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## COMPOSER SPEAKS

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### FROM MINIMALISM TO CLASSICISM: A COMPOSER'S JOURNEY INTERVIEW WITH MILOŠ RAIČKOVIĆ<sup>1</sup>



**Miloš Raičković** (born in 1956) belongs to the generation of composers who were first introduced to the public in Belgrade, the capital of Yugoslavia, in the late 1970s under the name *New Generation*. Although the members of *New Generation* were students of composition and composers of various ages and aesthetical orientations, they were connected by their idea of opposition to “everything that might have been characterized as dogmatic and conservative.”<sup>2</sup> Today, about thirty years later, most of them hold university teaching

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<sup>1</sup> In the United States, the composer's name is spelled as Milos Raickovich.

<sup>2</sup> Miodrag Lazarov, „Nova generacija“, Muzički program Studentskog kulturnog centra, Beograd, SKC – Sava centar, 1979, 1.

positions,<sup>3</sup> their achievements are the subject of research by musicologists,<sup>4</sup> and the idea of opposition to everything that is “dogmatic and conservative” has been given a completely new meaning in the context of contemporary events which—with the help of Baudrillard’s insight—can still be well described as “the state after the orgy”.

To Miloš Raičković, opposing “dogma and conservatism” in the 1970s meant turning to American minimalist music, which he had the opportunity to hear at concerts in Paris. What he considered to be the object of his musical resistance can easily be inferred from his musical works. Obviously, he was not satisfied with the rules valid for studies of composition in Belgrade and Paris: on the one hand, the dominance of academic conservatism in Belgrade (the mixture of some achievements of modernism and traditional sound), and, on the other hand, capitalist high modernism i.e. musical avant-garde, represented in projects of the Paris Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics and Music (IRCAM).

Although his minimalist music at some point seemed “liberating” to him and although it has remained the foundation of his work so far, after the first compositions written in the style of “ascetic minimalism”, as he puts it, Raičković soon found his “new sound”. After the minimalist cycle *Permutations* (1976-1980), he wrote his first composition (*Flying Trio*, 1979-1980) in a style which he called “New Classicism”. This was followed by other compositions based on the principles of this musical idiom: *Dream Quartet* (1986), *Happy Overture* (1987), *Prelude & Fugue* (1987), *Three Romances* (1988), *Sonata* (1988-1989), *Mon petit village imaginaire* (1990), *Symphony No. 1* (1992), *Alarm* (1999), *B-A-G-D-A-D, Music on a six-note theme* (2002), *Winter Waltz* (2006), *Where is My Love?* (2011) and others.

Raičković’s “New Classicism” is paradoxical in an exciting way. It is based on the combination of classical forms (sonata form, rondo, etc.), but reduced to the extent that the compound of their parts basically indicates a syntax repetitiveness immanent to minimalist aesthetics. It is based on themes which are by their type and strength of expression similar to examples of classicist and romantic lyricism, but since it has been subjected to rigorous procedures, it is the product of a serial modernist thought. For example, it uses only a certain number of tones of the major or the minor scale to construct thematic horizontals or verticals, and the musical material is exposed to a strict, specific process of variations, called by the

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<sup>3</sup> The biography of the composer Miloš Raičković is at the end of this text.

<sup>4</sup> V. for example, Marija Masnikosa, *Muzički minimalizam; Američka paradigma i differentia specifica u ostvarenjima grupe beogradskih kompozitora (Musical minimalism, American Paradigma and Differentia specifica in achievements of a group of Belgrade composers)*, Beograd, Clio, 1998.

composer the alteration of “cycles” of musical material, etc. It is closed within a world of absolute music and “art for art’s sake”, but in some works it provokes clear musical associations by its purely musical characteristics. By its intertextual connections with musical examples of the past, as well as by the various geographical origins of the musical material, it indicates familiarity with the world of globalized post-modern culture, but opposes that world at the same time. “New Classicism” is not based on the illusion of returning to national, ethnic, or tribal roots, nor is it a reminder of forgotten or repressed women’s identities or other special groups, or potential differences between class identities, or the mixture of sounds of previous so-called elite culture and subcultures. Thus, by emphasizing (in a modern way) its poetic autonomy and exclusiveness, “New Classicism” today, in so-called post-political times, when politics is executed by economic and cultural means, avoids a uniform representation of social identification by means of art.<sup>5</sup>

