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Branka Radović*

University of Kragujevac,
Faculty of Philology and Arts

THE 2014 MOKRANJAC DAYS

To be the programme selector of a festival has always been an honour, but in our present circumstances, it means trying to preserve what already exists under impossible conditions. Well, indeed, the 49th *Mokranjac Days* had to be organized under impossible conditions, on the centenary of Mokranjac's death.

A festival is assessed when it ends and when one can discuss it from various aspects, conceptual, organizational, interpretative, and the like. I will start from what was desired, conceived, and – unrealized. Not because the realization of what really transpired in reality and the actual programme of the festival was bad, or because something fell through, was pushed to the margins, but simply to make known the sorts of ideas we had when we set out to celebrate, i.e. mark this great jubilee.

As early as 2007 and especially since 2011 (the beginning of the selector's second term), the guiding idea had been to reach two important dates, the centenary of Mokranjac's death and the 50th anniversary of the Festival itself, in 2015. Projects were planned many years ahead. Meanwhile, the country changed a number of cabinets, ministers, state secretaries at the Ministry of Culture; several general managers were switched at the Cultural Centre in Negotin, then also a few mayors, town councils, and civil servants dealing with culture. In this general atmosphere of replaceability, the only constant was the programming committee of the *Mokranjac Days* and the selector herself.

Following some reductions and exchanges of opinions, the Governing Board, comprising the following eminent experts: Dejan Despić, Darinka Matić

* Author contact information: braradovic@yahoo.com

Marović, Aleksandra Paladin, Maja Vasić Čolović, and Marina Nikolić, adopted the selector's plan.

Regarding the jubilee year of 2014, we had addressed the Ministry and the Minister (that is, a number of Ministers) several years in advance, preparing for each one of them explications, verbal and written alike, of our guiding ideas, aims, and financial needs.

Briefly, there were (at least) two plans and two different concepts, open to alterations and reductions, depending on the government's financial assistance to the Festival.

The first concept was the creative one. It comprised several production projects. The first of those was a competition for new choral pieces by Serbian composers. The second was the restoration and cleaning of the film about Mokranjac owned by the Yugoslav Film Archive, as well as enabling its distribution and screening, which could serve various purposes, ranging from pedagogy and education to regular screenings for the general public. The third and largest project was conceived as a Mokranjac ballet-brand based on his biography, to be realized by the choreographer Vladimir Logunov, composer Zoran Simjanović, and coproduced by the Serbian National Theatre from Novi Sad and the Cultural Centre in Negotin.

This concept was the first to go, both individually and collectively, because it entailed extensive financial means; the ballet would be performed in city and town squares, with stage sets and all the other elements that every staging requires, with a live orchestra, a choir onstage, corps de ballet, and ballet and choral soloists. This spectacle would be premiered in Negotin and then in other cities and towns, and finally in Belgrade and Novi Sad; after that, with the onset of winter, it would move to the regular ballet season on the main stage of the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad.

The other plan, in case the first plan fell through, envisaged inviting international choral ensembles to perform works by Mokranjac, sacred and secular alike, at the Festival together, starting with the *Glinka* Choir and moving on to choirs from Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Germany, and elsewhere, which had already been agreed verbally, with some details already set.

The third "mission impossible" was the desire and need to perform Mokranjac's entire oeuvre as a collected edition in the form of a seven-day marathon, which is the duration of the Festival, even if individual performances had to go on for days.

Instead of all those ideas, conceived and explained well in advance, we ended up applying to the Ministry of Culture, like every year, and securing the same amount of support like every year. As one of the organizers put it, perhaps there

are two ways of looking at this. The first is that our funding was not reduced, as it happened to many others who applied to the same Ministry of Culture committee, and the other is that none of the more creative concepts won material support and that the plan was – the same as before. With support from the Municipality of Negotin, numerous sponsors, big and small alike, located in the region of Negotinska Krajina and Eastern Serbia in general, we approached the not so innovative contents of this year's festival in the spirit of what was doable and what we had in our country, its surroundings, and the programme, involving ensembles and individuals who felt professionally and artistically obliged both to the Festival and to Mokranjac.

In a few words, the Festival was neither bad nor worse than expected, but it did not break new ground either. We thought that the UNESCO committees, which had recognized the national value of Mokranjac, would make an impact on those who occupy the top positions in our country to come to the same recognition... but that did not happen.

For institutions and individuals organizing a festival, the main question is whether there were any cancellations (there were not) and whether there was enough audience (there was). Still, what the government failed to spoil was almost spoiled by stormy skies with rains that flooded all of Negotin and threatened to thwart all those who were planning to make their way to the Cultural Centre. Umbrellas were needed not only on the way to and outside the Cultural Centre, but also inside the hall, because there were leaks everywhere! Having to "swim" from the hotel to the concerts and back affected the organization of the events and when a state of emergency was announced in the city, we came to fear the worst – that the Festival would be cancelled right in the middle. Villages around Negotin were flooded and increasingly distressing news about missing people and property kept coming in during the floods. The decision to continue the Festival equalled our most ambitiously planned projects.

And indeed, it was quite a feat to get all the participants to Negotin and back when only one road, the one through Zaječar, remained open, while all other roads to Negotin were flooded. Travelling to and from Negotin was a real adventure.

There were ten choirs on the programme.

Like every year, the programme committee set the compulsory piece, which was Mokranjac's *Tenth Garland* this year, which made a number of choirs withdraw from the competition segment. In proportion to the interest of the Negotin audience, which is always very high on this, first day of the Festival, the quality of the participating choral ensembles was not the highest possible, varying from one year to the next. There is no cheating in deciding who will participate

or win. The idea is to include younger ensembles as well and to encourage and highlight the work of new and not yet established choirs. For these ensembles, the *Tenth Garland* proved too difficult.

The winner of this year's competition was "Iuventus cantat" from Sombor, led by Dajana Milić (1988), which had reclaimed the heritage of its best days under the legendary conductor Silvester Hajnal.

Also participating were choirs from Macedonia ("Kočo Racin", Skopje, led by Marija Andonova), Slovenia ("Ignacij Hladnik" from Tržič, led by Tomaž Meglič), while it was a special treat to see the local church choir of the Holy Trinity Church in Negotin, led by Svetlana Kravčenko, make its way into such a competitive selection. This is one of the Festival's greatest values: establishing ensembles and audiences in its local environment. That choir's musicality, melodiousness, and technical proficiency should be ascribed to the choice of pieces and skill of its leader, Svetlana Kravčenko. Although they did not win, these choristers from Negotin successfully made their way to the Festival stage.

The greatest challenge that the selector and Programming Committee faced was to present Mokranjac's work in his jubilee year in a dignified and respectable manner, which therefore called for two performances each by two of our best choirs, Obilić-Krsmanović and the Choir of the Radio-Television of Serbia. The concept was to have sacred and secular music equally represented and it seems as though that was achieved.

The first of these two ensembles performed the *Opelo* and *Liturgija* under the leadership of Darinka Matić Marović, while the second performed Mokranjac's settings for Holy Week and a selection from the *Garlands*, led by Bojan Sudić. I will not write about their interpretations, because it would be inappropriate for the selector to assess (her own) programming and choice of participants.

All of the participating ensembles were historically and essentially associated to Mokranjac's many activities. The First Choral Society of Belgrade, led by Svetlana Vilić, performed in the Old Church a selection of sacred works; the Mokranjac School of Music brought its school choir; and the Mokranjac Quartet performed one of Mokranjac's fugues.

The novelty of the Festival was a sort of turn toward youth and younger generations. In successful collaboration with the Musical Youth of Serbia, in a packed Hall of Students and Sports Fans at the Negotin School of Music, the Musical Youth organized the final session of its quiz competition, centring on Mokranjac. The students showed an amazing command of facts from Mokranjac's life and works; especially impressive were the victorious three from Leskovac. One of the prizes was a free stay in Negotin until the end of the festival and free tickets to all of the concerts.

Our impression is that for a long time the Festival had not seen so many musicologists of every generation attend the Festival and participate in it, thanks to our cooperation with the Musicological Society and the Faculty of Music in Belgrade.

Young musicologists, students and doctoral students, discussed their perceptions and views of Mokranjac's reception in electronic and printed media, including Ivana Petković, Ivana Miladinović Prica, Adriana Sabo, Milan Milojković, and Biljana Leković. The presentations of two publications of the Musicological Society of Serbia included talks by the Society's president, Ana Kotevska, publishing editor Biljana Milovanović, and musicologist Dr Tijana Popović Mladenović; the panel was moderated by Dr Sonja Marinković. The presence of MA students from the Faculty of Music in Belgrade brought a welcome breath of freshness and youth, convincing us that Mokranjac belongs to every generation.

Especially significant this year was the collaboration of several musicologists and conductors, Bogdan Đaković, Predrag Đoković, and Ivan Moody from England, who gave lectures, conducted a workshop in chanting sacred music, and at the end gave a concert with the workshop's participants at the local church.

Threads of Tradition, an event that traditionally takes place in Mokranjac's parental birthplace, Mokranje, is always an opportunity to cultivate the folk tradition of Eastern Serbia and the parts and villages around Negotin. A compelling introduction was supplied by the men's choir *Konstantinus* from Niš, whose performance was thrilling overall, especially their rendering of the *First Garland*, the only one that was originally written for a men's choir. The concert took place in the local village church and on the square in front of it, ending with spending time with our friendly hosts.

The only solo recital this year was given by the pianist Aleksandar Serdar, who played standard works from the classical repertoire, as well as a standard work in a non-standard and thrilling way: Kornelije Stanković's set of variations on "Što se bore misli moje" in a completely unusual and rather virtuosic manner, at any rate, in a "new reading" and different interpretation. There should be a lot more of this kind of venturing out of the usual programming choices and interpretations.

Performances of the *Garlands* and the best-known of Mokranjac's sacred works always attract special attention and are embedded in the deepest layers of our music history and tradition. Nonetheless, certain "relocations" and reshapings in line with the times would be in order. The *Garlands* are indeed part of our tradition and pedagogical practice, with regular student performances in various forms at our music academies and faculties, familiar, tuneful, and part of

our innate feeling for folklore. Still, there have been no attempts to “sneak in” an orchestra or add instruments, although any good music always remains good, no matter the arrangement. (Admittedly, two years ago, several arrangements of the *Garlands* were made for the choir and folk orchestra of the Radio-Television of Serbia, which performed them at a concert at Kolarac. The arrangements were made by Dimitrije Mikan Obradović, Milan Nedeljković, and Dobrica Vasić, and the performance was conducted by Stanko Jovanović.)

The only work by Mokranjac featured in this year’s festival that is seldom performed and for the most part negatively assessed in the literature was *Ivkova slava*, performed by a choir, orchestra, and soloists from Niš (Niš Chamber Choir, Constantinus Chamber Orchestra, soloists: Aleksandra Ristić, mezzo-soprano; Saša Arsenkov, tenor; Marko Milisavljević, bass), conducted by Ivana Mirović, the only work in which Mokranjac employed an orchestra. One could conclude that the work is neither bad nor uninspired and that it deserves to be staged, with the help of good directing, stage design, etc. at one of our theatres.

We tried hard not to let our powers and lack thereof, and the abyss that separated our wishes and intentions from their realization be seen or heard, to let the Festival resound with Mokranjac’s music in a “domestic” setting, to stay afloat amid the torrential rains that kept flooding us, to keep everything going despite all the mishaps, atmospheric, material, organizational, and performing alike. And finally, negotiating obstacles coming from the sky and elsewhere, without any cancellations or subterranean commotion, we successfully concluded the festival, which seemed more like a piece of drama than the intoxicating fragrance of the folk spirit.

We believe that a re-examining and re-reading of other less familiar and rarely performed works by Mokranjac would lead toward similar conclusions; a jubilee year was an opportunity to do just that, but not with the severely limited resources the organizers had at their disposal.

A theatre play, *Rođendan gospodina Nušića* (The Birthday of Mister Nušić), directed by Nebojša Bradić and produced by the Zvezdara teatar from Belgrade, was meant to remind us of the long-term and deep connections between the two artists, Mokranjac and Nušić, as well as to satisfy the desire and need of Negotin theatre-goers for theatre plays performed by good actors.

Side events, exhibitions and book presentations stopped being side events long ago. This year, especially noteworthy was an exhibition of paintings from the legacy of Miljenko Šerban, as well as the painters’ colony *Eho muzike* (Echo of Music). Significant musicological publications and their presentations are certainly not side or marginal events. The Festival saw the presentations of *Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac u napisima drugih* (Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac in the

Writings of Others) and *Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, inostrane turneje sa Beogradskim pevačkim društvom* (Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac: Foreign Tours with the Choral Society of Belgrade) in English and Serbian, a venture that had brought together several publishers; the presentations took place in the impressive surroundings of Mokranjac's birth house, in a hall packed with audience, including numerous young people, pupils of schools located in and around Negotin.

A local poet, Vlasta Mladenović, an artist whose poetry exceeded the bounds of the local environment a long time ago, addressed Mokranjac in his new collection of poems, *Pesmorečja u dosluhu sa Mokranjcem* (Poetic Wordings in Collusion with Mokranjac), published by *Intelekt*, whose chief editor, Aca Vidić, spoke about the book with much inspiration at its presentation at the Cultural Centre Gallery.

Another great poet from the region, Toma Mijović from Zaječar, addressed Mokranjac in his jubilee year and wrote a poem, "Mokranjčev nauk" (The Lesson of Mokranjac), which I transmit below in its entirety, with the author's permission and desire; thus instead of music from the *Mokranjac Days*, we bring poetry:

TOMISLAV MIJOVIĆ:

THE LESSON OF MOKRANJAC

In memory of Stevan St. Mokranjac

Listen to them, like your own old but still living
Songs, moving, joyful, longing,
From the weddings, saints' days, feasts, and celebrations
Of the God-pleasing Orthodox people,
From gatherings, by songs joined in one
That unites the worthless and the precious
And harmonizes the human polyphony,
With song to resist despair.
Also listen to songs from every gathering,
The merry tunes of harvesters,
Competing songs, prayers, toasts,
And mocking songs like comical songs,
From all-night gatherings without rest
And the heroism of your ancestors.
Songs for the soul from souls from a distant past,

That have reached you through all sorts of darkness
Re-sing them and make them gold,
With that gift repay your gift-givers,
Infuse them with the sounds of your own soul,
So they may adopt your own songs,
So they, too, may become old but living still,
Beautiful, moving, joyful, longing.

Did Negotin this year get any closer to or farther from Salzburg? Hoping that the sanctuary of Mokranjac and the place of our pilgrimages may become the same as the formerly small Austrian town and today a great festival and tourist centre, the sanctuary of Mozart, we will be looking in our minds for a future time that will recognize our present pains... and maybe already the next, jubilee Festival will erase all the negative memories from this year's Festival and compensate for all that was left undone, unrealized, unfinished?