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BEYOND ZERO: 1914 –1918 – A CENTERY AFTER

(String quartet by Aleksandra Vrebalov, composer, and film by Bill Morrison – director)

My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie; Dulce et Decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Wilfred Owen, *Dulce et Decorum Est*

Abstract: To mark the centennial of WWI, Aleksandra Vrebalov wrote a new string quartet *Beyond Zero: 1914–1918* which accompanied a film by Bill Morrison. The paper presents the means with which the musical structure was created to resonate with the subject, especially the technique of using quotations (musical and non-musical) in order to make the music more “pictorial”. The film, made from archive material preserved from WWI, with all its elements of devastation, uses moving pictures to the accompaniment of the “sounding pictures” of music.

Keywords: Aleksandra Vrebalov, quotation, Great War, WWI, text, zero, Dadaism, Bartók, Owen, Huelsenbeck, Gerard, film.

In the year 2014, the entire world, constantly “afflicted” by a contagion of conflicts between countries, ethnic groups and different ideologies, is marking

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the centennial of World War One. This significant reminiscence of the Great War has initiated new studies in the science of history¹, as well as in the other humanities, but also new works of art that reflect contemporary views on what was, in every way, the first enormous global catastrophe of the 20th century.

Among the artists who contributed to the global mourning, pointing to their anti-war position as a credo, is Aleksandra Vrebalov,² a Serbian composer based in New York, USA. Her piece *Beyond Zero: 1914–1918*, commissioned by the University of California, Berkeley³ is, however, an audio-visual work sui generis. Namely, this composition, written for a string quartet, is performed along with a film, that was created *after* the music. This unusual artistic collaboration, in which the music is not subordinate to the moving pictures, gives an additional quality to the work of Vrebalov and opens a possibility for discussion about how musical an image can be, as Karin von Maur pointed out, along with the well-known thesis of how music can be pictorial. But to begin with a Barthian question: what kind of plurality configures the “text” of this music? What was the goal of the composer starting from the title of the piece, and what are the applied means with which the title was “justified”?⁴

¹ The following books, among others, give a new perspective on the First World War: Ernst Piper *Nachtüber Europa* (Propyläen, 2014), Herfried Munkler *Der Grosse Krieg* (Rowohlt, 2013), Christopher Clark *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (Harper, 2013), Olaf Jessen, *Verdun – Die Urschlacht des Jahrhunderts* (C. H. Beck, 2014), Jörn Leonhard *Der grosse Krieg. Eine globale Geschichte* (C. H. Beck, 2014), Bruno Cabanes, Anne Duménil *Der erste Weltkrieg* (Theiss, 2013), Оливер Јанц, *14. Велики рат* (Прометеј, Радио Телевизија Београд, 2014).

² Aleksandra Vrebalov (1970) wrote more than 60 works, ranging from concert music, to opera and modern dance, to music for films. Her works have been commissioned and/or performed by the Kronos Quartet, the Serbian National Theater, Carnegie Hall, the Moravian Philharmonic, the Belgrade Philharmonic and the Providence Festival Ballet. Vrebalov is a fellow of the MacDowell Colony, the Rockefeller Bellagio Center, New York’s New Dramatists, American Opera Projects, Other Minds Festival, and Tanglewood. Her awards include The American Academy of Arts and Letters Charles Ives Fellowship, Barlow Endowment Commission, MAP Fund, Vienna Modern Masters, Meet the Composer, and Douglas Moore Fellowship. Her works have been recorded for Nonesuch, Innova, Centaur, Records, and Vienna Modern Masters. Vrebalov’s most recent collaboration, with director Bill Morrison, *Beyond Zero (1914 – 1918)*, was commissioned and premiered by the Kronos Quartet at Berkeley’s Cal Performances in April 2014 and had its European premiere at the Edinburgh International Festival this summer. Vrebalov is currently setting Charles Simic’s poetry for a song cycle commissioned by the ASCAP/Kingsford Fund and is collaborating with the architect Ronit Eisenbach on a site-specific sound installation at the Washington College in Maryland. For more details see www.aleksandravrebalov.com.

³ The work was commissioned by the Kronos Quartet, as well.

⁴ Karin Von Maur: *Vom Klang der Bilder*, Prestel, 1999.

