
COMPOSER SPEAKS

Article received on

Article accepted on

UDC:

Milena Medić¹

University of Arts in Belgrade

Faculty of Music

Department of Music Theory

MUSIC IS NOT A LANGUAGE

Interview with Miloš Zatkalik

Miloš Zatkalik (1959, Serbia) is a composer and music theorist. He studied music at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade under Professors Vasilije Mokranjac and Rajko Maksimović. He also holds a degree in English language and literature from the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. He is Professor of the Department of Music Theory, at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade and Visiting Professor at the Academy of Arts in Banja Luka. Professor Zatkalik has given invited lectures in the USA, Canada, Norway, Slovenia and Germany. He has presented papers at numerous conferences and published scholarly articles at home and abroad (*Musicological Annual*, *Joyce Studies Annual*, *Cambridge Scholars Publishing*, *Peter Lang Publishers*, etc.). His research interests include relationships between music and literature, music and language, music and narrative, music and myth; also the analysis of 20th-century non-tonal music, and psychoanalytic approaches to music. He is the author of the first Serbian electronic textbook on music theory (Clio, 2002). Between 2003 and 2012, he was one of the editors of

¹ Author contact information: milmed@eunet.rs

the publication *Muzička teorija i analiza / Music Theory and Analysis*, featuring papers from domestic and international conferences hosted by the Music Theory Department. He is a member of the Managing Board of the Serbian Composers' Association and member of the jury for the Stevan Mokranjac Award. His most important compositions, performed at home and abroad (Germany, Russia, Spain, Canada, USA) include *What's He to Hecuba for large orchestra* (1995); *Of Saralinda, Xingu and the Duke Who Was Swallowed by Golem – a Fable for Large Orchestra* (1996); *The Mad Carriage-Greeter from Ch'u for soprano, mezzo-soprano, flute, oboe, clarinet, piano and percussion* (1998); *Lost Fragments II for clarinet, cello and piano* (2006); *As If Nothing Had Happened for flute, clarinet, English horn, piano and percussion* (2007); *Four Visions of Absence for chamber string orchestra* (2009); *Seemingly Innocent Game for cello, piano and vibraphone* (2010); *What Has, Among Other Things, Happened Before the End of Time for clarinet, violin, cello and piano* (2012).

* * *

What was there in the beginning: logos or vox, lingua or musica?

If it were absolutely necessary to provide an answer, I would say that some kind of acoustic phenomenon must be primary. Moreover, I believe there is proof that this claim is objectively founded. We are born not only with a developed hearing apparatus, but also with some pre-natal auditory experience, at the time when we are only beginning to learn how to use our sense of sight; not to mention words: they don't even exist as words in our earliest infancy, they are again a kind of auditory experience. Or, to return to the Biblical spirit of the question: in the Book of Genesis, the emphasis, as I see it, is not so much on the content, on the particular words God utters, but precisely on "said": and God *said* (rather than sent an SMS). The act of Creation is an acoustic act. *Logos* from St. John's Gospel is belated wisdom.

The question of the relation between music and language is complex, multi-layered; its history is long, dating back far before modern time with its cognitive sciences and theories. It was already Plato who pointed out that the power of musical modes to move the spirit originated with their similarity to the sounds of noble speech. Although he never wrote about music within language, he drew attention to language in the musical context. The ancient Greek word "mousike" meaning "coming from the Muses" reveals that the understanding of the Muses calls for an appreciation of the role of music in the evolution of linguistic genres. Is language music? How and to what extent does language/speech make

use of musical properties in order to achieve linguistic communication and the transmission of meaning?

