
NEW WORKS

Article received on 24 September 2013

Article accepted on 30 September 2013

UDC: 785.6:786.2

*Stefan Cvetković**

ALEKSANDAR OBRADOVIĆ – *PRO LIBERTATE* *CONCERTO FOR PIANO AND ORCHESTRA NO. 3*

Abstract: The *Third Piano Concerto* by Aleksandar Obradović, composed in 1999, is one of the author's late works. While the poetical concept of the composition reflects the author's personal reaction to the events from that period, aesthetically it shows that the co-existence of different compositional and technical patterns is possible, amalgamated within a unique stylistic procedure of the work. According to its compositional and technical procedures, the concerto belongs to the class of neoclassical pieces which, apart from confirming Obradović's openness towards various musical solutions, attests to resorting to designs that stem from an extramusical stimulus to creativity.

Key words: Serbian music, Aleksandar Obradović, piano concerto, Neoclassicism.

The sumptuous mosaic of Serbian artistic music in the second half of the 20th century still cannot be appraised in its entirety, because many compositions stored as manuscripts are still awaiting their premieres. Until recently, one such unperformed piece was *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 3*¹ by Aleksandar

* Author contact information: stfnale@ptt.rs

¹ The full title of the work on the front page of Obradović's autograph reads: Pro libertate – Koncert broj 3 za klavir i simfonijski orkestar [Concerto Number 3 for Piano and Symphony Orchestra].

Obradović (1927–2001), whose premiere – organized within the 43rd BEMUS festival,² on the tenth anniversary of the composer’s death – was an occasion to actualize the oeuvre of this author, as well as to shed light on some coordinates of his less known, late creative period. Also, along the lines of these considerations, one should note that the work undoubtedly gives a valuable contribution towards completing the picture of the tendencies and subjects in Serbian music at the end of the last century. Composed in 1999 as one of Obradović’s last compositions, the *Third Piano Concerto*, alongside a few other works, speaks of the author’s lively interest in the concerto genre even in the last decade of his life.³ However, what separates the *Third Piano Concerto* from the group of other concerto-type works written during the 1990s is, above all, its poetical dimension embodied in a particular programmatic content, already suggested in the title “*Pro libertate*” (“*For Freedom*”). The work’s programmatic nature was a result of the composer’s response to the dramatic events that had overwhelmed his homeland in the year when the composition was written. This influence of the real context on Obradović’s compositional discourse could also be analysed separately in the case of the *Third Piano Concerto*; however, in retrospect, an interesting coincidence can be identified in the author’s oeuvre. Namely, the fact that Aleksandar Obradović in the early 1950s entered the stage as a composer with a programmatic work based on subjects from the then immediate war history, based on heroic battles and the triumph of victory and freedom (*First Symphony*),⁴ and that half a century later, in the twilight of his career as a composer, he once more decided to put the corresponding content into music, speaks very vividly about the position of a generation of creators who, in spite of spending the better part of their creative life in peaceful times – although that is rare for the historical setting in Serbia – were given, by a combination of circumstances, the opportunity to draw their immediate inspiration from the war

² The composition had its premiere on 20th October 2011, at the Kolarac Concert Hall. The soloist was Maja Rajković, and the *Camerata Serbica* orchestra was conducted by Aleksandar Marković.

³ Apart from this work, Obradović in the 1990s wrote the following concerto-type compositions too: *Koncert za violinu i gudače* [*Concerto for Violin and Strings*] (1992), *Muzika za klavir i gudače* [*Music for Piano and Strings*] (1993) and *Diptih za klavir i gudače* [*Diptych for Piano and Strings*] (1999).

⁴ As the motto for the second movement of the *First Symphony* (1952), Obradović chose the verses of Branko Ćopić: “S četama Slobode marširaće tada i mrtvi proleterii...” [“With the troops of Freedom, dead proletarians will then be marching too...”]. For more on Obradović’s personal attitude towards the subject of war in the *First Symphony*, cf. Zorana Radić, *Simfonizam Aleksandra Obradovića* [*Aleksandar Obradović’s Symphonism*], Udruženje kompozitora Srbije, Belgrade, 1987, 11–12.

context. The two above mentioned works, poetically related to one another, are separated, however, by Obradović's compositional oeuvre developed from the author's research of frequently distant musical expanses, which in the context of the *Third Piano Concerto* had its repercussions in the form of imprints of various personal creative experiences. Perceiving Obradović's need to express a personal reaction to the key events in the actualities of the time he lived in, one could note, on the margins of positioning the *Third Piano Concerto*, that the author in this work establishes a certain communication with his composition *Epitaf H* [*Epitaph H*], his referential work written as early as 1965, which will be discussed more thoroughly later on.

Conceived as a three-movement cycle, the *Third Piano Concerto*, not only formally but also from the point of thematic content and even orchestration, manifests Obradović's determination to come closer to a convention, as well as the need to produce a 'negotiable' musical structure, which suggests the author's neoclassical compositional strategy. However, the strict consistency of neoclassical procedure defies Obradović's signature digressions into a slightly more radical, inner undermining of the neoclassical formal pattern. Thus, the author's approach to convention is affirmative when conceiving the sonata cycle, with the ordinary sequence of the movements: fast – slow – fast, while the microlevels of each movement arise from authentic inventiveness in material structuring.

Such an approach is already manifested in the first movement, whose form is a direct consequence of the specific combination of various motivic treatments. Deriving all the thematic subjects in the first movement from a single nucleus basically suggests a monothematic principle in creating the musical tissue, which, nevertheless, is not structured into a dramaturgically typical sonata form. Writing about the work's form, Obradović personally does not resort to the formal classification of the movement, but sticks only to its "tematsko jedinstvo" ["thematic unity"], in which "pojedini zajednički gradivni element dovedeni do [svojih] transformacija u tolikoj meri, da sami sebi predstavljaju kontraste raznim parametrima muzičkog jezika, izraza i sadržaja" ["certain common constitutive elements are driven in such a measure to [their] transformations, that they become their own contrasts, in terms of various parameters of musical language, expression and content"].⁵ This suggests that, in avoiding conventional formal terminology, the author draws attention to what is more important to him in this case, namely the energy of the musical tissue created

⁵ The quotation was taken from the manuscript of Obradović's analysis of the work, attached to the autograph of the score: Aleksandar Obradović, *Pro libertate, Koncert broj 3 za klavir i simfonijski orkestar, analiza* [analysis], manuscript.

by skilful motivic treatment, which in the context of the content (the expression of defiance to the goings-on of war) becomes rather more a manifestation of personal emotion than a endeavour to comply with formal conventions.⁶

The musical tissue of the entire first movement grows from the initial motive of the introduction (Example 1), made of twelve tones of the chromatic scale, repeated in the identical sequence of intervals as many as eighteen times in semiquavers, in the string parts. However, the repetition of the established chromatic motive does not lead to the completion of any kind of thematic entity; it rather transforms into a “fon uzburkane mikro-polifonije, sličan pokretnom klasteru” [“background of turbulent micro-polyphony, similar to a moving cluster”],⁷ leading to the entrance of the first subject – the signal motive of a ‘shout’ (Example 2), whose first four notes are taken from the initial motive of the introduction. Unlike the surrounding musical tissue, the second subject (rendered by a bassoon) is composed as the only self-contained subject in the entire movement, whose head also consists of the full range of chromatic notes, in the interval order identical to that of the aforementioned motive of the introduction (Example 3). The dense chromatic structure of the subjects certainly suggests the atmosphere of the war chaos, or perhaps a personal resignation to such circumstances, and Obradović spread such a mood to the entire movement by the frequent distribution of chromatic motives and working with them. The development section, standing out as the highest dramatic plateau of the movement, is based on transformations of the said material; while the culmination of the musical tissue is achieved by the inversion of the second subject’s character which, by acquiring a march-like identity, comes closer to the nature of the first subject. Reaching a dramaturgical ‘point’ with this turnabout, Obradović leads the musical tissue to a symbolic ‘recapitulation’, announced by a strong initial, signal motive in the piano part, followed by a gradual dynamic abatement of the whole movement in a short coda.

Regarding Obradović’s attitude towards thematism, one should stress that the heterogeneity of the thematic materials is also reduced to a minimum in the

⁶ A similar kind of “formal thinking” also appears in some other of Obradović’s works written in 1990s – the *Concerto for Violin and Strings* (1992), the *Music for Piano and Strings* (1993), and the *Diptych for Piano and Strings* (1998). A more comprehensive insight into the matter is available in: Anica Sabo, “Aleksandar Obradović: Koncert za violinu i gudače i Muzika za klavir i gudače” [“Aleksandar Obradović: Concerto for Violin and Strings and Music for Piano and Strings”], *Internacionalni časopis za muziku Novi zvuk* 3/1994, Belgrade, 1994, 85–96; Sonja Marinković, “Dva diptiha Aleksandra Obradovića” [“Two Diptychs by Aleksandar Obradović”], *Internacionalni časopis za muziku Novi zvuk* 18/2001, 89–97.

⁷ Aleksandar Obradović, op. cit.

remaining two movements. In the slow movement that is achieved by repeating the movement's only subject in progressive dynamic and orchestrational gradation, while the formal arrangement of the third movement as a rondo is close to the passacaglia principle, given that the thematic pattern is repeated eighteen times altogether (the movement concludes with the entrance of the first movement's initial motive). As said previously, such a conceptualization of the thematism in the *Third Piano Concerto* is closely connected with the programmatic content of the work. Namely, the spiritual slogan of the concerto, contained in the title *Pro libertate*, Obradović inventively incorporated into the core musical material of the work, which at first reminds the listener of some of his earlier procedures used in electronic media. Thus, as an example one could take *Epitaf H*, where Obradović – using a tape recorder – incorporated pre-recorded sounds of human voices into the 'acoustic fabric' of the piece, in order to underline the content and express a certain 'message' of humankind. Now, in the *Third Piano Concerto*, with a similar intention, he resorted to 'writing out' the shout *Libertas* using Morse code (Example 4). However, in this case Obradović did not employ an avant-garde incorporation of the 'Morse signal' into the musical structure by means of an electric telegraph or, for example, some other electronic device, but by means of its instrumental transposition. A comparison with Obradović's earlier works suggests that the author had already used such a procedure in his *Fifth Symphony* and *Sixth Symphony*,⁸ so revisiting the same method in the *Third Piano Concerto* can be used as a sort of signpost for pinpointing Obradović's personal creative/stylistic position in his late creative period. Namely, an affirmative (uncritical) return to some of one's own earlier compositional solutions can in fact be perceived as a kind of reliance on a canon, i.e. as its confirmation, which appears as a symptom of Obradović's definitive stylistic anchorage in the domain of moderate Modernism/Neoclassicism.

Regarding the compositional and technical procedure for the 'musicalization' of the Morse code, it should be pointed out that Obradović observed its principles in the *Concerto* only in a broad outline. In Obradović's application, the Morse code letters retain their rhythmic identity only partially; this can be explained by the composer's need not to lose the musical logic by incorporating this extramusical element, which called for certain modifications. Thus, Obradović conceived every short note (shorter than a crotchet) to have the meaning of a dot, every longer note to signify a dash, while any rest is the interval between the letters. With such 'rules of the game', every group of shorter and longer notes not containing a rest is a single Morse code letter, and the pitch

⁸ Zorana Radić, op. cit., 85.

is of no significance whatsoever. The word/subject *Libertas* composed using such a procedure (Example 5) appears three times in the musical tissue of the third movement.

Obradović achieved the most striking form of moderately modernist communication with the past in the second movement of the *Concerto*. Conceived as the cycle's plateau and material contrast, the movement is thematically based on the material taken from Mokranjac's *Osmoglasnik* [*Octoechos*], which, in the context of the cycle dramaturgy, is functionalized as a suggestion of spiritual refuge.⁹ Finding it in the deeper layers of the national musical idiom, Obradović takes a sticheron from the Seventh Mode; however, he does not incorporate it as it is, but with some personal interventions. He described the attitude towards that material: "Ova stihira se pripisuje Jovanu Damaskinu (675–754), a pošto u to vreme nije bilo utvrđenog i preciznog načina muzičkog zapisivanja, svakako je melodija tokom vremena trpela izvesne promene, uzrokovane varijantama nastalim prilikom usmenog (pevnog) prenošenja na stalno podmlađivana nova monaška pokolenja. To mi je dalo slobodu da pojedine kraće fraze (inače prilično jednostavne, ali produhovljene melodije) transponujem na različite intervale naviše ili naniže, i obogatim savremeno shvaćenim harmonskim tumačenjima, koja ipak ne razbijaju osnovu uzvišenog sadržaja i njegovog asketskog uzbuđivanja do dinamičke katarze i povratka u smirenje" ["This sticheron is ascribed to John of Damascus (675–754), and since no fixed or precise method of musical notation was available at that time, the melody definitely suffered some changes over time, caused by variants emerging as it was handed down orally (in the singing) to new and ever younger generations of monks. This gave me the freedom to transpose individual short phrases (generally quite simple, but spiritual melodies) for various ascending or descending intervals, and to enrich them with contemporary harmonic interpretations, which nevertheless do not destroy the basis of the sublime content and its ascetic excitement to a dynamic catharsis and the return to tranquillity"].¹⁰ Such an approach to a model based on the relatively literal use of a historical paradigm subjected to an authorial reorganization is the closest to the neoclassical

⁹ Obradović's looking towards the national musical heritage, atypical in his early creative decades, appears also in his last work, a passacaglia for strings titled *Crni goro*, the literary foundation for which he also found in Mokranjac's legacy (a tune from *Jedanaesta rukovet* [*The Eleventh Choral Garland*]). For more on similarities in Obradović's treatment of Mokranjac's melody in the two works cf. Anica Sabo, "Obradovićev poslednji Largo elegico ed espressivo" ["Obradović's Last Largo elegico ed espressivo"], *Mokranjac*, 3–2001, Negotin, 50–52.

¹⁰ Aleksandar Obradović, op. cit.

method of the *paraphrase*.¹¹ By relying on archaic layers of the national musical idiom, the chosen material could be contextualized by creating a poetical correspondence between the work and certain modernist compositions in the Serbian music of the sixth and seventh decades of the last century, which only serves to place the *Concerto* within the coordinates of neoclassical resorting to canonical solutions, i.e. the already mastered thematic origins. However, in deliberating on the incentive to select such a thematic circle, attention could also be directed to the topical, i.e. to the spirit of times when the work was written, and which was strongly marked by promoting a return to nationalist values.

The concerto principle of the entire cycle is carried out by dense interweaving of the solo and orchestral parts, the correlation of which is conceived so that they travel equal distances in building a coherent musical entity. In the first and third movements, its character is marked by an increased expressivity, supported by skilful orchestral way of thinking dominated by an insistence on the figured repetition of the established (harmonic) pattern in the accompaniment, as well as the predominantly percussive treatment of the piano part.¹² In certain moments, it is placed as the outermost voice of the musical tissue, while elsewhere it is treated almost like a figured orchestral accompaniment functioning as the character generator. The primary trait of the thematic materials of the first and the last movements, thus functionalized, is not so much the melody as the metre and rhythm. Obradović achieves the expressionistic tension equally by the harshness of harmonic structures within a tonality that is as generalized as possible, contributed by cluster progressions (Example 6), as well as the occasional occurrences of aleatory elements in certain orchestral parts, also used to increase gesturality of the musical tissue. In terms of these parameters, the *Third Piano Concerto* is related to some of Obradović's works written in the same period, especially to the *Diptych for Piano and Strings* (1999).¹³ Contrary

¹¹ On the paraphrase as a compositional method particularly used in Neoclassicism, Vesna Mikić writes: "...parafraza, podrazumeva relativno strogu i doslednu upotrebu nekih karakteristika dela iz prošlosti (teme, tema, strukture, i sl.). U ovom postupku umetnik po sopstvenoj želji prerađuje materijale i odseke već postojećeg/postojećih dela..." ["...paraphrase, implies a relatively strict and consequent use of certain traits of a work from the past (subject, subjects, structure, etc.) In this procedure the artist, of his or her own accord, refashions the materials and sections of already existing work(s)..."] More on the paraphrase in: Vesna Mikić, *Lica srpske muzike: neoklasicizam* [*Faces of Serbian Music: Neoclassicism*], Fakultet muzičke umetnosti, Belgrade, 2009, 64.

¹² Obradović foreshadowed such kind of compositional thinking and piano treatment in the *Diptych for Piano and Strings*. Cf. Sonja Marinković, "Dva diptiha Aleksandra Obradovića", 93.

¹³ Cf. the analysis of the diptych in: Sonja Marinković, "Dva diptiha Aleksandra Obradovića", 93.

to the described expressivity of the outer movements, the second movement, as the material plateau of the cycle, is created by an essentially different musical thinking. Based on the said sticheron from the Seventh Mode of Mokranjac's *Octoechos*, it conveys a musical language nuanced by Late-Romanticist (and partly even Impressionist) compositional procedures, all the while being more clearly anchored in tonality. The predominance of the melodic principle is another contrasting distinction of the movement, while its closeness to the other movements could be found in the fact that Obradović here does not deviate from equating the soloist and orchestral roles, and so the thematism meanders along all the 'protagonists' of the musical tissue. Dramaturgically, Obradović's *Concerto* presents a gradation that turns the last movement into the cycle's focal point. This is not achieved by its formal structure, but mostly by its conception as the poetic outcome of the entire musical tissue which, after the complex musical development in the previous two movements, is finally able to express the work's message, through the subject *Libertas*.

The *Third Piano Concerto* completes the image of Obradović's compositional oeuvre, sharpening at the same time the insight into his endeavours in the last decade of his creative activity. In that respect, the concerto shows the coexistence of various creative experiences, but also the author's ability to skilfully join them within a unique stylistic procedure. As for the basic conclusions, one could say that, among the traces of the composer's earlier interests, the concerto contains distant reminiscences of dodecaphony (the construction of the twelve-note subject in the first movement) or a departure from the domain of musical convention (even in the form of the traditionally treated Morse code signals in the third movement). Besides that, the concerto manifests Obradović's creative inclination for extending the range of possible paradigms from the history of music (the musical material from the *Octoechos* in the second movement). By these procedures, Aleksandar Obradović confirmed his openness to always 'welcome' new compositional challenges (or those resolved in a new way), albeit to a slightly lesser extent than in certain works from his mature creative period. Nevertheless, along the lines of these intentions, Obradović through the *Third Piano Concert* liberates his Neoclassicism from a strict 'academic' shape, positioning it closer to the domain of a creative activity that is essentially arbitrary, and thus always somewhat risky.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović

Example 1

4/4 allegro risoluto e con collera

pf.

4/4 allegro risoluto e con collera
(♩ = 120)

1. vn I (1/4 = div. da leggii.)

2.

3.

4.

5. vn II (1/2 = div. da leggii.)

6.

7.

1. vcl I (1/2 = da leggii.)

2.

3.

4.

5.

vc (10)

cb (6-8)

Example 2

t. 14 Allegro risoluto e con collera

Pf
solo

fff marc.

Example 3

t.106 Allegro risoluto

2 Fg
C.Fg

ff

Example 4 and 5

t. 338 Recitativo

senza tempo, liberamente

Pf
solo

mf *ff* *fff*

energico *arch.*

10" 18"

Pf
solo

fff

10" 18"

Pf
solo

fff

10" 8"

Example 6

Allegro risoluto
t. 94

pf
solo

The musical score for Example 6 is a piano solo section starting at measure 94. It is written in 2/4 time and features a complex, rhythmic melody in the right hand and a supporting bass line in the left hand. The tempo is marked 'Allegro risoluto'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings like 'ff' and 'p'. The right hand part is characterized by rapid sixteenth-note passages and syncopated rhythms, while the left hand provides a steady, rhythmic accompaniment with occasional harmonic support.