The author Aleksandra Vrebalov explains the idea of composition: “Zero form in art refers to Malevitch’s zero form and 1915, and the legacy of abstraction. In physics, the concept of zero-point energy was developed in Germany by Einstein and Otto Stern in 1913.⁵ Therefore, the title of the piece refers to that very ground state, a “zero” of civilization destroyed by war, about starting over, about the world that had transformed itself, brought itself to the zero-form through the destruction of war, through the total annihilation of life and love. That lowest point of the system – a zero point of the world in the aftermath of war – with millions killed and impoverished, is not a static place without energy. On the contrary, that point of unimaginable suffering fluctuates with energy in which lies its highest future potential – rising from the ashes, a catharsis, a new beginning, a possibility for a paradigm shift, a point in which death and suffering can be transcended and consciousness raised, of oneself and others – for war to be avoided for generations to come”.⁶

According to the composer, the inspiration came from the work of authors who maintained the anti-war position, such as the poets Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, the composers Satie and Debussy, and the followers of the Dada movement. Especially significant and powerful, as Aleksandra Vrebalov emphasizes, is Owen’s line from *Dulce et Decorum*, that “sweet and noble death for one’s country is an old lie”.⁷

“Wild”, “distorted”, “dark”, “rough”, “violent”, “expansive”, “squeaky” are the score markings in *Beyond Zero*, which stand in contrast to “tenderly”, “espressivo”, “still”, “aware” instructions to the performers. These two “sides”, the brutal and the tender, both represented in the quartet, build a structure that in its clashing contrasts resembles a “battlefield”. Its brutality has much in common with Bartókian folklore, like blocks of persistently repeated music ideas brought to a collapse. However, in the militarily organized ostinato of cello in 4/4 meter, as a motive of the inevitable fate, the appearance of triplets sways this musical “discipline” and appears to sound like an “army” of faltering notes (b. 105-) (Ex. 1).

In contrast to this section, the slow part at the end grows in density, and obtaining a certain Mahlerian orchestral sound, represents an “adagietto” of the new age (b. 565-) (Ex. 2).

⁵ The idea of zero-point energy is that there is a finite, minimum amount of motion (more accurately, kinetic energy) in all matter, even at absolute zero, explains Paul A. Deck, Assistant Professor of Chemistry at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Cf. <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/follow-up-what-is-the-zer/>

⁶ From the correspondence with the Kronos Quartet, 2011.

⁷ Vrebalov, From a conversation with the composer, October 2014. See also: <http://kronosquartet.org/projects/detail/beyond-zero-1914-1918>.

Ex. 1: A. Vrebalov: *Beyond Zero*, b. 105 – 108

Musical score for Ex. 1, measures 105-108. The score is for four staves: Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The music is characterized by rapid triplet patterns. The first violin part starts with a 'rough' marking and features a series of triplets. The other instruments follow with similar rhythmic patterns. The piece concludes with a 'ritard.' marking.

Ex. 2: A. Vrebalov: *Beyond Zero*, b. 565 – 580

Musical score for Ex. 2, measures 565-580. The score is for four staves: Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The key signature has one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The music is characterized by sustained, legato lines. The first violin part starts with a '565 aware, still follow individual dynamic' marking and features a series of sustained notes with dynamic markings (ppp, p). The other instruments follow with similar sustained lines. The piece concludes with a 'p' marking.

The shifting of these contrasting parts, contrasting atmospheres, directly resembles the fluctuating extremes of life in times of war: months of battles in trenches, in dirt, disease and death, and the short breaks of a cease-fire, or times of leave. To make the music more eloquent, the composer imports quotations, both musical and non-musical. This technique, well-known from her other oeuvres, gives the music a strong aura of authenticity even without the film as a component of the musical flow.

An excerpt from the old recording of Béla Bartók's own performance of his Piano Suite op. 14 marks the start of the "zero moment".⁸ It is understandable why this specific opus is used: according to Vrebalov, the intention was to take the audience back to *illo tempore*, to the period of WWI. Also, the number of the opus is more than enough to warn us of the reason. Bartók's piece dating from 1916 with its scattered tonality is also a prediction of the dark times to come. Vrebalov starts the piece with one single note "pronounced and glassy" in the first violin, G3 harmonic, with a crescendo that transforms this sound into a quasi-human

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R-g7a9vVAU>

voice that moans. The quotation from Bartók’s music as an introduction, is not the only musical quotation of the quartet. The citation from the field of music was used once again at the very end: the solemn Byzantine hymn *Eternal Memory to the Virtuous*, chanted by the monks from the Kovilj monastery in Serbia. The rest of the quotations are intermediate),⁹ from the literature or recorded sounds of actual moments in a war. Aleksandra Vrebalov uses documentary recordings from different wars of the last century – excerpts from the military commands of the Serbian and Bosnian troops during the conflicts in Yugoslavia in 1990s, the extremely brutal “Loyalty Speech” of James Watson Gerard¹⁰ who served as a U.S. Ambassador to Germany until 1917, the disturbing sound of air-raid sirens during the bombing of London in World War II, the excerpts from Huelsenbeck’s reading of his Dadaistic prayer from *Chorus Sanctus*.¹¹ This intermediate “dialog” with a content that resembles war and suffering, was used in order to underline the author’s opinion not just about the Great War, but war in general. The segments of acoustic music that can be heard simultaneously with the documentary sound on the backing track sometimes reflect an atmosphere that is opposite to them, in order to portray the possible supreme alternative. At other times, they directly describe the non-musical “text” (and vice versa). So the *molto espressivo* marking in music clashes with the sound of military commands (b. 232–) underlining the fact that “while some make war planes, others are creating art...” (Ex. 3)¹².

