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NEW MINIATURES

17th International Review of Composers Belgrade, 19–25 November 2008

The Seventeenth International Review of Composers, held from the 19th to 25th November 2008 under the title *New Miniatures*, for the first time in the modern interior hall of the National Bank of Serbia (acoustically adjusted for this special occasion), will undoubtedly be remembered by the largest number of the works performed and the largest number of performers who took part in the several concert evenings of this 17-year-old festival. The intriguing slogan of the event – *A hundred miniatures for one, four, eight, hundred performers* – completely justified its contents, because in seven days 108 works were performed: 92 in the official programme and 16 in the bonus programme. It is particularly significant that the programme selector, Ivan Brkljačić, chose as many as 63 works by foreign authors, most of which dated from the last three years (with the exception of the American and European Modern ‘classics’ – Morton Feldman, Mauricio Kagel, Philip Glass, Charles Ives – as well as one work by Stravinsky), thus enabling the Belgrade audience and professional public to gain a clearer insight into the current world music production, as well as better orientation in the perception of the domestic creativity position with respect to the foreign artistic tendencies.

The official Review programme, comprising eight concerts, brought a musical miniature into life through the most diverse musical genres: song (Katarina Jovanović, soprano, and instrumentalists); chamber music (new miniatures for piano duo and percussion; for wind quartet, quintet, sextet and chamber orchestra; for chamber ensembles); orchestral (new miniatures for orchestra) and soloist music (new miniatures for piano; for solo instruments). The bonus programme included quartertone miniatures for two pianos, excellently performed by Nada Kolundžija and Deborah Richards, as well as miniatures for voice, percussion and oboe, in

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an outstanding performance by Margriet van Reisen, soprano, and Arnold Marinissen, percussion.

The inventive concept of the Review – *New Miniatures* – undoubtedly originated as a result of intensive thinking about the position of music creativity in the context of the Age of Information, where the speed of communication is imposed as an imperative. In such a context, the key question is the contemporary perception of a musical work, both from the creator's and the consumer's perspectives. Therefore the main idea of the event, stimulated by the speed of informational flow of all kinds i.e. by the condensation of all elements of everyday life, inspired the audience to rethink the very act of creation and perception, as well as to reassess the relationship between the categories of time and space, communicativeness and introvertedness, sound and silence, and so on.

The aforementioned categories permeated mutually in two stylistic planes of postmodern discourse: (a) the one more communicative, which flirts with various musics and popular genres and which infallibly includes games as a creative principle, and (b) the one more introverted, oriented towards modern and provocative avant-garde tendencies.

Playing with different music codes and the deconstructive approach to heterogeneous stylistic, genre and morphological aspects within a work, still represents one of the main preoccupations of contemporary authors. Within this context, we highlight the composition *Oratorio* by Nataša Bogojević, for soprano, flute, violin, viola, violoncello and orator, where the composer preserves the formal-notional premises of an oratorio (Prologue/Epilogue where the narrator – *storicus* – takes part, then Overture, Aria, Duet, Recitative, Finale, where several instruments 'impersonate' both choir and orchestra), although the work contains no more than 100 notes and lasts for only a few minutes. Branka Popović in *Song 'without' words* for soprano and piano presents an interesting play with the song genre: the very demanding vocal part, arrestingly performed by Katarina Jovanović, is made of three Japanese words meaning 'one, two, three'. By combining the words, certain rhythmical patterns are created, and the meaning of the text is eliminated. By desemantization of the work's verbal component, the author focuses on the sound qualities of a voice, but at the same time she strips off its 'natural' characteristic – singing – by treating it percussively, much the same as the piano. Noting the binary oppositions 'oratorio/non-oratorio' and 'song/non-song' respectively in these works, the composition *Giant Butterfly* for double bass and chamber orchestra by Finnish author Tomi Räisänen confronts us with a similar coexistence of concerto and non-concerto. Although the notion of a concertante genre is presented directly and openly, the morphological aspects of the work, its duration of

only two minutes and, finally, playing with instrumental registers, especially those of the soloist (in the very well-conceived interpretation by Slobodan Gerić), whose timbre is being transformed through using the highest instead of the lowest tones in the total instrumental set, 'dismantle' the basic concept of a concerto.

The typical surplus of communicativeness within artistic music was present in the works of the authors who more or less skilfully handled the codes of popular culture. The examples of well-deliberated use of pop-rock and jazz idioms and elements of popular dance forms such as tango, waltz or ragtime we can find in the compositions by Chiel Meijering (*Rondo* and *Harde Ballen V* from the cycle *Pop Songs* for piano duo), Armando 'Chick' Corea (*Contest* for piano duo), Bruno Vlahek (*Jazz Toccata* for piano), Kim Helweg (*Tango* for piano duo), Dragana Jovanović (*Tango Džango* for piano), Darija Andovska (*Off* for flute, oboe, accordion and double bass), Ivana Ognjanović (*Play With Me* for double bass, guitar, bass clarinet, double bassoon and violoncello), Nataša Bogojević (*Disappointment Regained* for string quartet), Katarina Miljković (*Valcer za Nadu [Waltz for Nada]* for piano). Improvisational spirit of jazz was dexterously brought to life in Szilárd Mezei's energetic piece *Hep 7 (B)* for bass clarinet, double bassoon and piano, while a much worse example of the use of improvisation and popular genres' postulates, we find in Norbert R. Stammberger's work *rerecording no. 29.30006.06* for electric guitar and orchestra, where the rock music models are trivialized, as well as the guitar sound, created by distortion and other 'noisy' effects, which in spite of the masterly performance by Aleksandar Sedlar stood in quite a discord with the traditionally written orchestral part.

Postmodernist exchange of messages and meanings, realized through the reaching for other authors' data, but with the integrity of one's own language maintained, proved to be vital during the 17th Review as well. The Swedish-Iranian composer Mansoor Hoseini, in the symbolically titled violoncello quartet *Four For Four*, networked his musical ideas with the materials by Witold Lutosławski, Béla Bartók, György Ligeti and from his own string quartet, while Jasna Veličković, inspired by the molecular structure of DNA (where every subunit of the molecule has its duplicate), was conceptually right-minded to include segments from Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* in her orchestral work *!DNA AND?*, solidly performed by the RTS Symphony Orchestra conducted by Bojan Sudić. Interesting relations between the personal creative principles and musical ideas of Vienna Classicism were established by Irena Popović in the song *Mocart/Hajdn [Mozart/Haydn]* and Aleksandra Vrebalov in the piano work *Bagatele [Bagatelles]*. While Popović played freely with the symbols of the comic opera, parodying the operatic way of singing and recognizable Mozartian melodic turns, Aleksandra Vrebalov

confronted Beethoven's piano bagatelles (op. 119 No. 5 and 9) with an original music material (in the order Vrebalov – Beethoven – Beethoven – Vrebalov) and created an inconsistent, somewhat eclectic work, establishing a collage of historically contrasted discourses of Classicism and contemporary musical language and ascribing utterly different meanings to them in such a context.

The 17th International Review of Composers also presented compositional concepts where traces of various avant-garde features could be decidedly recognized. Such moments were obvious in the works focused on visibility of the compositional procedure, pointillist structure or neutrality of music material, which in the process were introduced to a new communication space of music. The obviousness of the compositional technique can be noted in e.g. the works whose dramaturgy is built upon repetitive patterns (*Altus* by Vladimir Tošić, *Solid Opinion* by Pertti Jalava, *Igra senki [Shadow Play]* by Milorad Marinković, and others) or in the works inspired by Ligeti's poetics and micromovements of melo-rhythmic structures (*Vreme u boci [Time in a Bottle]* by Tatjana Ristić, *The Dove is Sad* by Stephen Andrew Taylor). Less concerned for the communicative potential of their works were the authors who insisted on the pointillist sound image (either in entire works or in the sections thereof), focusing on singular tones/particles in widely spaced registers, short arabesques criss-crossed by rests, fragmentary music ideas (Friedrich Jaecker – *7 Bagatellen*, David Drexler – *Improvisation*, Milimir Drašković – *LP Fragment*, Božidar Obradinović – *Severni pojas [Northern Belt]*).

Lacerated musical ideas, made discontinuous by 'grains' of silence, affirm the issue of the relationship between sound and non-sound, which in various ways engaged many authors at the Review. Hence it is not unusual that many musical ideas were 'rendered' in the realm of non-sound, or at the threshold of audibility, which forced the listeners to a special kind of concentration, whose goal was to bring forth the very act of listening and the act of creation, the environment in which they occur, as well as the specific relationship with the (extra)temporal dimension. Whether the silence was realized through noise, 'scratching' of harmonics, whispers or emphasized extensiveness of the lines with minimal motion in the quietest possible dynamics, a particular sensibility for its semantic activity was shown by Svetlana Maksimović (*Pesma žeteoca [Harvester's Song]* and *Agnus Dei*), Zoran Erić (*Sedam pogleda u nebo [Seven Glances at the Sky]*), Srđan Hofman (*Muzičke igračke [Musical Toys]*), Miloš Zatkalik (*I kao da ničeg nije bilo [And As If There Was Nothing]*), Paolo Longo (*Corale, Ricercare e Ricordo dall'erba Secca*), David Drexler (*Improvisation*), Valentina Velkovska-Trojanovska (*Toward the Cliff*) and

Kota Nakamura (*Composition for mezzo-soprano and string trio; Piece for violin, quartet and harp*).

In some of these works, reducing the music material to the area of non-sound caused a strong impression of time deceleration. The issue of temporality and perception of a musical work, especially provocative in the context of a miniature which suggests brevity and speed, was deliberated by several authors, both at the levels of concept and its realization. The examination of the sense of continuity, auditive memory or comprehensive (non-analytical) listening was particularly prominent in *Yarny/Wiry* by Mei-Fang Lin, *Off* by Darija Andovska, *Svitac u tegli* [*Firefly in a Jar*] by Milica Đorđević, *Vreme u boci* [*Time in a Bottle*] by Tatjana Ristić.

We must not forget that the Review, appropriately symbolically, began with the work *Ona* [*She*] for Her, three performers and Time, written by Ivana Stefanović, who on this occasion was presented with the Mokranjac Award for 2007 – for the work *Neobične scene sa Homerovog groba u Smirni* [*Unusual Scenes at Homer's Grave in Smyrna*]). Although the author described this work as 'a moment stopped in time', the persistent beating of time, personified in the electronic part, reminded us that time can be nothing else but continuous, unstoppable motion.

One of the strongest impressions from the 17th International Review of Composers was the need of authors of various poetics and stylistic directions, to transform and surpass the closed boundaries of the performing medium of music. Searching for most diverse sound images, the composers not only insisted on non-traditional playing techniques (plucking piano strings, using a bow on a vibraphone, slapping an instrument's resonating box and so on), but also strived to build various relationships between related and unrelated instrumental colours. Performing some of the works required even some behavioural expressivity. In Nickos Harizanos's *Si vis amari ama* for flute, Ljubiša Jovanović was whispering, shouting, 'humming', 'mumbling', speaking into the instrument, while in Miloš Petrović's *Pesma Leontija* [*Leontius's Song*] for soprano and piano, and in Fani Kosona's *Brass* for trombone (in an outstanding performance by Aleksandar Benčić), the performers slapped their knees, clapped their hands, stamped the floor. The most striking example of the break-over and extension of the performing medium was offered by Cecilia Arditto in *Split Piano – Licht* for piano duo (very enthusiastically performed by Piano Duo LP – Sonja Lončar and Andrija Pavlović) 'for one hand, a light bulb and sound objects', where switching the light on and off was subjected to clear rhythmization, and the lamp/bulb was incorporated in the total performing body, not losing its primary function of lighting/blacking out the surroundings. The cooperation of instruments building a common sound was very interestingly re-examined by Ivan Brkljačić and Srđan Hofman. While Brkljačić in *Tri mala*

apsurda [*Three Little Absurds*] ‘thwarted’ the ‘natural’ functions of the instruments in the trio in an ‘absurd’ way, using the flute for the bass line, the viola for the harmony, and the harp for the melody, which influenced the form, articulation and dynamic relationships, Srđan Hofman in the premiere performance of *Muzičke igračke* [*Musical Toys*] involved in establishing, the evolution and undoing some of the possible relationships between a violoncello and a double bass (through dialogue, dispute, competition in an inspired interpretation by Srđan Sretenović and Slobodan Gerić), in the context of hermetic music, sprung from the inner thought process of the composer, but at the same time ‘open’ enough to reach the listener’s world of ideas.

In spite of the very good organization by the Composers’ Association of Serbia and Jugokonzert, this year, as well as in a few previous ones, there were no accompanying programmes in the form of round tables, interviews with the artists, bulletins or workshops. The only parallel event was located by the entrance to the National Bank of Serbia – the sound installation *Staklena kutija – Intimni rituali* [*Glass Box – Intimate Rituals*] by Branislava Stefanović: interesting but a well-known concept, which did not draw significant attention.

Guided by the thought that quantity does not necessarily turn into quality, we cannot shake the impression that, for an event of relatively modest financial and organizational capacities, the programme was too extensive, and that some works did not meet the basic quality standards assumed by a review of this kind. Adding the fact that within spacious programme concepts some miniatures lasted even as long as 15 minutes, the basic idea of the Review occasionally seemed betrayed.

The 17th International Review of Composers showed once more the face and back of postmodernist music discourse, where ‘everything goes’ and which is based on the dynamic coexistence of different music languages – from those accessible to a wider audience, which count on the recognition of known music codes, to those more ‘autistic’, built by an avant-garde vocabulary, to those relying on more traditional music postulates, as shown in the works of the older generation of Serbian composers (Dejan Despić, Konstantin Babić, Mirjana Živković, Dušan Radić). This diversity did not sway the firmly installed concept of the 17th Review, which represents an important step towards building a distinctive image of the event and placing it on the world map of remarkable festivals of modern music.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović