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ON/IN THE *ORBITS* OF ALEKSANDRA VREBALOV

Orbits for symphony orchestra, a recent composition by Aleksandra Vrebalov (b. 1970), was written in November 2002 in New York City, where she has been living and working for many years. The composition was performed for the first time by the Vojvodina Philharmonic Orchestra (Vojvodanska Filharmonija) conducted by Berislav Skenderović, during the opening concert of the Novi Sad Music Festival (Novosadske muzičke svečanosti) on April 11, 2005. The performance of *Orbits* at the opening ceremony of such a significant music festival marked, in a sense, Vrebalov's impressive official comeback in Serbian musical life.¹

Bearing in mind that Aleksandra Vrebalov's very successful international career during the last decade has been (almost) unknown in Serbia, her work after the studies in Novi Sad, Belgrade and San Francisco will be mentioned.² In the course of almost fifteen years of her studies at universities in Serbia and the USA and advanced studies at different European and American institutions, Aleksandra Vrebalov won critical acclaim, as witnessed by many commissions and awards at prestigious competitions.³ Her compositions have been included in the repertoire of significant ensembles such as Kronos, Sausalito, Onyx string quartets, Utrecht Quartet, Orchestra of the San Francisco Conservatory (all from the USA), the Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra (the Czech Republic), the Vojvodina Philharmonic Orchestra (Serbia) as well as significant soloists such as guitarist Jorge Caballero (USA), flutist Robert Aitken (Canada) and violoncellist Ištvan Varga (Serbia/Hungary). Statistics of the Association of American Composers, where Aleksandra Vrebalov is a member, show that

¹ Aleksandra Vrebalov's piece was included in this respected music event and broadcast live on TV and it received huge media attention during the composer's stay in Novi Sad. Her earlier work was included in the program of the BEMUS 2002, the most significant music festival in Serbia, which was opened with the piece *Pannonia Boundless* (1998), one of the numbers by the Kronos Quartet.

² Aleksandra Vrebalov graduated in composition at the University of Arts in Novi Sad (1987-1992) in the class of Miroslav Štatkić, and continued to work with Zoran Erić at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade (1993-1994). She obtained her master's degree in composition at the San Francisco Conservatory (1995-1996) in the class of Elinor Armer. She pursued advanced courses in Poland (a summer course organized in collaboration with the IRCAM, 1990), Hungary (a summer course in collaboration with the IRCAM, 1992), the U.S. (New York University Summer Composition Workshop, 1996; Tanglewood Music Center, 1999), the Czech Republic (Music Academy in Prague, 1997), the Netherlands (Apeldoorn Young Composers' Meeting, 1998), Germany (international music course in Darmstadt, 2000). She received her doctorate in composition at the University of Michigan (2002).

³ She received such important awards as the first prize for the composition *Times* at The Highsmith Composition Competition at San Francisco Conservatory of Music (U.S.A., 1996) and the Vienna Modern Masters Recording Award (Austria and the U.S.A., 1997); her composition *Canta Claro* for two voices and piano was awarded at the fifteenth annual competition *Friends and Enemies of New Music* (New York City, 2004), and by the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers.

in 2002 and 2003 her compositions were performed in 44 countries, and in cities from New York and Hamburg to Osaka. Signing the contract with the publisher Boosey & Hawkes and gaining the status of visiting composer at the Ballet Festival in Providence, Rhode Island (2004) are some of the young composer's numerous awards.⁴ Aleksandra Vrebalov first taught music theory at the University of Michigan, and currently she lectures at the City College of the City University of New York.

The result of Aleksandra Vrebalov's twenty-year-long composing career is her oeuvre consisting mainly of works for different chamber ensembles and vocal and piano works as well as theatre music. Orchestral compositions are rather rare in her work, in fact, only *Times* and *Minoans* were performed before the *Orbits*. The former was composed in 1995 and it was on the repertoire of several orchestras. After its premiere in May 1996, when Michael Morgan conducted it with the Orchestra of the San Francisco Conservatory, it was conducted by Jiří Micula with the Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra (1997), and then it was recorded as part of the Vienna Modern Masters series (1997). *Minoans* was performed at the end of 2001 by the orchestra of the music department at the University of Michigan, under the direction of Kenneth Kiesler.

In *Orbits*, Vrebalov's latest orchestral work, the sound is saturated with dense texture resulting from the treatment of the orchestra as a uniform sound body, at times reminiscent of Mahlerian colour. Its formal structure suggests a spiral sequence of thematic models. The work has specific agogics, changes in metric and rhythmic patterns, and a very stressed rhythmical flow.

The composition's structure is organized into six sections, within which the piece has another internal formal layer consisting of double exposition of four main thematic nuclei, that is, four characteristic models. Applying the Fibonacci Sequence on the structural relations results first in the overlapping, and then in the divergence of these two formal layers of the composition. In other words, the established models are repeated throughout the work in their varied forms, while the texture and structure of the piece become progressively denser, so that the eight-part plan of exposing models ($a b c d a_1 b_1 c_1 d_1 a_2$) takes place within a six-part form. Consequently, application of the Fibonacci Sequence results not only in the spiral line in both the horizontal and vertical directions of the work, but also in the composition gradually condensing in the dramaturgical gradation and in time. According to the golden ratio, the key dramatic points of the piece are at the moments determined by the 1:2, 2:3, 3:5 relations. The culmination follows the lyrical anticlimax, which begins at the end of the second third of the music flow.

⁴ The result of the collaboration with the festival is the ballet *Widow's Broom* (2004), to the libretto by Chris Van Allsburg and the choreography by Viktor Plotnikov.

part	I	II	III	IV		V		VI	
bar number	1-24.	25-50.	51-79.	79-104.		104-120.		120-151.	
Tempo	$\frac{1}{4}=60$ (Free, robust)	$\frac{1}{4}=72$	$\frac{1}{4}=60$	Tempo primo		$\frac{1}{4}=72$		$\frac{1}{4}=60$	
Measure	4/4	4/4	$\frac{3}{4}-4/4$	4/4		$\frac{3}{4}-4/4$		4/4	
Material (samples)	A	B	C	D	A₁	B₁	C₁	D₁	A₂
bar number	1-24.	25-50.	51-79.	79-96.	97-104.	104-108.	109-120.	120-141.	142-151.

Therefore, four established models pass through two spiral circles and, at the beginning of the third, music fades out and vanishes. In the first sample, the “fate” triplet is characteristic of the percussives part, on the arsis of the $\frac{4}{4}$ measure, whose rhythmic potential becomes more important due to the lack of a melodic idiom. Rhythm is stressed also by specific agogics and by the manner of producing sound on the instruments – the scratching of strings by strong strokes of the bow, by strokes over the strings beside the heel, or by playing behind the bridge. In addition, at the end of the composition, the piano should be prepared by metal necklaces in order to achieve the effect of a polished and refined piano sound, in keeping with the concluding sound sublimation. After the orchestral voices have been superimposed, in the second sample the sound is reduced and what follows is a “transparent” orchestration based on multiple repetition or octave exposition of the tone in short note values and in high violin register, supported by tones of the same flute and piccolo register. In this context, there appears a pathetic melodic section with descending stepwise motion. The third sample is characterized by a distinct celesta sound, long and rhythmicized harmonics as well as

Mahlerian minor thirds in the harp part. The appearance in the most dramatic and culminating fourth sample of recognizable triplets from the first sample (especially in d_1), points to a turn, the beginning of the second spiral circle. This process of circular exposition of the music material is based on intermingling thematical circles, on transmitting samples from one section to another. Thus, for instance, functioning as the coda in the last section (a_2) and in the sublimation of the entire music development, the previously exposed nucleus of the third, set in the third and modified in the fourth sample, makes its appearance together with the long decrescendo and the dominant interval of the fifth. The vertical axis is based on relations which are identical with the horizontal and structural proportions, in accordance with the Fibonacci Sequence, that is, on the natural intervals of the harmonic series.

Thus the composer realizes her original idea of offering her own answer to the question “how *something* gradually changes and becomes completely different from itself”, that is, “whether this *original something* becomes something else or a more developed version of self”. And her answer unveils the process of transformation of the non-defined to the defined: “As the work develops, the coarseness of the first music material gradually changes and the composition concludes with a polished and delicate music texture”.

Based on analyzing Aleksandra Vrebalov’s previous composing practice, it is evident that quotations have an important role in her works. These quotations attest to the networking of different musical worlds – gipsy songs or the songs of the rock musician Frank Zappa, to name a few. In the *Orbits* for symphonic orchestra, Vrebalov does not use *signified* quotations from the world of the Other. However, four main nuclei, four samples (which the composer terms simple music patterns) of this composition are, in a way, treated as quotations, and are varied throughout the second circle and at the beginning of the third spiral circle. Work with samples manifests itself as autoreflexion, raising the possibility of understanding the work in the postmodern context (certainly not equated to the quotations themselves), albeit in one that is less communicative than, say, *Pannonia Boundless*. Bearing in mind Ivanka Stojanova’s definition of the postmodernism, according to which music of the postindustrial era involves plurality on different semantic levels, multiplicity of meaning and coding, multidimensionality, multilayeredness, i.e., openness to all directions in time and space, it seems that Aleksandra Vrebalov’s poetical attitudes, expressed in the composition *Orbits*, attest to her postmodern sensibility, the interaction between the signifiers of all her (musical) memories, her multiple new (musical) insights and her new (musical) context.

Translated by the author