Ex. 3. A. Vrebalov: *Beyond Zero*, b. 232–242

The image shows a musical score for four instruments: Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The score is in 4/4 time and features various dynamic markings and articulations. The first measure is marked with a 'V' and a '232'. The score includes slurs, accents, and dynamic markings such as *mf*, *f*, *p*, and *p tenderly*. The Viola part has an *esp.* marking and a triplet of eighth notes. The Violoncello part has a *mf* marking and a triplet of eighth notes. The score is written on four staves.

The threat of Gerard’s speech is juxtaposed with Dadaistic poetry in which the words disappear and only the vowels A, E, O, U and syllables without any concrete sense sound as the only reasonable meaning compared to the horrifying

⁹ Dubravka Oraić Tolić, *Teorija citatnosti*, Zagreb, Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1990.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vcaMJ2h42go>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5r3X5yH2w14>

¹² Vrebalov, op. cit.

words of the politician. The non-human speech resonates with the atonal squeaky “speech” of the string quartet (b. 363-) (Ex. 4).

Ex. 4: A. Vrebalov: *Beyond Zero*, b. 363 – 377¹³

The image shows a musical score for a string quartet, measures 363 to 377. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 363 to 403, and the second system covers measures 403 to 377. The instruments are Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello (Vc.).

Measure 363 is marked with a box containing the letter 'T'. The score includes the following annotations:

- Violin I: *p* (piano), *pp* gradually increase dynamic towards m. 403, very high register, move up and down in small intervals, legato.
- Violin II: *pp* gradually increase dynamic towards m. 403, very high register, move up and down in small intervals, legato.
- Viola: *pp* gradually increase dynamic towards m. 403, very high register, move up and down in small intervals, legato.
- Violoncello: gliss. on open G/D strings, up and down, slowly.

Measure 403 is marked "behind the bridge". The second system (measures 403-377) includes the following annotations:

- Violoncello: gliss. up and down on G string, violent, sul pont., *mp*, every pattern louder.

Additionally, Aleksandra Vrebalov utilizes the auto quotation from her opera *Mileva*. At the time when “old men were burying their children”,¹⁴ the voice of a girl calling her cats at the ending of the piece is a “symbolic reminder of the suffering of women and children, and of a longing for lost safety and domesticity”¹⁵.

There are numerous theories that explain the meaning of the music written for the film. The basic division into diegetic and non-diegetic music (Ćirić

¹³ The arrow-like notation of this segment of the piece supports the program of the composition in the sphere of the visual. It resembles actually a medieval “army” of spears. We can be sure that this was not the direct intention of the composer, but we can talk here about of voco-visual art in which, in this case, the score surpasses the media of sound, but cannot be seen by the audience. Cf. Mirjana Veselinović Hofman, *Musical Notation: The More or Less than Sound*, New Sound No. 35, I, 2010, 49.

¹⁴ Жан Палмије, *Експресионизам као побуна*, Нови Сад, Матица Српска, 1995.

¹⁵ Vrebalov, op. cit.

2014)¹⁶ is supported by analyses of how music can impact the drama in the film. The opposite situation is rarely observed. In the case of *Beyond Zero* the “gesamtkunstwerk” of Aleksandra Vrebalov includes a film made by Bill Morrison,¹⁷ a director who is known for his experimental work in which the documentary material is the main source of the artistic construction. However, the “presence” of Morrison’s film *in Beyond Zero* is depicted by the recorded sound of an old film projector that rotates the tape. This audio effect, which is not present during the entire performance, has two meanings. The first refers to the historical data of the documentary material used in the film, from authentic moments in WWI. The second resonates with the need of the composer to transform the sound into “fireworks” of possible associations. Namely, the realistic “humming” of the old mechanism gives the music of the quartet a very quiet, yet very cramping background that reminds the listener of the “flickering” of the wings of a butterfly captured in a jar. This somewhat simple explanation of the first stratum of the impact of the film on the music is not at all naïve. Even without the screen, this persistent sound surpasses its objective source and creates an association of one being trapped, without hope.

¹⁶ Marija Ćirić, *Vidljivi prostori muzike*, Kragujevac, Tempus-Filum, 2014. This basic division indicates the difference between music that accompanies the motion picture but it is not present on the screen as the sound that is played by an ensemble, and the music that is played in the film, before the eyes of the audience.

¹⁷ Bill Morrison (1965) is a New York-based filmmaker and artist, best known for his experimental collage film *Decasia* (2002). He is a member of the Ridge Theater and the founder of Hypnotic Pictures. He attended Reed College 1983–85, and graduated from the Cooper Union School of Art in 1989. Bill Morrison’s films have been screened at festivals, museums and concert halls worldwide, including the Sundance Film Festival, the Orphan Film Symposium, The Tate Modern, London, and the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles. Eight of his titles have been acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. He has been commissioned to create films for some of the most important composers of his time, including John Adams, Gavin Bryars, Dave Douglas, Bill Frisell, Michael Gordon, Henryk Gorecki, Michael Harrison, Vijay Iyer, David Lang, Harry Partch, Steve Reich and Julia Wolfe. Morrison is a Guggenheim fellow and has received the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts. He has received grants from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, Creative Capital and The National Endowment for the Arts. His work with the Ridge Theater has been recognized with two Dance Theater Workshop Bessie Awards and an Obie Award. *Decasia*, his feature-length collaboration with composer Michael Gordon, was selected by the U.S. Library of Congress for its National Film Registry in 2013, becoming the most modern film selected to the list. It has been noted by J. Hoberman of the Village Voice as “the most widely acclaimed American avant-garde film of the fin-de-siècle”. The director Errol Morris commented while viewing *Decasia* that “This may be the greatest movie ever made”. The film was commissioned by the Basel Sinfonietta to be shown on three screens surrounding the musicians. The film was released on Blu-ray as “Decasia” by Icarus Films in 2012. Morrison’s complete collected works were released as a 5-disc box set, in September 2014.



Photo courtesy of Bill Morrison

The film itself visually supports the music, as the director points out: “The film portion of *Beyond Zero: 1914–1918* is comprised of films never before seen by modern audiences. I searched archives for rare 35mm nitrate films shot during the Great War, and made brand new HD scans from the originals. In many cases this is the last expression of these films – some original copies were determined not to be worth preserving beyond this transfer to digital media. What we are left with is a glimpse of a war fought in fields, in trenches, and in the air. Most of the footage shows some emulsion deterioration – the by-product of a history stored on an unstable base for 100 years. Through a veil of physical degradation and original film dyes, we can see training exercises, parades, and troop movement. Some of the battle footage was re-enacted for the camera, and some depicts actual live rounds. All of it was shot on film at the time of the conflict. We see a record of a war as a series of documents passed along to us like a message in a bottle. Nothing is more powerful than the record of the film itself, made visible by its own deterioration. We are constantly reminded of its materiality: this film was out on these same fields with these soldiers 100 years ago, a collaborator, and a survivor...”¹⁸

¹⁸ Morrison, <http://kronosquartet.org/projects/detail/beyond-zero-1914-1918>.



Photo courtesy of Bill Morrison

If we bear in mind that “being somewhere means taking part” and that “one who was present knows exactly how it was” then it could be said that the intention of the artists¹⁹, both composer and director, was to turn the audience into an active witness of the catastrophe in which it takes part silently. Giving the audience this role is close to calling out for the responsibility of each person present during the performance, not for the past, full of cardinal mistakes, but for possible future decisions. This is what Morrison thinks when he comments: “If these are images that we, as viewers, were once intended to see, to convince us of the necessity and valor of war, they now read as images that have fought to remain on the screen. They are threatened on all sides by the unstable nitrate base they were recorded on, and the prism of nearly one hundred uninterrupted years of war, through which we now view them.”²⁰

¹⁹ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Istina i metoda, osnovi filozofske hermeneutike*, Sarajevo, Veselin Masleša, 1978.

²⁰ Morrison, op. cit.

It is not strange that the chanting of monks, at first hardly recognized as Orthodox, concludes the performance with the sound of gongs vanishing into the silence. The intention of the author was clearly not to point out the source of religion, but to show that all prayers are alike. The “echo” of gongs²¹ gives the ending a solemn atmosphere of rest “beyond” war, of a cathartic potential for starting from zero. This peaceful conclusion suggests a reconciliation as the only possible way forward – the only way that “dulce et decorum est”.

²¹ Aleksandra Vrebalov explains that for the “premiere of the piece we had real, huge, very resonant Vietnamese artillery shells hanging on the stage, and two violinists from the quartet had to stand up and tap on them... In most of the other performances, we don’t have the real shells so we use gongs...”. From a conversation with the composer, October 2014.