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SERBIAN MUSIC ON THE FESTIVAL OF EUROPEAN MUSIC IN FRANCE
March 8-13, 2005

Abstract: At *The Festival of European Music* which took place in March 2005 in Chalon, important town of French province Bourgogne, performers and audience attended the realization of Ivan Marković's (a composer and pedagogue who has been living and working in France for over four decades) old time musical dream.

This year the theme was the music of Slavic peoples, with Serbia being given the place of honor. From March 8-13th cantata *Vinea mea electa*, *Quartetto lirico* by Ivan Markovic, *Rosebud* and cycle *Five haiku songs* by Rajko Maksimovic, *Folksongs* by Aleksandar Damnjanovic were performed at the scene of the Chalon Conservatory, as well as works of Janáček, Mokranjac, Shostakovich, Hristić, Bartók... The audience, saluting these peaces, was not indifferent to their artistic quality.

Different generation of composers (Ivan Markovic - Chalon, Rajko Maksimovic - Belgrade, Aleksandar Damnjanovic - Paris), living in three different cities for years, bear in their hearts, and some of them in music too - a spindle, a distaff, a smell of cherry...

The Bourgogne¹ *Festival of European Music* has been taking place in the town of Chalon for several years now. This year the theme was the music of Slavic peoples, with Serbia being given the place of honour. The choice of Serbia as the guest of honour of this year's festival was realized thanks to Ivan Marković, a composer who has been living and working in France for over four decades. Ivan Marković's career has been connected mostly with the province of Bourgogne, where he had been cultivating rich pedagogical and choral activity. No one can count how many hundreds of French started singing in Serbian owing to this excellent musician. The audience of this year's festival has the opportunity to discover Marković the composer as well. In order to complete the idea of current Serbian music, Marković also recommended the works of Rajko Maksimović and Aleksandar Damnjanović (the author of this text). Whereas the first composer is known to our audience, Damnjanović's name is only just appearing in our music life: having completed his studies at the Paris Conservatory, Damnjanović developed his career in France and remained unknown to our audience up until two years ago.

The Festival of European Music lasted for six days, from March 8-13. After a brief description of its proceedings, we will return to some chosen moments. The festival was opened by the Chalon String Orchestra performing the works of Shostakovich, Janáček, Maksimović and Damnjanović. The second day was organized in keeping with French pedagogical tradition according to which Wednesday (since there is no school that day) is dedicated to music: during the afternoon children's choirs of the Chalon Conservatory performed Marković's arrangements of folk songs, among which Serbian vocal production was given a place of honour. A concert of the chamber production of Slavic composers was organized in

¹ Bourgogne, a French province renowned for its excellent wines.

the evening, at which – in keeping with the pedagogical inspiration of this day – each composition was briefly presented to the audience. The third day of the festival celebrated its initiator with a performance of his cantata *Vinea mea electa*. The fourth day was the only one that went by without Serbian music, but on the other hand, the string sextet of Aleksandar Stajić (a Belgrader living in France) performed works by Slavic composers. The penultimate day was dedicated to the young string quartet *Johannes* which, in addition to Bartók's Sixth Quartet, premiered Marković's *Quartetto lirico*. Finally, the closing of the festival was devoted to a field in which the Slavs (and the Serbs in particular) are masters – choral music: a German chamber choir from Bremen performed the works of Mokranjac, Hristić, Marković, Maksimović... along with famous German classics Mendelssohn, Bach and Schütz.

The first work of a Serbian composer the festival audience heard was a cycle of five haiku songs *Za mirisom rascvetale trešnje (After the Scent of a Blossoming Cherry)* by Rajko Maksimović! Maksimović's work, written in authentic Japanese, emanates freshness and clarity of expression. The very list of the performing body gives a clear picture of the spirit of this work: soprano, flute, vibraphone or marimba, harp, violins and violas. These are instruments of high register and airy sound. We all know what haiku poetry looks like. Three short verses, the first two of which (at least in our European translations) resemble some kind of riddle, enigma, while the third verse plays the role of the key which will open the door of meaning and understanding the whole.

Green willows	or	It offers its fragrance
paint eyebrows		to the one who breaks it:
on the brow of a hill.		a bough in bloom.

This brevity and succinctness could have led the composer down the path of a Webernian idea. And why not; but (in our opinion) it would lead, in its asceticism and excessive role of silence, to dullness, to excessive dramatization of these texts; and by extension they would lose their juiciness of enjoying earthly charms. The composer found a very poetic path to the heart of this poetry: its brevity is expressed by minimalism and repetitive means. This also solves the long-awaited arrival of the key third verse with great virtuosity: the repetition of motifs, the use of minimalist music means create the impression of a “vicious circle”; and by extension an irresistible need to exit it. Each of these “exits from the circle” gives the listener the impression of a cadence, that logical and natural conclusion brought by the famous third verse. The abovementioned minimalism sometimes takes an illustrative, literal form: this is the case in the fourth song...

The evening shower:
look, how swiftly the ants
flee down the bamboo.

... in which the composer uses a highly descriptive regular rhythm and even the typical pentatonic scale. That sounds merry and cheerful. It is so

very rare to see a smile on the faces of listeners in modern art. And that is the case here; just as we can imagine the smile of an old Japanese poet watching ants hurrying on the bamboo. Naiveté and simplicity are characteristics of great and daring artists.

The same evening we heard Maksimović's *Rosebud* for strings. Are you familiar with the origin of the word rosebud? It is the word which the hero of Orson Welles' film *Citizen Kane* utters before dying; its meaning remains a secret to everyone present and the hero carries it to his grave. Orson Welles is considered one of the most significant representatives of expressionism in film art. Just as Maksimović was able to stamp the haiku songs with freshness and simplicity, so he managed to shroud this composition in a mysterious atmosphere of anxiety and inexplicable fears... We find the atmosphere of dreams and nightmares, so present in expressionistic film, very powerfully evoked in the composition *Rosebud*. The repetition of motifs at the beginning of the first movement is not the simple minimalism that characterizes haiku songs, but rather a kind of tension that does not arrive at its solution, its cadence, its "third verse".

By its structure (two movements: one slow – one fast) the composition *Rosebud* can be classified under the great tradition of Eastern European composers who foster the diptych "singing – dancing" (Bartók, Slavenski), but the spirit is significantly different. With these two compositions Rajko Maksimović presented himself as a composer capable of penetrating the soul of different cultures, even if they are so distant (both from each other and from the composer's homeland). Having successfully dealt with the spirit of Western European expressionism and old Japanese poetry, this Serbian composer living in his own country presented himself to the French audience as a musician of international views and interests.

Unlike him, Aleksandar Damnjanović, his colleague who has been living in France for a long time, presented himself the same evening with the composition *Folksongs*, a work that contains a very strong ethnic basis. Namely, the work was written to authentic folk songs from Eastern Serbia and Italy. The original text and melody were strictly respected, while the composer satisfied himself with writing the instrumental accompaniment, or – as Bartók says – with "clothing" the folk melody in orchestral garments.

The following day the Festival audience discovered Ivan Marković in numerous arrangements of folk melodies – both Serbian and foreign – performed by children's choirs of the Chalon Conservatory.

However, this was just an introduction to the work of this excellent Serbian composer. A day later Marković presented himself to us with his cantata *Vinea mea electa*, written to the verses of Serbian peasant poets, as the composer's painful reaction to the tragic events in his homeland at the end of the 20th century.

Some time ago the author of these lines succeeded (not without difficulty) in acquiring the famous *Istorija srpske muzike* (*The History of Serbian Music*) written by Stana Djurić-Klajn in the 1960's. In the last paragraph, traditionally devoted to "emerging young composers", Ivan Marković's name appears among the 4 or 5 most important authors. That was precisely the moment when Marković

left Serbia and continued his career in France. However, as we have seen, Marković's inspiration has remained connected to the Serbian soil. Moreover, Marković did not settle for "creative nostalgia"; between the two extremes – allowing to be swallowed up by the powerful and rich French culture or being torn, there in body, here in spirit – Marković has chosen the most difficult, but also the most noble and most productive solution: to enrich both cultures with the other. The cantata *Vinea mea electa* stands at the crossroads between the East and the West, between the past and the future. That this is not merely a figure of speech is confirmed by the composer himself: "*Starting from these three words [Vinea mea electa] three paths appeared before me: the past, into which I was running, the present, in the face of which I felt helpless, and the future, which is still uncertain (whether it is the destiny of my wounded country or the form my composition will take)*". Verses of Serbian peasant poets hold a central position in the cantata. They are framed by quotations (in Latin) from two works of Western European composers from the 16th century.

The Serbian verses exude the freshness, simplicity and coarseness of everyday rural life.

LIFE	TO THE BROOK	THE REMAINDER
Sometimes I carry the sky	Stop, you fleet of foot	On the way back
sometimes I reap the henbane	so that my oxen can drink.	from the last harvest fair
sometimes with my bear feet	We have ploughed all day	all night long the
I thresh thorns and moan in	They the earth... and I the sky.	crickets
agony.		drunk with sorrow
Sometimes I heal with poison		break the silence.
a heart healthy in solitude.		

The Latin verses are characterized by a Biblical background. The first ones are of a historical nature, while the origin of the others is a timeless value, the word of God. Just as the first verses of a vocal work in Western European medieval music address the listener announcing the title of the work to him (*Lamentatio Jeremiae prophetae*), so the choir in Marković's cantata quotes the work of the Spanish composer Tomas Luis da Vittoria "O vos omnes" ("O All Ye That Pass By"). This reminds us of Despot Stefan Lazarević and the beginning of his *Natpis na stubu kosovskom (Inscription on the Kosovo Pillar)*, of a time when Western and Eastern artists used to find inspiration from the same sources.

The cantata ends with the quotation of another Western composer, Ingegneri's composition *Vinea mea electa*. We should also note that these verses, the title of Marković's composition, appear at the end of the work. They do not appear as an announcement, but rather as the realization, the goal of the journey the listeners have travelled; their painful meaning shines like the sacred relic that we approach at the end a pilgrimage. Here is their translation:

My chosen vine, I planted you
how have you been converted to bitterness

that you would crucify me
and release Barabbas?

By placing Christ and his tormented country on the same level, Marković removes the contemporary tragedy from its historical-political context and gives it an ethnic quality. Both events are historical facts, but it is their ethnic meaning that poses questions of suffering, sacrifice and their meaning in human destiny. In the framework of these holy texts, as if carved in marble, stand the abovementioned poems of Serbian peasant poets. While the holy words emanate eternity, the peasant poetry describes all those things that constitute the everyday life of a human being. Marković made the connection between everyday life and eternity, the transient and the eternal in a very poetic way. That is a characteristic of great artists.

Musicians trained in the vocal form of compositional skill (whether the composer in question is Palestrina or Mokranjac) always bear in mind the human voice as the most competent model. This characteristic of the human voice is precisely what leads us towards the instrumental work of Ivan Marković. The penultimate evening of the festival was dedicated to a string quartet, one of the most demanding forms of chamber music-making. Marković's *Quartetto lirico* – which was being premiered – was on the programme along with Bartók's Sixth Quartet. But the famous predecessor (and Marković's favourite composer) did not overshadow his Serbian colleague. These two works are very different, both in terms of duration and character. Opposite Bartók's long and dramatic work stands Marković's quartet which lasts for 7-8 minutes and is youthfully radiant and melodious. Marković's melodiousness, his vocal form of an instrumental work, is not of the same nature as Damnjanović's production of the same type.

In Damnjanović's cycle *Folksongs* one can feel the horizontality (and even the narrowness) of the range of Serbian folk singing and church chanting, while Marković's melodiousness is operatic, bel canto in character; it is lyrical and lyric. Marković's quartet bears the adjective "lyric", and that in Italian. The composer says: "*Why this particular title? Simply because the greatest part of my music work is dedicated to singing. And why in Italian? Because it sounds "lyrical".*" However, there is something even deeper than "melodiousness" in Marković's music. His instruments, or more precisely – his voices – are not anonymous and exalted "singers"; they are individuals, human characters, who express themselves and communicate with one another, like characters in a drama. And we get attached to them and their "conversations" in the same way that we become close to characters in a theatre play, who – once the curtain falls – become part of us.

Imitation has an important place among the creative principles Marković uses in his quartet. But this contrapuntal technique is not applied consistently. A consistent technique – as, for example, in a canon or a fugue – would give this work the form of the mechanical, the inevitable, a kind of music fatality. Marković uses his contrapuntal principle in a free way that is typical of him. Namely, we recognize the motif, we recognize its rhythmic or melodic relationship to the previous melody... but we also clearly understand that this is not consequent repetition. This technique gives his quartet the air of a

conversation between the instruments. This air gives the attentive listener the unusual feeling (heightened by the fact that this is chamber music) that we are witnessing an intimate, family scene, a conversation (now calm and reasoned, now agitated and heated) that is interrupted by occasional lyrical and melodious moments. (And what is chamber music if not a “family album” indiscreetly opened by us, the curious listeners...). Marković's musicians do not play; they talk or sing in turns.

On one occasion composer Ivana Stefanović stated on the pages of *Novi Zvuk (New Sound)*: “...I believe titles are very important. They are the frames of paintings. You yourselves know what happens to a painting which you put in a suitable frame. It starts to breathe, its colours come alive. Or maybe we should put it this way: you yourselves know what happens to a painting when you put it in a frame that does not suit it. The title is part of the meaning of the work. The key to understanding it and, in a sense, the position from which one approaches the work”.² (*Reč kompozitora, Razgovor sa Anom Kara-Pešić, Novi Zvuk br. 14 /The Composer Speaks, Interview with Ana Kara-Pešić, New Sound no. 14/*)

Marković's *Quartetto lirico* justifiably carries its title and gives us the correct position from which to approach it.

The theme of this festival and the place where it was held are a sign of the final reconciliation between Serbia and Western Europe. The selection of the composers who were present is a symbol of reconciliation between Serbian authors in the country and those living in the diaspora. We are left with one great battle, the one we are fighting against ourselves. It would be better if our musicians (starting from their school days!) performed works of Serbian composers with love and interest, instead of the mandatory “national author” being the nuisance one needs to get rid of as quickly and as painlessly as possible. Other nations will show interest in us only if we show interest in ourselves.

Translated by Jelena Nikezić

² *Reč kompozitora, Razgovor sa Anom Kara-Pešić, Novi Zvuk br. 14 (The Composer Speaks, Interview with Ana Kara-Pešić, New Sound no. 14).*