

Article received on 3rd February 2009
Article accepted on 21st May 2009
UDC 78.072(047.53) Kotevska, A.

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PERSONAL MESSAGES IN A BOTTLE
Interview with Ana Kotevska



Ana Kotevska

Musicologist Ana Kotevska's resume is one of the most interesting and diverse in our musical environment. She developed her career, concurrently or alternately, on radio, television, in various professional magazines, daily newspapers and scholarly meetings. Among many other things, she worked as an editor, critic, instructor and round table moderator, radio author, festival selector. While residing in Senegal, from 1983 to 1987, her interests permanently extended to the field of ethnomusicology, above all to the study of traditional music practices in West Africa. One could say the only aspect of musicology Ana Kotevska never actively involved in was teaching, but that should be taken provisionally: during my university studies, while I was working as an associate of Music Department of Radio Belgrade Second Programme, whose editor was Ana Kotevska, she was the first person who decisively influenced the formation of

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my professional criteria and the first person who steered me towards the research area which was to become my passion and narrow specialty. During the political and wartime turmoil in the nineties, Ana was removed from the Radio, and in 1997, from the position of MIC (Music Information Center) administrator and a member of *New Sound* editorial board, she was actively engaged in promoting our contemporary music and publishing.

I assume the fascinating ramification of your career and most of your activities partly issued from combinations of circumstances, but there also must have been some inner urge, some personal 'hunger' for exploring various subjects and conquering various challenges.

Combinations of circumstances turned out, in time, to be stages of a discontinuous and seemingly utterly controversial, but, in retrospect, meaningful and relatively coherent journey, which I would describe by paraphrasing Albert Camus, as both acceptance of the world of music's beauty and the rebellion against the triteness and foolishness of that world. In fact, I think I fought from the beginning to reconcile those two things which formed a large chasm within me, in my relationship towards work, which could probably have been read between the lines in some of my texts. It took me a long time to realize that exactly this tension between the beauty and the cruelty of the world is where the solution should be looked for, and that the moving should be step by step, conforming to it, without expecting a resolution and ending. In fact, I realized there is no happy end (laughter).

The desire to feel the totality of the world, life as a great uncertain journey, were giving me great acceleration, sometimes even a dangerous one, hence the results at times could be, and were, half-way and fragmentary. For all that, it seems to me that I invested too much energy into staying what I was, what I thought I should be. Therefore the journey turned out more difficult, more complicated, more discontinuous, and not overly rational – partly due to my nature, partly due to the personal and political circumstances. At one moment, when in the nineties I was removed from the Radio, I thought everything I had been doing professionally was in fact a series of mistakes and delusions, and that I should make a move in a completely different direction. However, the shattered pieces of meaning started to come back together relatively soon, largely thanks to the professional musicological surrounding, above all working on the magazines *Bis* and *New Sound*, and so the image of inner satisfaction and the firm conviction

that all of us who deal in music are privileged reappeared again. I think Pascal Bruckner calls such circumstances ‘happiness in retrospect’.

What was it that first drew you to musicology studies, and kept you on that road (having in mind that you also studied literature, which potentially could have redirected you professionally)?

When I started to play the piano, that activity somehow naturally tied in with my writing and reciting poetry ever since my earliest childhood. In the ‘Josip Slavenski’ Music School I graduated both from the Piano and Theory Departments, and in the same year I passed my first year at the World Literature and Theory Department at the Belgrade University Philology School. After the piano exam (a mediocre one, as far as I recall), I quit trying to start studying piano at the Faculty of Music and decided for literature. However, due to a combination of circumstances again, I took the entry exam for the Department of Musicology at the insistence of Marija Koren-Bergamo and Petar Ozgijan, brilliant educators who taught me musical history and harmony respectively, in the Slavenski School, and who in the very same year were selected as assistant professors at the Faculty of Music. I have always been grateful to them for that ‘action’, because during the musicology studies all of my senses became ‘open’, thanks to excellent professors such as the two I mentioned, Nikola Hercigonja, Vlastimir Peričić, Dušan Skovran, Berislav Popović, and also original ‘extrauniversity’ personalities such as Pavle Stefanović and Dragutin Gostuški, but also thanks to the stimulating and open milieu of the University. I emphasize this because I think there is a widespread opinion among younger generations that this was the time of ‘monism’, of closed ideological systems and, say, Soviet musicology influences, as opposed to ‘World Literature’, which was the nickname for the General Literature and Theory Group, known and recognized for its liberal tone. On the contrary: studying in the two elite and open groups of the time, such as Musicology and General Literature, forever instilled in me the sense of freedom of thinking, decision-making and the possibility of speaking one’s mind in public, even before 1968, and especially after! On the other hand, studying at two schools was not such a rarity back then. It was hard, but the subjects were complementary, and it did not take me long to start using literature studies (above all aesthetics, literature theory and art history) as ‘auxiliary disciplines’ in musicology, and as a mirror and corrective of sorts. Ever since.

What did you experience during the study residence in Paris? What was new and different in the French way of education, in what ways were their scientific and critical writings on music distinguished from those in ex Yugoslavia, and what parts of these experiences did you bring back to our musicological midst?

Chance took part in that too. As a French government's scholarship holder, in 1972 I 'fell' to Professor Jacques Chailley, the director of the Institute for Musicology in Paris, and came to him with a summary and argumentation of a third degree doctoral thesis. Influenced by Huizinga's game theory, current at the time, and by my own geopoetical interests along the line Spain – France, I proposed the subject *Game and Dance (Jeu et Danse) in French Music At the Turn of the 19th to 20th Centuries*, having in mind Nietzsche, Apollonian and Dionysian dichotomy, turning to the South and the transalpine sense of the world, anti-rhetorical swerve from the sonata movement and cycle to dance and suite, and similar theories topical at the time.

As soon as Chailley (who published a book on Mozart and Freemasons at the time) read my paper, he said, both kindly and cynically: *Your original ideas will agree better with my dear friend, Vladimir Jankélévitch*. To me, that name was an ideal, but unreachable at the time, since Jankélévitch was known by personally selecting his doctoral candidates. I was lucky that Chailley, probably wishing to resolve his 'problem' with me, recommended me to Jankélévitch, who in the same year, 1972, started his two-year course on the Dance.

In that post-1968 time, the leading Paris professors were Derrida and Barthes, so I occasionally attended their classes as well, and I consulted Messiaen a few times. The two-hour Jankélévitch courses on the dance on Wednesday mornings, were broadcast live by Radio Sorbonne and subsequently by *France culture* programme, and the students, about fifty of us, were obliged to participate actively in the discussion after the lecture. The research methodology, introduced at the Sorbonne – Université Paris 1, implied that the score analyses, excerpts from the literature relevant to the thesis, quotations and most diverse ideas on the subject that could ever cross your mind were to be noted on cards (*fiches*). In the second stage, the cards were to be screened with a critical discarding of impertinent notes, and in the third, they were to be sorted thematically in envelopes and boxes. If those actions were performed well, the structures of the presentations and chapters, and the formal shapes of the dissertation would appear by themselves, which for me was an interesting and useful discovery, the one I still apply when working on longer texts. Already at the end of that first year, the exam committee, after a serious

control of my boxes' contents, gave me a green light for writing the work, with the recommendation to narrow down the subject to Ravel and his particular understanding of game as frisk and dance. Mastering a completely new methodology and writing in the ruthlessly difficult French language, made me remember that first year as exceedingly arduous. The challenges were enormous, but today I think I was in the right place at the right time.

The Music Department of the National Library placed the complete existing material on Ravel at my disposal: manuscripts, all the editions of sheet music, correspondence and other documents, recordings of Ravel playing his own works on the piano. I visited the houses Ravel lived in, listened to his voice, and I remember Jankélévitch insisted I visit the composer's grave too, a request I considered exaggerated. Since he told me he would not let me enter the second year until I did that, I simply lied to him. He asked me: *What flowers did you take there? Cyclamens*. He was satisfied. I made up for that falsity, whose sting I felt occasionally, only 27 years later, in 2001, when I took a pot of cyclamens to the Parisian suburb Levallois. I think this anecdote shows that the educational process of Jankélévitch, otherwise a tolerant and modern professor, still included the elements distinctive for the French humanistic tradition, especially for comparativistics.

The colleagues who chose to work with Derrida and Barthes were extremely sceptical about Jankélévitch's alluring Bergsonism, moralism and eclectic aesthetics, his verbal relationship towards science and great improvisatory skill, but particularly about his method of including biographies into researches. However, today it seems that Jankélévitch's contribution to musical aesthetics should be revalorized, just as it is certain that biography retakes its place in musicology. In any case, except for much wider opportunities for work, which were available to me in Paris, I did not feel any substantial difference compared with the studies in Belgrade. I think I often had an advantage due to broader professional and practical musical knowledge at my command and the interventions populated by concrete examples. What had appeared to me as deadweight during the studies in Belgrade, proved to be very important and useful in France. Also, we must not forget that the country I came from had a special, sort of privileged status in a dominantly leftist intellectual climate of France at the time.

So, game was a Leit-subject of the first stage of your research work. Were there any subjects that were drawing your attention for a long time in such a manner? Perhaps to this day?

I think my preferred subject, ever since the earliest childhood, was a mixing of cultures, of multicultures actually, first in the space of the Balkans, and later in the extended Mediterranean, including the North African shores. Even as a little girl, I was interested in the slightest signs of West-East fusion in poetry, music, architecture, interiors, cuisine. Hence today I do not believe the title of my graduate work *Susreti Debisija i Falje na tlu impresionizma i hispanizma* [*Encounters of Debussy and Falla on the soil of Impressionism and Hispanism*] was a coincidence. I will also mention the title of quarterly programme cycles, i.e. essays, which, accompanied with appropriate music, were broadcast weekly on the Radio Belgrade Third Programme: *Igre, Maske i Vode u muzici dvadesetog veka* [*Dances, Masks and Waters in the Twentieth Century Music*]. It would appear that the journey of music, the interweaving of influences, diffusion of musical codes and so on led me logically to Africa. I worked very seriously on all those texts, aware that the processes and phenomena involved are very complex and that their simplification would be more dangerous than a certain hermetism. Of course, being professionally connected to media, treating the actual social issues ‘on assignment’ often took me a lot of time and strength. It seems to me that this ‘scatteredness’ is very characteristic for small cultures and historically turbulent environments. I could see that for myself here in Belgium as well.

It is interesting that, by a combination of circumstances again, i.e. thanks to your husband’s work, you found yourself in Africa. That residence became an important inspiration for your subsequent research work and fitted perfectly with your interest for multiculturalism, which in the meantime became one of the key subjects in virtually all branches of art.

You cannot imagine how much I enjoy that (laughter).

Interestingly enough, new possibilities of research opened for you there, which led you to the field of ethnomusicology.

That again was a consequence of curiosity, but it is not difficult to be curious in Africa, where people make music night and day. The original fascination grew into a long-time passionate but discontinuous dealing with forms of traditional musical practices of West Africa and the processes of change which reflected and anticipated social changes by turns, and

occasionally heralded a step back. By all indications, it will be a book on West African musicians and their instruments, their migrations, travels, transformations under various influences. For musicians travelled with their instruments even in times of greatest conflicts and wars, hence the mutual influences and osmoses took place in most diverse circumstances. Only in Senegal and Mali, among Wolof, Dogon and Jola peoples, I realized to what extent the being of music keeps its authenticity and openness, even in the most horrible of times, and adapts new elements due to some sort of fascination by other, maybe a fear of that other, but also in order to alleviate that fear. All these realizations helped me to try and understand our chaos in the nineties.

The encounter with and the research of African practices undoubtedly enriched your understanding of African musical culture as a whole. Did they in any way modify your ideas on West European music, acquired during the studies in Belgrade and Paris?

Facing West African musical practices, first of all I recognized the anthropological nature of musical trade, realized that unhistorical musical reservations do not exist and that 'remoteness' does not mean the absence of communication, that different musics have a common history, that notation is but a formal delimiting point between traditional and artistic music, that the boundaries are porous, even those between musicology and ethnomusicology. All these ideas were in circulation in the seventies, and the image of Eurocentric music was already shaken: by then, composers such as Kagel and Stockhausen had been freely including extra-European sources in their works and expanding the music media, seemingly with no end, and also the first signs of the upcoming wave of *world music* could be discerned...

Thanks to the radio shows, and especially criticisms in Politika and Borba newspapers, for a while you had an influential, but also very unrewarding role of the most prominent critic in our musical midst. What were the greatest challenges of that position?

Most prominent, you say? By no means! Apart from that relentless exposure to the public, I always considered criticism a discreet, individual message. I do not believe that criticism can 'regulate' musical life or the musical market. Especially today, when that type of writing is practically vanishing. But I do believe in interpersonal dialogues and specific

messages. Let us put it this way: if the great Maurizio Pollini says he is happy if one single listener in the hall understands and feels his interpretation, how could critics dare expect a wide, let alone *social* radiation of their texts? I started with that premise and organized my criticisms as multiple messages hidden in various bottles – paragraphs: to the composer and musician I wrote about, to their educators if young musicians were involved, to the organizer, to that one single reader/listener. Also, I strived to make every text a miniature impression of that specific concert moment, an experience of an event; hence I had been mentioning some ‘extramusical’ situations which influenced the particular concert. Language-wise, I tried to step away from routine phrasing and stereotypes, by inserting something curious, a word not pertaining, a bit subversive, in order to intrigue readers who think they know what comes next. I hardly always succeeded, not only because of the large number of items – at least two per week – but also due to the fact that writing for newspapers is a risky business, since it involves editorial interventions, hence sometimes ‘the bottle with a message’ reached the reader broken. In spite of that, over twenty years I enjoyed that game of simulation/dissimulation. Besides, that continuous work imposed a specific discipline, enabled a permanent contact with live music, preceded by a mini-laboratory (musicological?) where I prepared for the concert, listening to various performances of the scheduled works, with scores if possible. In time, in every criticism I found a place for that imaginary dialogue I specially developed as a principle, writing ten years for *Politika*, until the beginning of 1997. You recognize the year: I stopped amid Belgrade street protests, in the time of much more direct communication. I emphasize again: for me, writing criticism is above all the experience of live music, which is of prime significance even today. That ‘walking the line’ on the concert, sometimes over the ground, safely, sometimes over an abyss, the uncertain and ever so vulnerable result, another journey with the musicians, through the labyrinths and turbulences of their states of mind, dialoguing with the composers’ writings... In my inner hierarchy, fragility of a concert performance ‘now and never again’ is the greatest challenge in music. Although I dealt with stopping those moments, in fact I was always fascinated by their transience. Albeit even my critical miniatures were made ephemeral by the fact. There you go, an incoherent, contradictory answer, right? It is our condition to spend a lifetime wondering, reconsidering and changing a bit...

Did your experience in writing criticisms and working on radio influence your scientific musicological work, and in what ways?

On the Radio Belgrade Second and Third Programmes, I first mastered the secrets of radio and musical time, subtlety of communicating with the interlocutors and listeners, dramaturgy of a musical show that could be transferred to a text or a musicological study. I learned not to reel off the messages and conclusions directly, but instead to suggest and obliquely present some data and ideas on music, leaving the conclusions to the audience. I was also forced to reconcile working individually with working in a team, and to listen and respect various opinions. Nevertheless, I return to 'live sound' and live communication as the common denominator of critic and radio work, which, perhaps subsequently, spontaneously fitted in my musicological items.

It is interesting that you mention dramaturgy in this context, for the issue of what rhythm a certain material is presented in is primarily important for the construction of an artistic form. A comment by Anthony Minghella on writing also comes to my mind, where he says that, unlike theatrical 'epigrammatic' language, film is better suited for 'anti-epigrammatic' scripting, which excludes explicit statements and leaves the conclusions to the audience, but that is the opposite of what is expected from a scientific work.

That sort of 'paraliterary' writing in our business is risky: sometimes it works out, more often it does not. Most people do not even experience your text the way you imagined, so what is left is the procedure in your head. You face commentaries of 'shallow/deep' variety, the drawers they try to put you in your whole life, and you keep evading. I will not go into debating whether musicology is a science, after all 'logos' is a part of its name, but I maintain that the allotment of creativity in musicology is potentially very large, although I hear ironic commentaries while I am saying that. I will simplify and say that I have always considered musicology an active more than a reactive discipline and I hope I have shown that by my attitude. Many of our musicologists today have every right to take place among creators. Why there are no awards in the field of musicology?

On several occasions I attended recordings of special broadcasts which you have been doing with Jasmina Zec, for the Radio Belgrade Second Programme, and I remember how the process of putting the spoken fragments and music together was musical in itself, how the issue of, for example, balance and rhythm was important. You also signed a few serious radio-art projects,

dedicated to Nikola Hercigonja, Cage and Mahler, and I wonder if you experienced working with sound as composing of sorts, and was it the most enticing part in that experience?

Writing by sound is one of the most creative areas of all, able to bring deep fulfilment. During the hours of radio-art editing with creators such as Ivana Stefanović, Zoran Jerković, Darko Tatić, Jasmina Zec, I was fortunate to be able to develop my own creativity. I think I expanded the notion of music by the notion of a sound field first during my years on the radio, and then by the contacts with contemporary music creativity. My hearing simply opened for nuances, details, marginal sounds which sometimes uncover a capacity undreamed of, as probably happens in the compositional process as well, for the inner form. All of that must have flown into my items in one way or another.

Undoubtedly your devotion to various activities has had many positive aspects. On the other hand, it is natural for narrowly specialized professionals to form their internal circles of operation and I wonder if that could be a problem for someone with wide interests and experiences as yours. Regarding that, did you ever experience a feeling of disassociation or discomfort because of some circles' tendency towards closed operation?

Of course there were discomfoting and unpleasant situations which I found myself in, sometimes consciously and sometimes as a collateral victim, but 'I have no more time' to go back there, so I simply forgot them. Although divisions within small closed guilds are common everywhere, our problems were and are divisions among music creators on most diverse levels and losing huge amounts of energy to maintain these divisions. While I was a student, composers were divided by mentorship, while I was on the radio, the so-called 'radio' composers were latently conflicted with the 'academic' ones, next by affirmation of musicology confrontations between composers and musicologists followed, and then among musicologists themselves. I was hoping those unproductive tensions would dissipate in younger generations, that the sense of codependency of composers, performers, musicologists and organizers will prevail. That did not happen, but today I am sure that the cohabitational tendencies, by their high achievements, always managed to overpower the destructive ones. Continuous lives of festivals like BEMUS, International Review of Composers, magazines like *New Sound*, an array of excellent new works in Serbian music, written by composers, interpreted by performers and analyzed by

musicologists – is not all that more substantial and more worthy than the ephemeral sound and fury?

Thanks to various positions you were holding during your career, you were able to perceive our musical environment from most diverse angles and to assemble a more credible mosaic than someone viewing from a fixed point could have done. At the same time, our society has undergone great changes in the last two decades. What do you think about the current phase of Serbian music and musicology, compared to the time when you began your career, and then to the nineties and beyond?

I think what should concern us most at the moment is the lack of decentralization, i.e. concentration of almost all musical capacities in Belgrade. Degrading changes in that respect, compared with 30 years ago, are drastic. If we could agree that the renewal of musical life in Serbian cities is a priority, in the following years we should work towards that goal, as well as regional cooperation which would expand the music market. Unfortunately, the economic crisis currently prevents any new cultural investments, and that is an additional problem. Also, I think one of the issues, though I do not have the statistical data, is the stagnation of composers' productions, which points to the problems regarding the lack of commissions and other supporting mechanisms which the art of composing relies on in all developed countries, including the fact that an exclusively musical publishing house does not exist. It seems that musicology is currently more vital and productive, topically rich and modern, though in the long run there is no musicology without music. Besides, although 'a symphonic orchestra' left this country in the nineties, our performance scene is very active and rejuvenated, which attests to the still solid educational bases and vitality and regenerability of musical art. Since we know music is not a *perpetuum mobile*, we should prevent the crisis which is obviously imminent.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović