

Branka Radović

**SEARCHING FOR THE IDENTITY OF THE COMPOSER AND MAN
AN INTERVIEW WITH RASTISLAV KAMBASKOVIĆ**



Rastislav Kambasković was born in Prokuplje in 1939, graduated from the Departments of Theory and Composition (the class of V. Mokranjac) of the Music Academy in Belgrade, obtained his MA degree at the Department of Composition (P. Milošević). He was a long-standing programme editor and music producer at Radio Belgrade and then professor at the Department of Theory of the Faculty of Music and was twice elected Dean for Academic Affairs. In his rather small, albeit diverse oeuvre, he tried his skill in a number of genres, from solo, vocal and chamber music to symphonic and vocal-instrumental music, only to become more focused on opera in recent years. He is the recipient of numerous awards of the Serbian Composers' Association and RTV Belgrade, as well as of the BEMUS Award.

*There are many reasons for this interview, first and foremost your jubilee, and also the fact that the opera *Hasanaginica*, on which you have been working for the past few years, has still not been performed. I would much rather the occasion for this interview were a stage premiere, a concert presentation, a recording, a television production... but seeing as that is not the case, can you tell me what inspired the interest in opera at your mature age?*

The interest in that music-scenic genre was kindled in me already in my high school days. The fever among musicians in that far 1956, caused by the efforts of the then music activists in Niš, principally Ilija Marinković, PhD, composer and conductor of the Symphonic orchestra, and professor Stevan Guščin, conductor of the city choir in Niš, to stage the first opera in Niš (Verdi's *Rigoletto*), most of its performers being from the local, Niš area, gripped me, too. As far back as then, at the age of 17, I became aware of all the (often insurmountable) complexities of the financial, organizational and performing efforts one needs to put into the realization of an operatic work. At the time I knew nothing of the creative problems, I could only vaguely make them out.

I remember being enchanted by that first opera performance in my life, although it was, from today's point of view, very modest in all the aspects an opera performance entails.

Since my student days (1957) this feeling of enchantment has been growing and intensifying for decades. Now, however, I have expanded my insights into the complexity of this genre to temptations facing the contemporary author of operas. These temptations are connected with both macroplan and microplan in the architectonics of an opera work. We could illustrate the complexity of contemporary opera with the fact that the number of operatic works by most 20th century composers can be counted on one hand, many of whom have composed only one. Perhaps the biggest problem facing the contemporary author is choosing a distinctive music language from the myriad of stylistic trends that are prevalent in the 20th century, which is supposed to not only strike the chord with the listener's current or local sensibility, but also, if possible, attain a more universal importance and value.

The reasons for my writing opera at an old age probably lie in a certain logic of mine of one's evolution as an author; from work on soloistic, chamber compositions to the symphonic and vocal-symphonic ones, I have arrived at the peak of creative effort and accomplishment – the opera. This is how I see that evolution. Besides developing my craft and style, I also needed to discover an adequately inspiring text in order to lay the groundwork for such a complex creative effort as this. Eventually, that condition was fulfilled when I came across Ljubomir Simović's drama *Hasanaginica* at which point I began, somewhat logically and spontaneously, the laborious and long task.

When did you begin to show interest in music, more specifically composing?

I spent the entire period of my primary school education in villages near Prokuplje, where my father worked as a teacher. He was also my first teacher. This was a destitute postwar period, destitute particularly in terms of interest in music. And yet, after all these years, I still fondly remember Saturday evenings when a Mr. Malucković, a teacher from the neighbouring village of Donje Crnatovo, used to visit us (our flat was in the village school building); he and my father would spend the entire evening performing violin duets. My mother, my younger, five-year-old sister and I, a seven-year-old, were a grateful and elated audience in the light of the oil lamp.

I finished senior primary school, fourth through eighth grade, in Prokuplje in 1953. It was then that I started to “engage in” music, at first as a singer and the inescapable soloist in the school choir, which was led by Ilija Krsmanović, a diligent and dedicated music worker. In addition to his work at school, he founded and directed the town’s string and chamber orchestras, as well as the very successful choir “Abrašević” in Prokuplje.

In those years I began taking my first violin classes. I played on my father’s instrument. My teacher, Mrs. Bukvić, a graceful, middle-aged lady from Dubrovnik, who had studied violin under Jan Malat in Prague, was very well educated compared to the provincial circumstances of the time. She was married to Mr. Bukvić, also from Dubrovnik, who was brought by life’s mysterious ways to Prokuplje to teach chemistry at the town’s high school. I studied under my teacher for a year or two because they soon moved back to Dubrovnik, although many years later, while I was studying music, I would visit them, on many occasions, in their house in Dubrovnik, much to their and my pleasure. My moving to Niš in 1953, to music high school “Dr. Vojislav Vučković”, marked the beginning of a more serious practice of music. I was studying at the Department of Theory, and besides playing the violin, I took up the piano for the first time in my life. Until then I had never even seen one. Several years later, I took an interest in composing. That desire was completely intuitive in that I had never been given any guidance by my professors as none of them was concerned with composition. I was well aware of the gaps in my musical education, but there was nothing more you could do in that environment at the time. I arrived in Belgrade and began my studies in 1957. That year, Balkanska Street proved to be the entrance to adulthood both for me and many other newcomers. Since then, I have lived in Belgrade for 50 years, constantly searching for my musical and existential identity.

*What was your relationship with the professors who introduced you to the secrets of music?
Who were these people?*

Besides the mentioned high school in Niš, I graduated in pedagogy-theory from the Music Academy in 1961 and, having completed my military service, I enrolled at the Department of Composition in 1962 and, at the beginning of the 1970s, I obtained a master’s degree at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. A whole host of teachers passed through my life during all that time, leaving marks of different intensity in my memory.

Even today, I still have fond memories of my professors from Niš: Dorina Radičeva, Simić at the time, who taught harmony and solfeggio, then Ljubica Andrejević, who taught musical forms and music history, and two gentlemen in the true sense of the word – the mentioned Stevan Guščin and headmaster and professor Vojislav Vojinović who taught the Russian language and psychology and well as being my form teacher.

From the period of my studies at the Department of Pedagogy-Theory, I have fond memories of Prof. Miodrag Vasiljević, whom I often assisted in collecting folk songs in the field. I cherish the

memory of the relationship I had with Dušan Skovran, who always found a way to help me out not only with my classes, but also in life.

Still, my fondest memories from that period are of the classes, my collaboration and longtime friendship with professors Petar Bingulac and Vlastimir Peričić. Professor Bingulac is still very much present in my life and in discussions with other colleagues, and not only with those from my generation! In these reminiscences of ours, we never fail to express admiration for the elan and enthusiasm with which Professor Bingulac used to present the teaching units, so much so that we all were exhilarated by what he was saying. Throughout my pedagogical career, I have tried to emulate him in that very segment of genuine enthusiasm in the teaching procedure. Even after so many years, my memory of Vlastimir Peričić is filled with admiration for that extraordinary combination of great erudition and deep humanity.

The crucial role in my creative development was without doubt played by my professor of composition and harmony, Vasilije Mokranjac.

I first met him in the autumn of 1962 as a graduate in pedagogy-theory, which means that I was rather familiar with the circumstances at the faculty. That year Prof. Mokranjac started teaching the class of composition and I was his first student. Although he had, by then, gained considerable pedagogical experience, working with a composition student was a challenging novelty for him, too. From this time distance, I believe that in working with me, Prof. Mokranjac started rounding out the most delicate segment of his pedagogical career, which is shaping a young composer through extensive individual work. I think I was privileged to receive from Prof. Mokranjac the most beautiful human dedication enriched by extensive compositional and pedagogical experience.

The most valuable achievement of my compositional work is the pursuit of my own music idiom in the tide of different stylistic (often ephemeral) influences (dodecaphony, Polish school, new simplicity), under Prof. Mokranjac direct guidance.

“It is impossible”, he said “to stay deaf and blind to the trends that surround us, but still, the essential thing is searching within oneself”. This is best confirmed by the stylistic changes and evolution in the work of Vasilije Mokranjac. Despite the passage of time and the creative maturity, this motto has remained characteristic of my work. Searching for my own compositional and human identity is, for me, a permanent process which, I believe, will last for the rest of my life.

Your coming to Belgrade must have entailed engaging in different fields of activity. Which one was the most significant?

As a student, for a while I was the conductor of the choir of the cultural club “Žikica Jovanović Španac” in New Belgrade Student Campus. Having completed my military service, in 1962 I became a professor at the Second Belgrade High School “Ivo Lola Ribar” and in 1964 I became the producer (recording) for chamber and symphonic music at Radio Belgrade where I stayed until 1988, when I

was elected docent at the Department of Theory (harmony and musical analysis) at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. I retired on October 1, 2004 as a full professor. During my work at the Faculty, I was elected Head of the Department of Theory for three terms (1992-1998) and a member of the Board of Department Heads of the Faculty of Music. From 1998 to 2002, I was Dean for Academic Affairs for two terms, and after the untimely demise of Dean Ljubiša Petruševski in August 2002, I assumed his post and was acting dean for the rest of the year. Of all the responsibilities and duties I performed, I could not single out only one as being the most important. I devoted myself to all of them to the utmost.

How do You view your work as the music producer of Radio Belgrade today and how has this job influenced your creative output?

Back in 1964 I was 25 and had, by then, worked as a high-school teacher for two years when, on the initiative of Dušan Skovran and my composition professor Vasilije Mokranjac, I was called for an interview with the then chief of music production at RTB, the renowned musicologist Ljubomir Kocić. That interview resulted in my transferring from high school to RTB and becoming the music producer for chamber and soloistic, and later symphonic music. I stayed in that job until 1988. And so my strong wish from student days to become acquainted with the life of a symphonic musician, not only from the concert forestage, but also from “within”, ultimately came true.

I collaborated with all the conductors in Belgrade (K. Baranović, Zdravković, S. and B. Pašćan, D. Miladinović, B. Babić, B. Simić, M. Jagušt, O. Danon, A. Šurev, V. Čavdarski, to name a few), as well as with many others (M. Horvat, S. Hubad, I. Đadrov, Jean-Pierre Jacquillat, A. Fedosejev). I worked with an immense number of soloists from the country and abroad. From that myriad of memories let me single out only one example: with Anita Mezetova and Zdenko Marasović, her accompanist, I recorded about 1000 (!) minutes of foreign and national lied and a large number of works performed by the then acclaimed Belgrade Wind Quintet (I clearly remember the recording of Schönberg’s Wind Quintet). With Milan Horvat and the Zagreb Philharmonic Orchestra I realized over 5000 minutes of all kinds of symphonic music. From that period I remember executing Ligeti’s *Requiem* with the choir of RTB and conductor B. Simić, Lutoslawski’s *Three Poems* by Henri Michaud with the choir of SORTB and conductors S. Zlatić and B. Simić, and I also recall the great experience I had with the ballet *Daphnis and Chloe* by M. Ravel with J. P. Jacquillat, a conductor from France. With M. Jagušt I realized 15000 minutes of music. I am particularly glad to have taken part in the realization of almost the entire symphonic production of Prof. Vasilije Mokranjac and of most of major Serbian composers of all generations. For some time I also worked as the administrative manager of the RTB Orchestra (1970-1976) when I learned about all the problems a major ensemble can have in life and work. The period in question meant amplifying and enriching my professional knowledge, which cannot be obtained at any college.

What is your attitude towards festivals and the performances of your and other Serbian music performed at them? You received the Bemus Award for one of your most important works, Offrande. How did that affect your career thereafter?

I have been following festivals for 40 years now and they have always been a reflection of various circumstances, including the social ones, which determined the place of these events, their role and importance. I feel nostalgic about the times when concerts were organized as part of the Yugoslav Symposium on the Problems of Contemporary Music in Opatija. It was a large-scale event where you could meet many people and gain new insights into the music output from all over former Yugoslavia. In addition to perceiving a wide variety of stylistic orientations, you could participate in exhaustive discussions that elucidated the place of music works and music authors from every conceivable angle. After the breakup of Yugoslavia, the Association of Serbian Composers initiated the International Review of Composers which was first held in Sremski Karlovci and has ever since been organized in Belgrade. For many years my works were present at this Review. In the past few years I have not submitted any of my works because I feel that the meagre funds society is allocating for this event should instead be used for promoting young authors.

As for Bemus, I did receive the highest award back in 1974, but not a single work of mine has since appeared at that festival.

I am neither performed at the review "Music in Serbia" nor at BEMUS, but that has not defined or hindered my creative work.

How do you view the relationship between politics and music?

Unlike other arts (theatre, literature, even painting), which have often borne the brunt of political ideology, the freedom of artistic expression through music has, in my opinion, always been complete. I do not remember a music work being under the onslaught of political-military anathema or proscription. I believe this is because the powers that be estimated that music (at least the one at issue here) exercises minimal or almost no influence on the masses with its abstract means of expression. That is why music has been the most suitable target for applying the so frequently and thunderously proclaimed principles of the freedom of artistic creation, which have otherwise been violated in other arts quite often. Because of that our music milieu has, in fact, been a small meadow in which "thousands of flowers blossomed", and I would add – weed, too.

As I see it, the political influence on music production is reflected in not a small number of composers who have dedicated their works (some of them entirely, some of them only the odd work) to glorifying the incumbent political party or figure. Numerous examples have borne out this

statement, from the post-war period to this day, in which we are witnessing neoclericalism in music production.

The authors whose artistic credo is to ingratiate themselves with the ruling ideology are now going through difficult times. In the last few years the ruling structure has been composed of different parties (DOS included 18) with different, even conflicting ideologies. In such a pluralist system abounding with ideologies, it is difficult to determine and espouse the ruling state or social ideology, let alone cultural ideology. It seems to me that some composers have “rightly” assumed that creating works with religious subject matter is playing it safe.

Another, no less great, tendency which is present among the young authors is something I would term abstract mondialism. It is characterized by not only by terms borrowed from the cosmic glossary, but also a specific poetics that insists on glorifying the unreal, parapsychotic or ulterior world. All things considered, our politicoeconomic and social transformation correlates with the transition of our overall cultural and, by extension, musical creative output.

As for me, now that I have a chance to look back on my own life and work, I believe that I have honoured the unwritten pledge I had adopted from my professor Vasilije Mokranjac and that I have remained my own man, with the inspiration I found in myself and my pursuits of an individual expression.

What is your position on the styles? Do you favour classical, postmodern and transavantgarde over some other authors or, for that matter, our authors over the foreign ones?

This question should reveal my “musical coordinates”! I see this geometrical notion as a set of dividing lines of my esthetic transformation. And I stress dividing, because in terms of these horizontal-vertical boundaries, the direction and the destiny of my development do not have the linear character of the coordinate system.

On the contrary, should I, by way of illustration, accept this usage of geometrical terms which are supposed to be signposts for ascertaining the development of a composer’s esthetic criteria, I would then, in my case, be inclined to identify an entire constellation of strophoids, cycloids, astroids, cardioids or a conglomerate of Archimedean or hyperbolic logarithmic spirals and circles. I do not see my attitude to musical heritage, about which I learnt a great deal through a combination of circumstances, as being linear, no matter how crisscross these straight lines are.

The isohyptic morphogenesis of my emotional and, hence, esthetic evolution has always been both the cause and result of my wide-ranging interest in all aspects of sonic shaping.

Naturally, I am aware of the fact that having an interest in itself does not mean a deeper, much less fateful commitment. This remark refers to not only contemporary works, so rich in results of various pursuits and orientations, but also many other works that hold a position of their own in history.

From a myriad of themes I would like to single out a line which fascinates me and which could partly fit into the coordinate system or, more specifically, into a part of the system relative to the horizontal-vertical pointing upwards, towards the sky, this being the line of development of music thinking. The fascinating thing about this line is its dialectic inevitability. The notion of this inevitability inspires optimism at a time when creativity is facing an esthetical cul-de-sac. The evolution of 20th-century music saw quite a few times like these. Not that they had not existed before. Many examples attest to this statement, so I am afraid there would not be enough room to enumerate and elaborate on them all.

Speaking of your most successful works, we cannot confine ourselves to only one area, for example, soloistic, chamber or vocal-instrumental. In each of these areas you have outstanding works which met, through brilliant performances, with a powerful response in our milieu. These would certainly include Sonata za dve violine (Sonata for two violins), Sonata za violinu i klavir (Sonata for violin and piano), Ozbiljne varijacije za flautu i gudače (Serious Variations for flute and strings), Movimento Simfonico, Kvintet za drvene duvačke instrumente (Quintet for woodwinds), Kvintet za limene duvačke instrumente Kumb (Kumb, a quintet for brass wind instruments), Sonata za četiri harfe (Sonata for four harps), Koreografska simfonija Fluidi (Fluids, a choreographic symphony), Torzo za klavirski trio (Torso, for piano trio), Lamento za Jefimiju za violončelo i gudački orkestar (Lament for Jefimija, for violoncello and string orchestra), Lamentoso za sopran i pet trombona (Lamentoso, for soprano and five trombones), Šest preludijuma za klavir (Six preludes for piano), Balkanski rekvijem za soliste, hor, dečji hor i orkestar (Balkan Requiem, for soloists, choir, children's choir and orchestra) and the opera Hasanaginica. Which one of your works do you favour?

Each one of my works represents my spiritual and intellectual achievement at the time of its creation. Therefore I cannot favour any one work in particular. It is true, I have tried my skills in the field of soloistic, chamber, choral and vocal-instrumental music. If I would have to single out one work, it would be the opera *Hasanaginica* because it required a comparatively great effort and because it was a source of my creative inspiration for a very long time.

The choral works Gospi (To Our Lady), Jesen (Autumn), Kantata (Cantata), Balkanski rekvijem and your most recent songs are a direct offspring of your literary taste. How do you choose poetic texts for your works?

That is an interesting question. It requires the most sincere introspection. I guess I have never asked myself this question that explicitly because of life's great speed. The choice of texts would come spontaneously. I had never had a predetermined music concept into which I would later incorporate a text. I had only the basic idea as a starting point for the pursuit of a suitable text. The text's message,

direct or (particularly) symbolic, metaphoric, was the inspirational trigger around which the music tissue was woven according to some surreal logic and law.

The common thread for all the texts that inspired me, be it the old Persian poets Shams-od-din Muhammad Hafez or Mosleh al-Din Saadi (songs “Crveni tulipani” /Red Tulips/ and “Hladna i ponosna” /Cold and Proud/) or the exponents of Serbian modernism, Svetomir Nastasijević (“Gospi”) and Branko Miljković (“Jesen” and “Balkanski rekvijem”), or Rade Drainac (“Kada sam bio mlad” /When I Was Young/ and “Otac i sin” /Father and Son/, Matija Bećković (“Slamka” /Straw/) and Ljubomir Simović (“Hasanaginica”) or Gypsy folk motives (“Ciganske” /Gypsy Songs/), is that they all are deeply emotional and highly-regarded literary works. In them I heard the harmonies and melodies that perhaps others cannot perceive, which is why I experienced all of these texts, so inspiring for me, on a profound personal level.

As an author, do you feel favoured or neglected in our milieu? How do you see the promotion of artistic values in our country?

So far I have not felt particularly favoured, or neglected for that matter. All of my works have been performed (some of them more than once), recorded and many have been published (as musical editions or compact discs). I have received numerous awards at various competitions. I was admitted to the university solely based on the estimation of my work because I had little pedagogical experience at the time of admissions, critics have been very kind to me from my earliest works to the most recent ones and most importantly, all the musicians who performed my works, be it soloists, chamber ensembles or orchestras, played my music with a joy that I found moving.

How do you see the role of the musician-performer in interpreting and promoting your music?

I see it as a factor that is crucial to both the recognition and the life of a music work. Without performers and performing, a written work is but an empty word. This is best confirmed by numerous scores from our musical legacy that never got to the listeners, making it unavailable for the public’s value judgments. These works are practically dead.

Basically, my experience with performers has been very positive, except for this game surrounding the persistent avoiding to perform *Hasanaginica*, which I am having a hard time to understand. Quality, professional support of the performers is particularly important for a young composer who is still looking for his/her own expression. I have lots of fond memories of the collaboration with some notable figures of Serbian and foreign reproductive art. Their genuine enthusiasm and whole-hearted commitment to studying my work have always been for me the most important beacon in my own critical reexamination. No kind of official review (incidentally, every

single one in my career has been favourable) could affect me as much as the opinion of a musician performing my work. Almost all of my works are considered demanding for the performer, but I have never seen them unwilling. On the contrary, I can testify to their showing a great interest in performing a work. This is especially true of *Hasanaginica*. The problem lies with the management of ensembles, but also in their frequent replacement in this transitional period.

What is your position on the reception of contemporary works and the (un)popularity of contemporary national music?

Our social milieu has been more or less isolated from the rest of the world for quite some time now and that is bound to take its toll on our entire cultural, and particularly, music life.

I feel that in this complete degradation of our cultural output, music production has sunk lowest. National drama, literature, fine arts and especially film all seem to rank infinitely better with the audience than music.

The financial resources earmarked for culture, although drastically limited, are not the only factor in this degradation. I think that reproductive artists, who base their careers on basically a limited repertoire of world music (mostly Romantic) legacy, thereby completely neglecting national works, are not helping matters either. Until mid-20th century it was inconceivable that a non-thematic concert should not include a work from the national music repertoire. Our leading musical institutions are the ones who are neglecting national music production the most. Their actual activities run counter to their frequently professed aim to provide more room for national music production.

Not a single authentic national work has been heard on the stage of the Belgrade Opera for over thirty years. The repertoire of the Belgrade Philharmonic includes works of national authors only symbolically. At the celebration of its jubilee, the Philharmonic did not include in the programme a single national work, not even a work of its founder! Such a situation is unthinkable in both the West and the East.

But then again, the status of national music is more favourable in the programmes of SORTB. In such circumstances one should not be surprised by the shattering fact that out of fifty operatic works in the hundred years of Serbian opera (1901-2001), six of which were made for television, more than a half have never seen the light of day. Among them are the first written opera and the last, my *Hasanaginica*.

Given the circumstances, it is difficult to make a comprehensive judgment about the popularity or unpopularity of national music stated in your question. At least not with the same degree of certainty with which one could make a judgment about its neglect.

I would love to know (hypothetically) what kind of interest Debussy's *Peleas and Melisande* or Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* would arouse with our audience. An erstwhile production of Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* received a lukewarm reception from the wider audience, the same as

Wagner's *Lohengrin*. For decades our audience's taste was cultivated on a narrow, standard Italian repertoire so it safe to say that many major works of world literature would most likely be "unpopular" in our country.

You have taught many generations of young musicians and you were also Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Music. What are your pedagogical and organizational experiences?

At the Faculty of Music I taught Harmony with Harmonic Analysis and Musical Analysis. I lectured at almost all the departments. The memories of that period of my life are full of many pleasant experiences. I had a fine relationship with both my students and colleagues. My basic guiding principle in teaching was that harmony, although a science abounding in facts and figures that need to be memorized, therefore in no way an easy science, had nonetheless promoted beauty throughout centuries. In teaching, I always wanted the students to experience harmony as a logical, regular evolution of the human sense of harmony and beauty of musical shaping rather than as a tedious bunch of rules they need to learn by rote. Judging by the students' interest in this subject and by the great number of graduates and postgraduates who opted for harmony, I believe I have done well with such an approach.

Besides teaching, I did a great deal of work in managerial positions at the faculty. I was Head of the Department of Theory for three terms and Dean for Academic Affairs for two terms. That period of my life was filled with many important activities such as the setting up of a department of the Faculty of Music in Kragujevac which later grew into a separate faculty. From the inception of the Department, in whose foundation I was involved at nearly all levels, to this day I have been teaching harmony there and already there are potential teaching assistants among the students in Kragujevac, while many students who graduated from this faculty already work as music teachers in various parts of Serbia and outside of Belgrade. I have particularly fond and warm memories of the collaboration with Dean Ljubiša Petruševski during all that time. We went through many hardships together (for example, during the NATO bombing, when our faculty's building was hit by a shrapnel of an exploded projectile thrown at the General Headquarters, which is in our vicinity).

How do you rate today's music life in Belgrade? How stereotypical, prejudiced and how innovative do you think it is?

The way I see it, I would divide Belgrade's music life into several groups: first, the activities of such professional music institutions as the Opera, the Philharmonic, the ensembles of Radio Belgrade and TV Belgrade and the ensembles of the Serbian Army, as well as many more or less official chamber ensembles ("Dušan Skovran", "Sveti Đorđe"). Second, a large number of smaller unaffiliated ensembles in pursuit of their place under the sun who are trying to establish themselves by performing

the most diverse programmes. Third, a large number of solo performances, student concerts, competitions for junior, high school and university students and last, performances by an increasing number of amateur choirs of different artistic levels. All these ensembles and soloists work at enriching and diversifying our music life, in which process they struggle with hardships caused by the limitations of the current economic situation in our society. This situation demands investing great enthusiasm and dedication on the part of all these artists for their own promotion, but also for the promotion of our (especially new) production.

How do you see the role of the National Theatre and the National Opera in performing and fostering works of contemporary opera and ballet authors?

Paradoxically and sadly, the current situation in the Belgrade Opera was defined by Vojislav Vučković as far back as 1935 (“Pravda”, Sept. 6): “Our Opera is going through the same hardships it suffered from ten years ago (! R. K.) – sharing the building, budget and administration with the Drama, the Opera still has a subordinate role in the theatre. Those who are even slightly familiar with the Opera’s internal affairs know what circumstances may result from such a situation, what anarchy, disorder and disagreement it may breed and what difficulties in work it may cause”. Sadly, seventy years after this assessment the situation has remained essentially unchanged.

In the meantime, Serbian music has been suffering a terrible fate. From 1901, when the first opera was written (*Ženidba Miloša Obilića /The Wedding of Miloš Obilić/* by Božidar Joksimović), to 2001, when I wrote my *Hasanaginica*, fifty operas were composed, the last three being *Smrt majke Jugovića (Death of Jugović Brothers’ Mother)* by Dušan Radović (1988), *Lenka Dunderska* by Miroslav Štatkić (2000) and my *Hasanaginica*.

The fact that the Serbian language has not been heard on stage in decades now is simply devastating (Stanislav Binički’s opera *Na uranku /At Dawn/* was performed to mark its anniversary, but that was merely a reprise of the campaign launched by the Faculty of Music as part of the LEMEK festival).

Speaking of opera, we have been experiencing a music neocolonialism of sorts for quite a while.

“This being in service of foreign art’, as Petar Konjović used to say, ‘can be tolerated because, after all, art is at stake, but still it is hard to accept this situation or anything foreign, for that matter.’”

In our immediate neighborhood, particularly in Croatia and Slovenia, even in Vojvodina, matters are infinitely better. The last premiere of a national opera in Serbian, Petar Konjović’s *Otadžbina (Homeland)*, was in 1983.

When it comes to performing potentials in our milieu, I would say they are at a high level. True, the best ones do not live here, but work all over the world. Some of them I taught at the faculty,

others I keep in touch with and I know they would be glad to give their contribution in a potential realization of diverse and quality repertoire projects aimed at refreshing the ossified bel canto and Verdian-Puccinian repertoire of the Belgrade Opera. It only takes a bit of good will, courage and knowledge to get down to it.

If you are robust, not in the least flexible, if you are stalwart in appearance, voice and demeanor, if you don't bow and do not bend, what else then is there left for you to do in today's social and musical circumstances?

To remain, as you say, "robust, not in the least flexible, stalwart in appearance and demeanor". It is what I was made to be like.

Translated by Dušan Zabrdac