Let us start with an answer I can offer in the most direct manner: music is not a language. Of course, two such fundamental human activities simply cannot be utterly devoid of common or analogous features. Some of them are obvious: we talk about the melody of a sentence, speech intonation, rhythm, the timbre of the voice. This last item actually contributes to distinguishing between the phonemes of a given language. It is beyond doubt that such features are important for communication. Their developmental priority is also indubitable, at least at the ontogenetic level: a baby will be able to distinguish the timbre and intonation of its mother's voice from all other voices long before any verbal-conceptual apparatus is formed. After all these irrefutable facts, the question still remains: are these characteristics really musical in the proper sense of the word, or are they acoustic phenomena *sui generis*? Such claims cannot be made with certainty. What I can make a claim about is something from an opposite stance: a highly musicalized verbal text can become less successful in communication and conveying meanings precisely owing to that musicalization. Whoever doesn't understand that let them read Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

During the Renaissance a significant change occurred in the relation between music and language. The change was due to a new understanding of the possibility of the use of sound in language as an expressive means – in the poetry of Francesco Petrarca in particular – and the credit for this goes to the Venetian literary theoretician Pietro Bembo. Three centuries later, the poetics of symbolism was born, albeit in an entirely different way, out of the spirit of absolute music, and poetic language, in its endeavors to capture the fluidity of musical texture, returned once again to the source of sound. Infinite connotations of the relations between tones have become an impulse for the purification of poetry and language from mimesis, description and explication. Expressive freedom drew from the evocation of the infinity of meaning. During the avant-garde period, the transition from the linguistic to the musical, the appearance of speech as music, found its embodiment in sonic poetry, verbal music, verbo-voco, etc. Are there any other ways in which a linguistic product can become closer to music?

Locally: morphology and syntax. Language consists of hierarchically organized discrete units; something similar could be said of music. If it weren't for this similarity, I doubt that influences could be possible. Having established a basis for comparison, the differences are delineated all the more clearly, and it is

precisely owing to these differences that we recognize when one of these areas has influenced the other. To be more specific: you will have noticed that talking about music I used the phrase “something similar could be said”, while my claim about language was quite categorical. The constituents of music are not nearly as precisely defined as those of language. Very often, a piece of music can be broken into its constituent elements in different ways. Music sustains both extreme fragmentation and extreme condensation. Try similar procedures in language and you end up with nonsense. Yet, writers have been known to take such a course, sometimes carrying the process to the point which they felt to be just barely this side of language. It is there that one finds really interesting results.

On a global scale, we may speak of an overall structure of the text, where musical macroform can serve as a model for the construction of a given verbal product. Researchers have occasionally discovered a fugal or sonata structure in a novel, more or less successfully and with more or less justification. On their part, writers sometimes put great efforts to fashion their works not simply after a certain genre or formal type, but even after a concrete composition, like Anthony Burgess after Beethoven’s Third Symphony. By the way, do I need to say that the novel in question deals with Napoleon’s biography?

And there is also the ever present question of meaning. Let us assume that there is a universal agreement that a product of language means something. I don’t know how much we agree when music is in question. Someone, I don’t remember who, drew attention to the following paradox: if music means something, why after several thousand years we are still far from any agreement as to what that meaning might be; if it doesn’t mean anything, why have we been raising that question for thousands of years. The least we can say is that the denotative meaning characteristic of words is hardly possible to prove in music. Desemantization of words, if I may say so, could be part of musicalization. Essentially, the emphasis would shift to construction, from constituent elements to relationships between them. To the extent that meaning – whatever that word *meant* – can be searched for in these relationships, one might say that the syntactic plane would assume the role of the semantic one.

Although vocal music (music with text) does not play a significant part in your compositional oeuvre, in two of your theoretical works (“Levels of the Musicalization of Literature“, New Sound No.12; “How Musical a Narrative Can Be“, Narrative Conference, Washington DC, 2007) you did actually explore levels of the musicalization of literature and the degrees of the musicalization of narrative. Could you say more about that?

There was a time when I expected from myself that music with text would be my strong point, that I would find ways to match words and music with great facility. And then it turned out that music without text came more naturally to me. The two streams could run independently of one another. Indeed, on second thoughts, perhaps therein lies something like a proof of the statement *prima la musica*.

