexity and multi-layers, noticeable in the ideological conception but also in the structure of the composition. This impression is fully confirmed after a more detailed analysis.

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<sup>1</sup> Irena Popović was born in Čuprija in 1974. She studied composition in the class of Srdjan Hofman and Zoran Erić at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. She is currently attending postgraduate studies at the same Faculty in the class of Zoran Erić and at the same time she is attending advanced studies in Salzburg at the University *Mozarteum* in the class of Reinhardt Febel.

<sup>2</sup> The work was written for symphonic orchestra and was premiered at the opening of the Review in the hall of the Foundation of Ilija M. Kolarac on October 25, 2004. It was performed by the Symphonic Orchestra of Radio and Television of Serbia (RTS), under the direction of Biljana Radovanović.

The introductory remark that the work is a “poetic-stage” performance intended to be performed by an appropriate ballet ensemble ( even though the author did bear in mind beforehand the impossibility of staging the work in practice) points to her intention to problematize by this work, from her own perspective, the question of boundaries between popular and high art. This ambiguity, reflected in the way certain elements of the work are considered and treated, points to a specific idiom which will be noticeable at several levels in its stylistic-analytical examination. Thus, the metaphor used in the title of the composition, which served as inspiration for its creation, comes from a novel for children *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. Although it was adopted from the children’s world, in its figurative meaning this metaphor points to very serious problems of interpretation, in this case of one’s own work, as well as of different possibilities of reading and interpreting a work of art in general.<sup>3</sup> Irena Popović in fact tried to suggest some of the ways of “reading” her composition: on the one hand, the seeming ease of expression points to a “children’s” art that is unburdened by interpretation, while on the other hand, the adult, the educated listener will listen to it from his own perspective, “burdened” by layers of knowledge and beliefs<sup>4</sup>.

If we examine the compositional procedure the author applied when creating this work, we can observe that one of the dominant elements is repetitiveness, which is consistently carried out by the permanent repetition of short melodic-rhythmic motives. Since repetitiveness is considered one of the main features of minimalism, Irena Popović accurately implies that *Zmijski car...* can be determined stylistically within the framework of postminimalism.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the “agreeable” melodic motives and impulsive rhythm that are also a striking characteristic of the compositional procedure in this work (as well as being another postminimalist feature) collide with the repetitiveness, thus representing yet another layer within the aforementioned element of ambiguity.

From an analytical point of view, the formal disposition of the work is very lucid and clear. The form is ternary (A B A1), which can be easily perceived already on the basis of indications in the score: the first section (Drawing No. 1) is entitled *Zmijski car spolja (The Boa Constrictor from the Outside)*, the second (Drawing No. 2) *Zmijski car iznutra (The Boa Constrictor from the Inside)*, and the third (Drawing No. 3) *U ogledalu (In the Mirror)*. The sections are interconnected and practically “flow” into one another, each of them consisting of subsections, in which the author develops several main thematic and motivic materials.

For Irena Popović, the three-bar theme presented at the very beginning of the composition has the role of a motivic core, which is ambiguous by its very nature: “at the same time it implies seriousness and flippancy, movement and static quality”.<sup>6</sup> The transformation of the initial motivic core takes place in a multilayered manner throughout the entire composition: on the macro level at the transition from Drawing

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<sup>3</sup> Irena Popović, taken from her defence of her graduation work (manuscript), Belgrade, 2002, p.2.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 3.

No. 1 to Drawing No. 2, while on the micro level within smaller units within the framework of certain subsections.

The first big section, that is, thematic block, **Drawing No. 1** (*Zmijski car spolja*) consists of several smaller subsections: the introductory *Allegretto* brings the motivic material which will appear on the bordering parts of the thematic blocks and which is characterized by moveable rhythmic figures, while the broken octaves which dominate the melodic line create the impression of kineticism. Next follows the subsection *Mobile* which brings contrast, primarily in the field of orchestration. The octave break is taken from the first subsection, but presented in a different instrumental setting. The third section (*Risoluto*) has a transitory character, while the fourth (*Risvegliato*) once again brings the initial thematic material from the beginning of the composition to its original form, this time in violas. Within this subsection, different instrumental groups then present the material successively, thus creating a thick score image, while in the fifth subsection (*Pesante*) a new disintegration of the initial motivic core occurs. The music material presented in this part in fact announces the appearance of the next big section, **Drawing No. 2** (*Zmijski car iznutra*). The first subsection (*Inquieto*) again brings the recognizable motivic core, but this time in the form of a dialogue between the string and the wind instruments. Next comes *Liberamente*, bringing change to tempo and metre, once again implying the author's "toying" with the dualism of the serious and the flippant. In the third subsection (*Con dolore*), which brings a new atmosphere compared to the previous music flow; the strings present the only lyric theme, whose "ironic" character becomes noticeable only after the reappearance of the characteristic octave break from the beginning of the composition, with the help of which the entire material will be transformed into a new form of the initial core. If we go back for a moment to analyzing the macro level, we observe that this part resembles a slow movement and represents a kind of anticlimax to the entire composition. The same material is further developed in the next section (*Piu mosso*) in the string instruments, while the clarinets and the bassoons bring an entirely new theme of different character.

**Drawing No. 3** (*U ogledalu*) is a somewhat changed reprise of **Drawing No. 1**, primarily in terms of a melodic-rhythmic varying of motives, with certain changes on the harmonic level. Within this section, however, there are also subsections in which completely new thematic material appears. The initial *Allegretto* is in fact a slightly changed reprise of the first subsection of **Drawing No. 1**, while the next one (*Grandioso*) brings completely new thematic material in tutti orchestra, disrupting the concept of the literal reprise. According to the composer, this part represents, on the dramaturgical level, an antipode to the subsection *Con dolore* from **Drawing No. 2**.<sup>7</sup> What follows are *Mobile* and *Risoluto*, which appear in shortened versions compared to **Drawing No. 1**. The final subsection of **Drawing No. 3** (*Ben ritmico*) represents the *Coda*, in

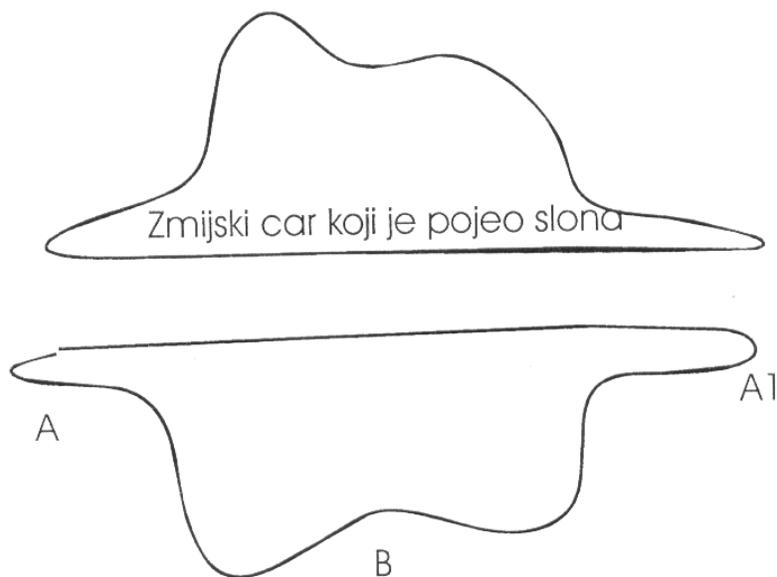
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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 6.

which the motivic materials and their variants from all the sections of the composition are presented for the last time.

After a formal analysis we arrive at the conclusion that the composition's form corresponds to a drawing from the book *The Little Prince*. The said drawing is in fact a skeleton of the action taking place in the book, and Irena Popović used it as an inspiration for forming the ideological-stylistic concept of her composition. Furthermore, she also took the titles of the drawings from the prose work and transferred them to the music work. The entire idea is best explained by the drawing, that is, the formal sketch which she enclosed with the text of her defence of her graduation work:

**Example: the formal pattern of the composition – the boa constrictor in the mirror**



Having analytically examined the composition *Zmijski car koji je pojeo slona* we get the impression that, although this is a graduation work which by its nature imposes certain rules on the author – and by extension certain limitations as well, Irena Popović absolutely and expertly controls the score in terms of her craft, the sonic result of which is a very clear and quite specific music writing. Her artistic poetics is fresh and new, modern and contemporary, and at the same time agreeable, popular and as close to the professional listener as to the average amateur listener, which points to unmistakable talent and great potential for the young author.