Closed within the frame of the autonomy of artistic expression and high aestheticism, in the modern sense of the word, Raičković’s musical idiom can be interpreted as a kind of resistance to the new dogma of contemporary culture. Music critic Mark Swed has tried in numerous descriptions to bring listeners closer to the world of Raičković’s music by comparing it to the art of Viennese classics, Stravinsky, Cage, Picasso, Gertrude Stein, representatives of the *Oulipo* Paris school, using expressions such as: “Classically pure music for our multicultural era” or “Straightforward music that arrives in the midst of a world in nervous musical flux” and the like. However, he might have been closest to an authentic description when he wrote: “Raickovich’s ‘New Classicism’ knows our postmodern chaos; and it is an unconfused music, for, as they say, the interesting times in which we are fated to live.”<sup>6</sup>

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1. *Would you describe the compositional procedures applied in your cycle of compositions Permutations (1976-80)?*

*Permutations* is a cycle of five works, all based on six pitches: C, D, E, G, A, B. The melodic aspect of all these works is based on permutations of these pitches. In some works, the permutations progress in an orderly fashion (C-D-E-G-A-B, C-D-E-G-B-A, etc.), while in others, the permutations are random. These works were written for the Ensemble for Different New Music, sometimes also called

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<sup>5</sup> i.e. “New Classicism” avoids conspicuous promotion of identity politics.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Swed, “New Classicism“, Liner notes for the compact disc: Milos Raickovich, *New Classicism*, New York, Mode Records, 1995.

the Ensemble for the Other New Music (originally, in Serbo-Croatian: “*Ansambl za drugu novu muziku*”). The group was based around the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade, and it was made up of a group of composers and performers, mostly students. Each of the works in *Permutations* uses a different compositional procedure.

*Permutations I*, later called “Little Peaceful Music” (1976) consists of a single line, written for a solo instrument. Permutations in this piece are random, with the absence of any melodic sequence. *Permutations II*, “Canon” (1976), is a piece for two pianos played by seven performers. Here, each performer is assigned a single octave, all of them covering the whole seven octaves of the piano range. Permutations are random. All seven lines start in unison, but then, they gradually branch out into a canon. At the end, they all gradually come back to unison.

*Permutations III*, or “Water Tones” (1976), went through a transformation over the years. Originally, the music was written down as a piece for three pianos, 18-hands (three pianists on each piano). Soon, another, improvisational version (for pianos, electric piano and mallet instruments) proved to be more effective. In “Water Tones”, each hand performs random permutations of six notes within the range of a sixth: G, A, B, C, D, E. The permutations are random, and so is the rhythm, made up of random long or short notes, with the avoidance of a pulse. Any sequence, melodic or rhythmical, is to be avoided. The role of the conductor is to determine who plays at any particular moment, and to show the dynamics, articulation and the speed (tempo) at which particular performer(s) should play. This is something that I like to compare with Jackson Pollock’s action painting, where the painter is making a general gesture (spilling the paint in a certain way in a particular direction), but cannot predict the details of the painting. The musical form of “Water Tones” is thus created by the conductor (me), and each performance represents a new version. In 2011, I made yet another version of “Water Tones” – a studio recording, where I recorded each part separately on a 15-track recording.

*Permutations IV*, “Mirror” (1980), is a piece for piano 6-hands. The permutations proceed in an order (C-D-E-G-A-B, C-D-E-G-B-A, etc.), both horizontally and vertically. Each hand plays one note at a time. The chord is always made up of all six notes. The process goes on until all 720 possible permutations of six notes are completed. *Permutations V*, “Sound of the White Hole” (1978), is a piece for six performers on various keyboard and mallet instruments, all performing in one single octave (“middle-C” octave). Each performer plays one of the six notes of the chord (cluster): C, D, E, G, A, B. The permutations vertically proceed in an order (C-D-E-G-A-B, C-D-E-G-B-A, etc.), each chord being orchestrated differently. The work is made of all 720 possible orchestrations of a six-note chord with six different timbres.

I should add that the cycle *Permutations* belongs to my beginnings as a composer, and that since the 1980s, I haven't done much work in that style—a style which I like to call “Ascetic Minimalism”.

2. *What are the characteristics of your music idiom called “New Classicism”?*

*Flying Trio* is the first composition in my style, which I like to call “New Classicism”. After composing this work in Paris in 1979-80, I wrote: “New Classicism may be roughly defined as a blend of musical Minimalism and the styles of Viennese Classical and early Romantic music. Its form is Classical (e.g. the sonata), but the tonality is reduced to only a few notes of the scale. This reduction gives tonal music a new quality—a new energy. New Classicism enables me to express my feelings while at the same time it satisfies my need for a clear and coherent musical language.” This, slightly simplified description of my “New Classicism, holds even today”.

3. *Some of your works which belong to the “New Classicism” style, as you call it, are politically declarative, that is, they have a clear political, anti-war message.*

Since 1999, I have written a number of pieces that can be best described as anti-war music. These include *Alarm* (1999), written after the US/NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, and a number of other pieces, like *B-A-G-D-A-D, Music on a six-note theme* (from 2002, originally for piano, then arranged for orchestra, as well as for string quartet, and for string orchestra). Some of these pieces also use the stylistic features of my “New Classicism”. In some, dissonance is treated more freely, but always in the tonal/modal context.

4. *Could you tell us more about the reduction of pitch material and the compositional process which the material is exposed to in your works?*

I do not consider my pitch material to be a “reduction”. It is simply my own material. When I write, I have no feeling that anything is missing. (Just like with, let's say, Peking Opera genre, where the whole evening can be filled with only five different pitches, and nobody asks about the “missing notes”.) I am reluctant to spell out which particular scales of 4, 5, or 6 notes I use, but that is something that can be easily heard in my music, or seen in my scores. As for the compositional process, it varies from piece to piece. I often try to build forms with a single musical theme and its transformations. I never use “traditional” minimalist techniques, like the repetitive patterns in Reich's pieces, or the additive rhythms in Glass's pieces. I do use my own procedures. Sometimes, the form is Classical (sonata, variations, etc.), and that dictates its own Classical procedures, or, at least, the procedures that resemble Classical ones. One of my techniques, used often, is: writing an initial

thematic material; then, using the fragments of the initial material, but mixed in a new way. The process can often continue, by splitting the fragments to even smaller ones, and mixing them again in a new way. Like a collage.

5. *What is your relationship to the musical past? It isn't ironic, so is it nostalgic?*

The musical past is a part of our present lives. The concert and recording repertoires today are based overwhelmingly on works older than 100 years. Children still study Mozart, not Schoenberg or Steve Reich. In many ways, Classical traditions never died, they are still alive and well. Then, why reject the “musical past”, which is so much a part of our musical present? The “musical past” was my own tradition, the music I heard and liked as a teenager growing up in Belgrade. That is my “folklore” and I feel no distance towards it. As for irony towards the musical past, you are right, I am not trying to be ironic in my compositions. Of course, that doesn't mean that there is no irony there, but that is not up to me to do such interpretations. I don't think that my approach is nostalgic either. One cannot be nostalgic towards the Classical and Romantic styles, which are heard on every Classical-music radio station, all the time. One can realistically be nostalgic only for the things that are missing—let's say, for the absence of the atonal music of the 1960s-70s, which is rarely heard today in concerts. Perhaps, *that* is the real music of the past. I should add that I am not nostalgic about the absence of composers like Boulez from the New York concert scene.

6. *If we exclude the fact that minimalism, being the basis of your poetics, originated as a critique of high modernism—but still in the embrace of modernism—this remark of yours is slightly unusual, bearing in mind that you studied in Paris during the time when avant-garde music (the art of high modernism), despite the crises which shook it, was still dominant in musical institutions. Could you describe the musical experiences you acquired in “Boulez's Paris” in the 1970s?*

I left Belgrade and went to Paris in 1976, at the time when I became attracted to music by Boulez and Messiaen. In Belgrade, previously, I read Adorno's *Philosophy of New Music*, and I wrote atonal music. That was my musical “puberty”. To me, Paris, with composers like Messiaen, Boulez, and Xenakis, was the center of new music. Paradoxically, it was there that I “discovered” composers like Reich, Glass, Riley, and Meredith Monk, who performed their music at concerts. The minimal music of that time sounded new, powerful, and uninhibited, and it had already acquired a substantial audience. The atmosphere at these concerts seemed to me “healthier” more open, and more humane than the atmosphere at the concerts given by the “dissonant avant-garde”. At minimalists' concerts, there was something “communal” about the music making. People felt friendly. At IRCAM

concerts, on the other hand, there was no sense of enjoyment and community, there was more a feeling of “every man for himself”, or, rather, “every intellectual by himself”. Dissonant music had a neurotic and depressive effect. In some sense, there was a war between the two camps. On one side, you had a powerful, state supported avant-garde, with Boulez in charge of IRCAM; and on the other, you had visiting minimalists. The two styles never mixed at the same concert. These were separate worlds. I do remember an exception, a concert by the American minimalist Frederic Rzewski, presented at the Paris Conservatory (a bastion of dissonant aesthetics). After the first piece, all hell broke out, and while some people were applauding, many more were shouting obscenities and booing. It was a strange phenomenon, that such anger was provoked by a very consonant piece.

I wrote my first minimal piece, *Permutations* (which later evolved in a cycle of five pieces), in Paris in 1977. It was performed the same year in Belgrade, in the Student Cultural Centre, by the Ensemble for Other New Music. At that time, the director of the music program at the Student Cultural Centre (SKC) was composer Miroslav Miša Savić. Among other interesting composers around the SKC, I should mention Miodrag Lazarov Pashu, Vladimir Tošić, Milimir Drašković, Miloš Petrović, Dušan Bogdanović, Katarina Miljković, and Aleksandar Damjanović. All of them were influenced by minimalism. I should also mention the pianist Nada Kolundžija, who has commissioned and premiered a great number of new works. The ensemble went on tours several times, including the concert at the Music Biennale Zagreb in 1979, where we were invited by its artistic director, Nikša Gligo. We performed at a concert shared with the Michael Nyman Band.

Paradoxically, my early minimalist pieces were never performed in Paris. Anybody who wasn't in line with the official “dissonant” style was excluded from musical life, tightly controlled by the French state institutions. Visiting American minimalists were an exception, but they usually came through different, private channels. I must add here that my initial enthusiasm with Reich and Glass has somewhat diminished over the years. Their early minimalist work was powerful and had the ritualistic energy of communal music-making. Later on, they both embarked on more elaborate projects, but the freshness and innocence of their early styles has been lost along the way. I still enjoy listening to an occasional new piece, but I long for the good old days, when new music sounded really new and fresh.

*7. Does the sophistication of your musical idiom have to do with Eastern cultures, particularly with the Japanese culture, or could it just seem so to someone with stereotypical views on the cultures of the Far East?*

The transparency in my music was inspired by my exposure to works by Reich and Glass, in the 1970s. If there are some Asian features in my music, that is probably something that happened later, once I had already acquired a “minimalist” mind-set. If, to some listeners, my music sounds at times “Slavic”, “Japanese”, “French”, or something else, it is not because I am consciously trying to do so, but rather, because these particular cultures are part of my personal expression. The fact that I lived, among other places, in Paris, Honolulu, Hiroshima, and Belgrade might partially explain why these various influences can be found in my music. The only instance when I consciously wanted an “Asian” sound was my film score for the Hong Kong film *The Map of Sex and Love*. I must add, a great example of a composer with the ability to integrate various styles and cultural influences into a unique style is Dušan Bogdanović.

8. *To what degree do you modify complex structures from such diverse musical idioms as, for instance, Schubert’s musical idiom and traditional Japanese music, when you manage to find what basically can seamlessly connect them? How do you do that in the song Where is my Love? or in Duet without You for piano 4-hands?*

I rarely use musical quotes. In that sense, the song that you mentioned is an exception. There, I quote a short motive by Schubert, and the fragment of a Japanese melody. It is perhaps the similar mood (in the minor key) that connects them the most. I wouldn’t go into technical details here, but, let’s remember, the combining of diverse styles (whether with quoted or original material), and integrating them into one’s own style, has always been an appealing process to composers throughout history. In both the technical and aesthetic sense, there is no good “rule” about how to go about this. Today, too often, styles are combined at some superficial level, and the result is too often not-so convincing. That is probably because the composer’s own style may not be well-defined, so the “outside” influences stay on the outside, on their own, as strangers, uncomfortable to feel at home. (Here, I sometimes think of a composer as a “colonizer”, somebody who never really mixes with the indigenous population, but rather steals their land, their goods, and their melodies. Like Pinkerton from *Madam Butterfly*. I hope I am not!)

9. *You have composed, among others, a work under the name B-A-G-D-A-D. The very title of the composition is ambiguous. It is, as you have already explained, an anti-war composition from the year 2002, but on the other hand, when the impressions of the current difficult, political moment fade over time, the composition is likely to stand out as an example of “absolute music”. (Now I have in mind an opposite example, the example of a „war” composition that eventually lost its*

*political and ideological dimension. It is the composition Carmina Burana by Carl Orff, once written as a support for the Nazi regime. Today, that dimension of this work is suppressed. Carmina Burana is often performed throughout Europe, even in the context of the celebration of Victory Day.) I have two questions regarding this issue. The first is whether you believe or, better still, have evidence that works of art by themselves, ignoring the additional political activism of artists, have the power to influence the value system of a society and cause it to change? I am not referring to current examples of politicized culture, but to works that are not supported by a political party, clan, local, corporate, market interventions and regulations, politicized music institutions such as the Kronos Quartet, for example, or similar levers of power.*

In the documentary film *Amandla*, a film about the use of music in the anti-Apartheid struggle in South Africa, one of the musicians speaks about the fact that the masses are often better influenced and enlightened by the right song, than by a political speech. Serbian epic poetry was sung through the centuries under Ottoman rule, keeping up the spirit of identity and the resistance to the empire. In other words, yes, works of art have enormous power in society. Having said this, I have to add that my own music is very limited in that respect. First of all, it is not a popular genre. As music designed for the concert hall, or radio and film at best, it is music for a small audience. Second, the best I can do is not to remain silent but to do my part, in my own field. That is something I do not do out of a feeling of duty, but rather, out of necessity, and not just political necessity, but rather, an artistic one.

*10. Another question related to the above issue is: by having composed B-A-G-D-A-D, have you become that very colonizer that you did not want to become? After all, the composition is an example of your distinctive idiom, and there is no essential connection with the Iraqi culture. In the orchestral version you added harp, flute and oboe, instruments that come, as you say, from ancient Mesopotamian civilization. In this composition I predominantly hear a hint of Russian romantic music, with distant associations with the music of ancient civilizations. However, we actually have no preserved remains of Mesopotamian music, only scientific assumptions about how the music sounded, so these associations are also questionable. Could we rather talk about this composition as being your own very personal musical dedication to the city at a specific moment in its history, or do you still suggest a musical impression of the city, as well?*

*B-A-G-D-A-D* is my very personal work, written in solidarity with the Iraqi people. The original title of the piano version written in the autumn of 2002 was: *B-A-G-D-A-D, Music on a six-note theme, in defense of Iraq*. In a way, it is a

symbolic work of solidarity with the people under attack. I recorded the piece right after the composition was finished, and sent it to two New York radio stations, who played it. In one radio show, I was able to speak against the oncoming war. That is partly what I wanted with the piece, to use it in any way possible. As for the musical content, I had no aspirations to write a historically “correct” music. That wouldn’t be possible, even if I wanted to. While writing, I wanted to use a more “universal” idiom, exactly because I wanted to reach out to everyone, and especially to the Arab audience. In a way, performing such music is like putting a human face on the TV screen, and showing the audience in the West that Iraqis, Serbs, or Libyans are human beings, not the faceless monsters the media is trying to turn them into.

*11. At the beginning of your career it was freedom of expression that you needed, and you pursued it like many other artists. Today, the world of music is so diverse that it can be accused of everything except the lack of opportunity for freedom in artistic expression. Did you imagine this world of music in the seventies?*

There are no more riots at concerts of new music, like at the premiere of *Le sacre du printemps*; or the booing and catcalls, like at concerts of the 1970s. In other words, art today is less relevant, despite the “freedoms” it has gained. I personally enjoyed the new music scene much more in the 1970s. Despite a greater variety of styles today, I find very few interesting, new composers. One of the few is the Russian composer Anton Batagov. In a documentary “After Bach”, a film about Batagov and three other minimalist composers from Moscow, one of them asks, “How soon do you think we will be forgotten after we die?” Another answers, “Nobody knows about us even now. So, there is no problem”. Such is the situation with new music today. Back to your question. No, I didn’t expect this kind of music world that we have today. And yet, I think that each society is still imposing unwritten rules on its artists. There are still creative freedoms to win, especially in these elusive times which we live in, where “war is peace” (sometimes with a Nobel Peace Prize approval!). The seeming “artistic freedoms” are here, perhaps more as the result of a general apathy than anything else. Again, on a positive note, there is plenty of work to do today.

### **Biography\***

Milos Raickovich (Miloš Raičković), composer and conductor, was born in Belgrade (Serbia, Yugoslavia) in 1956. He has lived and worked in Belgrade, Paris,

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\* Cf. Milos Raickovich, *Far Away*, Albany, Albany Records, 2010.

Los Angeles, Honolulu, Hiroshima and New York, where he now resides. While in Belgrade, Milos Raickovich was the founder of the Ensemble for Other New Music (1977), as well as one of the founders of the Belgrade Youth Philharmonic, later known as the Borislav Pascan Youth Philharmonic (1977). He also worked as an assistant conductor at the Belgrade Opera House.

Raickovich's music has been performed at numerous venues in Europe and the USA, including the Warsaw Autumn Festival, Zagreb Music Biennale; Carnegie Hall, La MaMa Etc. and Miller Theater in New York; and the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. Among the performers of Raickovich's music are the Moscow Symphony Orchestra (M. Raickovich, conductor), Honolulu Symphony Orchestra (Donald Johanos, conductor), Beach Cities Symphony in Los Angeles (Barry Brisk, conductor), Richmond County Orchestra in New York (Alan Aurelia, conductor), RTS Symphony Orchestra in Belgrade (David Poreclijn, Milen Nachev, Bojan Sudjic and Milos Raickovich, conductors), Ensemble Divertimento (Milan), Margaret Leng Tan, Dorothy Lawson, Reiko Watanabe, Gloria Cheng, Jed Distler, Beth Levin, Christopher Oldfather, Tatjana Rankovich, Jovan and Nada Kolundzija, among others.

Milos Raickovich studied composition with Vasilije Mokranjac, Olivier Messiaen, Armand Russell and David del Tradici; and conducting with Borislav Pascan, Pierre Dervaux, Barry Brisk and Herbert Blomstedt. He holds a Ph.D. in composition from the City University of New York. Raickovich's dissertation includes an essay "*Einstein on the Beach* by Philip Glass: A Musical Analysis". He has taught at the University of Hawaii, CUNY Hiroshima College in Japan, Brooklyn College, and the College of Staten Island of the City University of New York. Milos Raickovich's choral work *Parastos* was published by Boosey & Hawkes. Raickovich's score for Evans Chan's film *The Map of Sex and Love* received a nomination for the best original film score at the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival in 2001. A member of ASCAP, Raickovich has received three CAP awards from the American Music Center for his orchestral pieces, Symphony No.1, *B-A-G-D-A-D*, and *Winter Waltz*.

**Compact Discs:**

*New Classicism*, New York, Mode Records, 1995.

*B-A-G-D-A-D*, Albany, Albany Records, 2007.

*Far Away*, Albany, Albany Records, 2010.

*Water Tones* (not published yet)

**Website:**

<http://amc.net/MilosRaickovich>