How can a narrative – I will restrict myself to literary narrative – achieve musical effects? I have tried to systematize the musicalizing strategies of narrative, and have reached several levels, some of them with sub-levels. I cannot give a detailed account here, I have published some of these findings, but my most concise overview would start with the zero level, i.e. music as the subject matter of narration. I call it the zero level since I don't see it as a particularly musicalizing factor. At the first level where musicalization really begins, the emphasis shifts from the signified to the signifier, the starting point is the aspect that crucially defines music, namely, sound: word music, verbal flow characteristics for its sonic qualities, certain combinations of phonemes or rhythmic patterns. However, I also call for caution. Not everything we hear is music, and accordingly, verbal sound does not necessarily produce musical effects. Perhaps in a quite rudimentary sense, the very fact that a narrative course draws our attention by its sound makes it closer to music, but in order to have a truly musicalized narration I find it necessary to introduce further levels. The next level I call syntactic. The grounds for comparison lie in the fact that both in music and in language discrete elements are combined according to certain rules in order to produce hierarchically higher elements. Differences, hence the space for influences, occur owing to the fact that elements of music are much less strictly defined, their discreteness much lower, or in other words, their predilection for fusion much higher; from the opposite perspective, the segmentation of a verbal product is generally clear and unequivocal; music can be much more ambiguous. As a separate sublevel, I indicate thematic procedures, which can differ dramatically from the principles of combining linguistic units: just let us be reminded of the quantity of repetition that music allows, indeed demands; or the processes of motivic variation, expansion and the like. A number of writers have tried something like that in their works; with the support of other procedures they have managed to achieve musical effects. A particularly intriguing question is related to polyphony, and more broadly, simultaneity: so typically musical, and so beyond the grasp of the verbal sphere. Very challenging for a whole series of writers, yet the essential breakthrough towards polyphony always remains elusive.

Going further, on a broader scale, we tackle the question of the construction at the global level: macro form or formal typology. The shaping of a narrative flow after the sonata model, for instance. But what to do with tonality then,

that is a major issue, and ultimately insolvable (although various solutions have been offered, the most original being that the equivalent of musical tonality is sought in the system of tenses!).

Shifting the focus again, we arrive at the relation between music and myth, often pointed out and always fascinating. Without going into detail, and indicating only that the explanation can be sought in the domain of psychoanalysis – more on that later – we cannot fail to notice that mythical atemporality/pantemporality, universality, irrationality, analogy with dream, the fact that myth offers insight into some fundamental truths without resorting to logical argumentation and proof, bear considerable resemblance with music. Therefore, the closer a narrative is to myth, the closer it is to music as well. Apart from Joyce, who is my stock character for musical analogies, I would like to draw attention to some achievements of the “Latin American boom”, their *lo real magico* (Carpentier, Onetti, Fuentes, to mention a few of my favorites).

The psychological level also needs to be mentioned. At this level, we start from the assumption that music possesses certain psychological properties, that there are certain unique ways in which music affects us, or if these ways are not exactly unique to music, then at least they pertain to music much more than to other arts. Accordingly, a narrative approaching such effects would be musicalized. However, one needs to make certain distinctions. It was Mendelssohn, I believe, who said that music was far more precise in expressing emotions than words, able to capture the minutest emotional nuances – I don’t remember accurately, but something of that nature – and it’s all fine until we ask Hanslick or Stravinsky what they would make of it. Therefore, I speak of this aspect of music with great caution. There is something else, though, something I am much more convinced of, and here is where I refer to psychoanalysis.

In his theoretical considerations where he defended music against accusations that it was “a mere sonic structure without content and meaning” Carl Dahlhaus pointed out that such an apologetic motivation of music originated, on the one hand, from the idea of the emancipation of instrumental music from text and extramusical functions and contexts (beginning towards the end of the 18th century and ending with absolute music of the 19th century), and on the other, from the tendency of relying on the theory and terminology of the old disciplines of grammar and rhetoric. The idea of the autonomy of music was supposed to confirm its linguistic character. Adorno said in that sense that music is not a language, yet it is linguistically founded. In the meantime, all levels of language have been recognized in music: phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic. Our pedagogical practice seems to largely overlook

the importance of the historical roots of morpho-syntactic analogies between language and music dating back to the 9th century with its Musica enchiriadis, when such an analogy laid the foundation for the construction of melody all the way to modern times. Little attention is paid also to the fact that mediaeval grammatical terminology was subsequently, with Johann Matheson and other German theoreticians, used in the modern context of the theoretical explication of the symmetrical musical phrase and the articulation of periodic structure, crucial for the understanding of musical syntax in the 18th and 19th centuries. When you teach your students, to what extent, if any, do you attach importance to the historic origins of the terminological parallelism between musical and linguistic syntax? To what extent is such parallelism justified in the first place?

I will use this question of how justified this parallelism is to recall that given the preverbal nature of music, attempts to express it in words often seem simply pitiful. Listen to a musicological or music-theoretical lecture, immerse in a text on music (not least one of my own): it is swarming with metaphors, borrowed images, concepts from disparate fields. And the crux of the matter, the very essence, remains elusive nonetheless. In that sense, it is only natural that when we use language to interpret music we use notions and images from language. In this context, the inclusion of the historical perspective that you mention produces two opposite effects. By persisting throughout centuries, it confirms the vitality of music-linguistic parallels. At the same time, however, when we observe how much they have changed, we must become aware of their tentative and relative nature, which means that the privileged position of language does not imply its absolute domination. This, in its turn, points to the part of the question that refers to students. If a student shows interest in that direction, of course I will help. If one day I choose to teach a specialized course, such questions will be considered. But for a wider student population, I dare say there is good old arrogance of us pedagogues poking its head. As long as it is my field of interest, then it is so terribly important, and when it is so terribly important, then my student – each and every one – must follow me, like so many ducklings. No, not everybody has to do everything and they don't all have to do the same.

What else can we learn from linguistics?

Precisely what you find in my article of the same title. This answer is more serious than it sounds. I believe that the article does a rather good job of pinpointing certain areas in which linguistic models could say something meaning-

ful about music. For instance, the notions of prefix/infix/suffix could be used in music analysis very conveniently. And so could the linguistic distinction between free and bound morphemes: in music we come across certain units of the motivic or submotivic level that could be clearly isolated, but that never appear in isolation, only as affixes to other units; in a typical case they perform a defined syntactic role, cadencing or connecting to the subsequent events. Lastly, I was also interested in the issues of linguistic typology. Can we establish a relation between the morphological structure of a language – this kind of typology I am referring to – and the motivic structure of music? Is there any sense in comparing – I will use extreme examples for the sake of clarity – Webern’s pointillism with an extremely isolating language like Vietnamese, where words generally consist of a single morpheme without inflections (or for that matter, English is not far from that)? Or, contrariwise, to compare polysynthetic languages like Inuktitut with Ligeti’s micropolyphony? Culturologically bizarre, and yet, certain similarities cannot be denied. The trouble is that we haven’t learned much from the article: we have just learned what we could learn. We will shortly see that it is no accident I haven’t developed these ideas any further.

But then, the question was meant to be: what *else* can we learn? In the meantime, I have reversed my perspective. Some ten years or so I was searching for what makes music similar to language. Afterwards, I became more interested in what makes music different from language. By all means, linguistics can also make its contribution by pointing to the differences. Let us take, for instance, the musical sentence, since it has the status of a holy cow of our pedagogical practice. Right, there is ample reason for such an analogy, but the meaningful use of language must be in the form of sentences. In music, thus we teach our students, there also exist loose, “fragmentary” structures; no such category exists in linguistics. Not to mention grammatical categories like subject, verb, object, how do we construe them in music? And I will reiterate the problem of the very status of constituent discrete units in music.

For thousands of years the concept of music was defined by its connection to literature based on the use of titles, libretti, programs, poetic texts, whether in the vocal or instrumental medium. Your chamber and orchestral works have striking, even lucid titles, which are without exception always attached to the already completed piece. These titles evoke various stories (mythical, Shakespearean-Huxlean, stories about you and everyone, occurrences preceding the end of time), or else the play of interpersonal communication, as well as reflections on foreboding, loss, absence. They invoke certain universal questions in the form of personal interrogation and contemplation, and conversely. Is there

in your compositional spiritual time-space some kind of circle where literary and literary-like impulses of musical reflection and imagination eventually emerge as verbal formulations of the musical piece?

The only thing I cannot answer with confidence is how I compose. Mind, I don't mean in the least to mystify the process. Not even when I myself am in question, and still less when I speak in principle, how I see the creative process in general. Every human activity must be rational, but evidently, not only rational. Let us allow, therefore, that the process of creation always contains something inexplicable, ineffable, beyond the grasp of knowledge. All right, I have now said something rather bombastic, but suppose it is irrationality making even. I think you will have recognized the answer "I don't know" expressed in a learned style.

Interesting is that idea about the circle. Nicely said. I'm not sure how accurate, though. Factually, the titles, each and every one of them, were concocted subsequently, when the compositions were completed. Do they really try to cast a verbal net over something important in the music; moreover, have they perhaps existed from the very beginning at the unconscious level as initial impulses, a guiding idea, something of that nature? Possibly so...

On one occasion you have said that Zatkalik the theorist and Zatkalik the composer do not necessarily harmonize with one another (particularly when talking about linguistic and literary questions), but there is still some interaction between them. Where and how is this interaction manifested?

A debate between the pair of them might eventually result in the conclusion that their differences are not unbridgeable. Yet, there is also Zatkalik the pedagogue who ought to be invited there. Then, composing could be successful if the composer and theorist establish some kind of cooperation, provided they keep off the pedagogue and do not allow him to get involved. The theorist can assist the composer with his knowledge, but there would be no pedagogue to preach to him how to do it. The latter, so it seems to me now, was apt to interfere too much in some earlier phases. Now, in hindsight, I could very well say: look, here, this moment in the composition, I did it like this because at that time in my work with students I insisted on such and such a thing. It is irrefutable, however, that my research over the last six or seven years, much deeper analytical engagement with works of more recent music (this includes also my work with students, which may contradict my previous statement about the influence of the pedagogue, but in this case I have in mind postgraduate students, which makes a difference), my new awareness of the analytical naiveté with which I

used to approach works of such major 20th-century personalities like Webern, Varese, Ligeti: all this made me see my own music in a new light. Not through direct influence, of course, but in a hardly explicable way, as my theoretical-analytical activities unfolded, I became aware that what suited me was rather different from what I had previously done. I ought not to be allowed to write longer pieces. Or, huge gradation ending in dramatic climaxes – I used to revel in such situations, while my attempts to do something of the kind turned out to be quite lame. And then, there was my obsession with forcing into the composition some semi-clandestine signals which purported to contribute to its coherence and integration... I've been much more satisfied since I stopped thinking about that. Let's call it the awakening from a "dogmatic slumber". But, neither do I renounce my previous work, nor claim that my music is now brilliant. Simply, I have discovered a way of better expressing myself (there you are, "express myself" – as a theoretician I would never allow myself such an unreserved statement about music being a personal expression), my theoretical work being somehow involved in the discovery.

You have said that "the process of creation always involves something inexplicable, ineffable, beyond the grasp of knowledge." Great psychologists and psychoanalysts of the 20th century pointed to the archaic or deep layers of the psyche. If this is so, in what ways music is closest to these fundamental, preverbal levels of the human psychic structure?

Here is what lies at the bottom: we are born with our hearing apparatus already developed, even with considerable pre-natal auditory experience. The auditory predates the visual, which in turn predates the verbal-conceptual. As adults, we obtain some 80% of information about the external world through sight, but at the earliest developmental stages it is hearing that dominates. Apparently, the earliest human fears, perhaps the only ones that are innate, are from loosing the ground and from an abrupt, sudden sound (a developmental psychologist would probably consider this statement too simplified, and would probably object to the word "fear" as adultomorphous, but I am sure that the claim I am making cannot be fundamentally refuted). This is already an interesting piece of information, the link between the senses of balance and hearing; therein lies the root of various gravitational metaphors in music (high and low tones, for instance: not even a pianist thinks of tones in terms of left and right; a cellist plays higher notes while moving fingers downwards; we are inclined to hear certain tones as "heavy"; and there is tonality, with the tonic as the center of gravity, etc.). If we are right about the fears just mentioned, or better the tension that tones produce in the earliest childhood, and if we take a child with a

more sensitive hearing apparatus, then we can easily assume that this generates a need to conquer these terrible sounds, to “tame” them, to master auditory tensions – much in the same way as when at a later stage the child is terribly scared of the evil witch from a fairy tale, but will nonetheless ask to be told the tale over and over again. This could in part explain the motivation for becoming a musician. More broadly speaking, affects first experienced in individual development, operating at the most archaic core of mental structure are linked with auditory representations; visual and verbal ones are more recent acquisitions.

We are talking now about primordial affects which form a unity with auditory sensations, but it obviously isn’t music yet. Needless to say, a work of art cannot be brought into existence without the engagement of entire emotional, spiritual and intellectual resources, which includes everything that the creator has assimilated through tradition, culture, education. It is pointless to argue what the share is of each of these aspects, which of them is more or less important. What matters here is that music never severs ties with its preverbal, archaic, unconscious roots, that it always engages the part of the mental structure that functions in accordance with primary processes, as some psychoanalysts call them. This is probably best seen in the study of dreams, which are, as Freud has famously said, the royal road to the unconscious. Transformations that percepts undergo in dreams bear a striking resemblance with thematic processes, or more general constructive procedures in music. Multiplication, fragmentation, condensation – these are some typical transformations readily identifiable in music. The idea of the existence of the manifest and latent content in dreams could be interpreted in a Schenkerian manner as the relationship between the surface and deep structures; images that mediate between the manifest and the latent in dreams could fit into this model as a *Mittelgrund* of sorts. Or, take for instance the experience described by some scholars as the “oceanic feeling”. In the earliest stage of development there seems to exist a feeling of unity with the outside world, external-internal ambiguity; individuation, the rift between I and not-I emerges only later. Such a mode of mental functioning becomes manifest in music: blending, permeation, fusion. Lines, voices, layers of musical tissue very naturally intertwine, blend, conjoin. Language – and as we have seen it is a newer acquisition, from the time well beyond the oceanic feeling – can hardly achieve that. Simultaneity, polyphony – it is beyond the reach of language. It is very well that Mikhail Bakhtin coined the term “polyphonic novel”, but he himself insisted that it didn’t have much in common with musical polyphony. Or, to quote Susanne Langer who says that the discursivity of language belies the simultaneity of events. It is no accident that writers who endeavored to emulate musical processes not infrequently tried to do so through polyphonization, creating a form that would somehow resemble a polyphonic composition, a fugue

for instance (DeQuincey, Joyce, Huxley) or referred to the string quartet as an ensemble which is by its nature preordained for the intertwining of melodic lines (Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot). To create polyphonic effects is unattainable for language, yet so challenging for musicalizing tendencies. It is characteristic that the visual sphere falls somewhere in-between sound and word, corresponding to its position in the development process.

It is important to clarify the following. Listening to music somehow brings us into contact with these archaic layers. There have been interesting investigations concerning the phenomenon known as the aesthetic peak experience. In a typical case, the subjects stated that the experience was extremely difficult to verbalize. Clearly, it connects us with the preverbal layers. The most fascinating is the fact that this experience implies the loss of the sense of personal boundaries and merging with the work which produces this effect. It has been proven that such experience is most commonly brought about by music. Artistic experience is – among other things – regression of a kind; only the regression is not pathological. Therefore, psychoanalysts coined terms like creative regression, adaptive regression, regression in the service of the ego.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović