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***THE LITTLE MERMAID... BY GORAN KAPETANOVIĆ
AS A POSTMODERNIST TRAGEDY¹***

To the spirit of Goran Kapetanović

Abstract: The article is a discussion of Goran Kapetanović's work *Sažeti prikaz neumitnog i tragičnog toka sudbine koji je krhko biće Male Sirene odveo u potpunu propast* (A Brief Account of the Inexorable and Tragic Course of Destiny that Led the Fragile Being of the Little Mermaid to Total Disaster). This multilayered postmodernist work from the closing decade of the 20th century is discussed here from several perspectives: as a postmodernist intertext, as a drama (tragedy), and as a hypertext in relation to Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, which Kapetanović used as the model and hypotext for his own piece.

Keywords: Goran Kapetanović, postmodernism, collage, intertextual play of signs, hypertext, musical semiotics, narrativity, tragedy, postmodernism in Serbian 20th-century music

When *Sažeti prikaz neumitnog i tragičnog toka sudbine koji je krhko biće Male Sirene odveo u potpunu propast* (A Brief Account of the Inexorable and Tragic Course of Destiny that Led the Fragile Being of the Little Mermaid to Total Disaster), a work by Goran Kapetanović (1969–2014), was premièred at Belgrade's Sava Centre in 1994, as part of the Third International Review of Composers, I was

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present in the audience.² It was one of those first performances that let you know right from the start that you are witnessing an important work, an accomplishment that breaks through local academic barriers and boldly steps into the New. The performers were visibly excited, almost out of breath in their empathy for “the Little Mermaid’s destiny”. It was there and then that I fell in love with *The Little Mermaid* and made a promise to myself that one day I would write about the piece.

Many years have passed since then. Four years ago, I began working on a text about *The Little Mermaid*, but I was distracted by my circumstances at the time and the “inexorable course” of life. I made a promise to Goran then (and renewed the promise I had made to myself) that I would certainly write a text about *The Little Mermaid* on another occasion and now, three years since Goran Kapetanović left us, the time has finally come.

I have thought about this piece a great deal, I have listened to it many times, and each time, it eluded a straightforward interpretation. It was clear to me that due to its multilayered poetic conception, Bakhtinian heteroglossia and carnivalesque aura, hybridity of genre and collage musical form, *The Little Mermaid* called for an intertextual, multilayered analysis, which would divine the work in the interaction of its many poetic layers. At the same time, it was likewise clear that the artistic power of *The Little Mermaid* (I cannot find a professional phrase for the effect produced by the piece) calls, irresistibly, for empathy and a personal interpretation. That is probably why all texts written about this piece so far bear a powerful subjective tone, from Kapetanović’s own lucid and auto-poetic text,³ the inspired essay by Zorica Premate,⁴ the synthetic and creative-analytical text by Ivana Vuksanović,⁵ Nebojša Petrović’s “Opširniji prikaz...” (A More Extensive Review...) of *Little Mermaid*,⁶ to the brief commentaries about this piece penned by other authors.

² The sound example is available online at the official New Sound YouTube channel. Please find the playlist here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GZt_2SKutBY&list=PLNFGwrMs0-Xzo9GYGsuBaxxOc6704_IUJ

³ Goran Kapetanović, “Sažeti prikaz neumitnog i tragičnog toka sudbine koji je krhko biće Male Sirene odveo u potpunu propast”, *Muzički talas*, 1, 1994, 11–13.

⁴ Zorica Premate, “Mala Sirena ili o praznini sveta” (The Little Mermaid, or: On the Emptiness of the World), in: *Dvanaest lakih komada* (Twelve Easy Pieces), Belgrade, Prosveta, 1997, 41–47.

⁵ For more on *The Little Mermaid* by Goran Kapetanović, see: Ivana Vuksanović, *Aspekti preznačenja elemenata trivijalnih žanrova u srpskoj muzici XX veka* (Aspects of the Re-signification of Elements of Trivial Genres in Serbian 20th-century Music), Belgrade, University of Arts and Faculty of Music, 2006, 62–65.

⁶ Nebojša Petrović, “Opširniji prikaz toka sudbine vizuelnog sažetog prikaza...” (A More Extensive Account of the Course of Fate of a Visual Brief Account...), *Muzički talas*, 1, 1994, 13–16.

What intrigues me the most about *The Little Mermaid* is the relationship between its collage, conspicuously intertextual surface layer and its postmodernistically hidden ‘dramatic line’. In my perception of the work, the postmodernist play and irony that Kapetanović discussed in his own text, constitutes a mere ‘camouflage’, a postmodernist charade hiding the work’s poetic message. Its musical ‘story’, told in a carnivalesque fashion, is really a tragedy unfolding in the dazzle of stage lights! This hidden and, as much as possible, ‘muted’ tragedy, ‘clothed’ in irony toward ‘vanity fair’, represents (in my opinion) in Kapetanović’s piece the breakdown (or death) of the “fragile being” of a feeling Subject in an age (our age) that only appears to be free from ideological constraints, but is actually perfidiously led by the logic of force, which always supports the stronger.

My strong impression of Kapetanović’s work informed my decision to write here about *The Little Mermaid* in two ways: by discussing its postmodernist intertextuality, generated by a carnivalesque play of signifiers, and by illuminating its ‘pervading’ dramatic thread, which is suppressed, in fact hidden by the imposing postmodernist collage fragmentation on the surface of the work’s musical flow.

About the Piece

Goran Kapetanović’s enigmatic and complex piece – *A Brief Account of the Inexorable and Tragic Course of Destiny that Led the Fragile Being of the Little Mermaid to Total Disaster* for coloratura soprano, soprano, flute, clarinet/bass clarinet, bassoon, viola, double bass, piano, and electronic backing track (1994) – certainly belongs in the representative zone of radical postmodernism in Serbian music. Almost completely elusive in its intertextual play, fragmented, textually heterogeneous and, at the same time (on other levels), integrated, and narrative in a unique way, *The Little Mermaid* resists straightforward interpretations, toys with the “unquestionable” commonplaces of postmodernist theories, and, in fact, like its author, “tells its own story”.

The work’s postmodernist play begins already in the title,⁷ which is so extended that it immediately seems ironic, especially given the abundance of well-

⁷ In her book, *Aspects of the Re-signification of Elements of Trivial Genres in Serbian 20th-century Music*, Ivana Vuksanović pays special attention to the title of Kapetanović’s piece, whose pathetic quality reminds her, on the one hand, of “sentimental 19th-century pulp fiction” and Bovarism and, on the other hand, the products of certain icons of the “popular” in the 20th century: Woody Allen’s film *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex * But Were Too Afraid to Ask*, or, perhaps, García Márquez’s *The Incredible and Sad Tale of Innocent Eréndira and Her Soulless Grandmother...* Cf. Ivana Vuksanović, op. cit., 62.

known rhetorical tropes: a “brief account”, the “inexorable and tragic course of destiny”, “fragile being”, “total disaster” – how many times have we all heard or uttered those hackneyed clichés! At the same time, though unexpectedly, the title of the piece is so logical that anyone can memorize it right away. In any case, this disarming title clearly refers us to Andersen’s fairytale of the Little Mermaid as the work’s literary model, while a significant role is certainly also played by “Disney’s eponymous cartoon (produced in 1989...)”, as noted by Ivana Vuksanović.⁸

In line with the fairytale’s plot, the piece comprises three movements, in a complex tripartite form, conceived as a musical collage. Kapetanović himself clearly states as much in his auto-poetic explication of the piece: “In a brief account, the fairytale may be reduced to three key moments: the Little Mermaid’s birth, her desire for the outside world, and her demise, i.e. death”.⁹ Each movement comprises its own part of the story, written in the form of stage directions (of sorts).

The musical form of each movement is a “product of a collage procedure”, generated by “linking up ‘incompatible’ musical materials”.¹⁰ Quotations (samples of Stravinsky’s voice and the singing of Florence Foster Jenkins) and numerous simulacra (“quasi-quotations”) from various kinds of music (popular culture and art music) are carefully woven into the ‘plotline’ – juxtaposed or placed in succession, which is further discussed below. The fragmentation of the musical flow is so conspicuous, as if championing, literally and deliberately, the theoretical precepts of musical postmodernism, which one may after all read in the entire organization of the piece. The postmodern intervention here implies a multiple coding of the musical text of *The Little Mermaid*, as well as a peculiar (ironic) kind of ambivalence toward the chosen historical artefacts, whose meanings are ‘used’ in this music.

For a moment, I wondered how one might define the ‘natural musical language’ of this work and music analysis gave me a clear answer: it is a free postmodernist, dodecaphonic pseudo-tonal musical language, which also ‘combines’ chordal structures based on thirds and their tonal and non-tonal progressions, diatonicism and linear formations with open chromaticism, as well as constant re-alterations in the melodic lines. Regarding the work’s musical language, one also notes its (postmodernist) ‘irreducibility’ of textural layers. The musical flow is often bi-centric, occasionally venturing into polytonality: the intentional foci of simultaneously present layers of texture are different and their friction at some

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Goran Kapetanović, op. cit., 12.

¹⁰ Ibid.

points in the piece¹¹ is ‘amplified’ so much that one can no longer distinguish the individual ‘units’ of meaning that are active in a given situation!

On the other hand, some of the ‘combined’ elements of the primary organization of this work’s musical language (which is further discussed below) occasionally quite clearly allude to Stravinsky’s musical language in *Petrushka*.

Therefore, it all comes together in the theoretical ‘model’ of a postmodernist work of music – heterogeneous, hybrid (multiply coded), sophisticated in its modernist re-examination of non-modernist ‘musics’ and their conventions. Bizarre in its discursive ambivalences, *The Little Mermaid* by Goran Kapetanović theoretically combines and unites (!) even elements of Jonathan D. Kramer’s collage “radical musical postmodernism”¹² with fundamental traits of Hal Foster’s “postmodernism of resistance”!¹³

Intertextual Playing with Signs in *The Little Mermaid*

The subtitle of the piece – TATOO 1 – as well as the composer’s explication of this term clearly refer the listener/interpreter to the composer’s peculiar approach to the representation of elements of the plot, that is, in Lawrence Kramer’s terms – to the elements of the composer’s narratography.¹⁴ Goran Kapetanović wrote: “TA-

¹¹ Harmonic ‘dissonance’ between various layers may be noticed in a number of situations in the piece. Harmonic discrepancy between individual layers and even instrumental lines is noticeable already in the First Tableau, in the sections starting at score marks **M**, **N**, and **O**. In the Second Tableau, the section starting at score mark **K** reveals a harsh discrepancy between individual layers of texture – in each one of four layers, the intonation centre clashes with the remaining three. There are similar polytonal situations at score marks **U**, **V**, and **W** in the Second Tableau, as well as in sections starting at marks **Q**, **R**, **V**, and **X** in the Third Tableau.

¹² Jonathan Kramer’s term “radical postmodernism” refers to that ‘strand’ of postmodernism that insists on stylistic eclecticism, the textual heterogeneity of the piece, and the reduction of the organicist myth of the unity of the work to only one among many available creative choices in the postmodern age. On the other side, according to Kramer, there is “neoconservative postmodernism”, which implies a “resurrection of lost traditions set against modernism”, still valorizing stylistic unity. Cf. Jonathan D. Kramer, “Beyond Unity: Toward an Understanding of Musical Postmodern”, in: *Concert Music, Rock, and Jazz since 1945: Essays and Analytical Studies*, Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 1995, 21.

¹³ According to the theorist Hal Foster, “a postmodernism of resistance” is concerned with “a critical deconstruction of tradition” (of all tradition, therefore including modernism as well) and also aimed against the “‘false normativity’ of a reactionary postmodernism”, while the “postmodernism of reaction” represents “a return to the verities of tradition (in art, family, religion...)”, which is heterogeneous in practice, but “singular in its repudiation of modernism”. Cf. Hal Foster, “Postmodernism: A Preface”, in: *Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, London and Sydney, Pluto Press, 1983, xii.

¹⁴ “Narratography is the practice of writing through which narrative [*qua* story] and narrativity are actualized, the discursive performance through which stories actually get told”. Cf.

TOO (in musical terms) is a set of musical actions whose purpose is to establish *the existence of sense beneath the sediments of mass production*" (italics added).¹⁵

Here, the way the elements of the plot are represented does not share the character of programme music, typical of music from earlier historical periods. There is no "realistic presentation of an event" here. Specific musical signs merely represent certain extra-musical (or musical) meanings, while the drama (in fact, tragedy) of *The Little Mermaid* is 'performed', in a dialogue of sorts, by her 'voice' (which is a direct expression of her state) and various musical signifiers that surround it and, from one moment to the next, simultaneously or in succession and, indirectly, present the entire context of the action.

The main *designator*¹⁶ that directs the listener's engagement with the work's (extra-musical) content is the title, which unequivocally points to the fairytale of the Little Mermaid as the story that the music will 'tell' and that will then be 'complemented' with a brief 'programme', stated at the beginning of each movement. In this way, the listener is offered an extra-musical interpretative code to facilitate her engagement with the Little Mermaid's (musical) drama, which unfolds in an interesting postmodernist play of signs.

Of course, as the composer himself put it, "the dramaturgical course of the story in relation to A Brief Account... highly influenced the choice of musical materials and corresponding colours".¹⁷

One after another, or one with another, the signifiers in Kapetanović's *Little Mermaid* point to a multitude of signifieds. In certain segments of the musical flow, semiosis, taking place in the work in real time, is accelerated so much that the listener finds it easier to discern the relations between individual signs rather than their respective meanings. And it is precisely the relations between the signifiers, their succession, juxtaposition, repetition, intertwining that make up the peculiar narrative structure of Kapetanović's musical text.

In the First Tableau, "which initially presents the underwater kingdom; then, the Little Mermaid is born"¹⁸, there is less playing with referential signs than in

Lawrence Kramer, "Musical Narratology: A Theoretical Outline", in: *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1995, 100.

¹⁵ Goran Kapetanović, op. cit., 11.

¹⁶ In "Music and Representation", Kramer defines the designator as a mark (whether verbal or a clear musical allusion) that implicitly or explicitly identifies what is being represented (Jonathan D. Kramer, op. cit., 69–70). According to Kramer, the designator points the listener to a specific correspondence/similarity between musical tools used in a piece and the objects represented by those musical tools.

¹⁷ Goran Kapetanović, op. cit., 12.

¹⁸ The quoted text by Kapetanović appears as a sort of stage direction; it is placed right before the score of the First Tableau.

the Second or Third Tableau. The musical flow is at first quite disjointed, there is a series of unconnected fragments, figures, and short motives. The sound is organized in an almost pointillist fashion and there is only an occasional arabesque (replete with double notes) to complement the sound image.

In this tableau, there are only three important musical signifiers: a simulacrum – allusion to the Ballerina’s dance from Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*, another simulacrum – a pianistic *Cadenza brillante*, and the Little Mermaid leitmotif.

The first ‘referential episode’ occurs at mark **K** in the score: a duet of the clarinet and electronics (from the tape). The clarinet’s melodic line is constantly changing direction from ascending to descending and back, the melody moving in a fragile and frivolous fashion up and down the triad (with re-alterations). The melodic line, the ‘accompaniment’ (ascending and descending triad arpeggiations – like in Stravinsky!), as well as the instrumentation at this point generate the effect of an allusion to one of the Ballerina’s appearances in Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*, but it is semantically blurred by jazz twists, the elusive elements of jazz! An intentional ambivalence, play, riddle, irony?

The signifier here points to Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* as its object, but the signifier itself is ambivalent and equivocal: by modifying the sample (Stravinsky) with elements of jazz, this complex signifier points to a double, ambivalent signified! Following a statement of this semantically equivocal theme, beginning at marks **M** and **N**, there is a “collective improvisation on motives from the theme”, which, as Ivana Vuksanović rightly notes, “generates the impression of an unsynchronized ensemble whose members [...] are half-heartedly ‘getting done’ an obligatory part of the programme, in total self-alienation”.¹⁹ This procedure would not merit analytical attention if it did not concern a sort of ‘killing’ of the primary reference (the Ballerina’s dance from Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*) – at first by foregrounding those elements of jazz and then also by “emptying them of meaning”, by a progressive slowing down in the musical flow. A very interesting and rare procedure in the vocabulary of collage postmodernism!

Precisely because it simultaneously restores and negates its primary signified (Stravinsky), this ‘referential event’ (simulacrum) would certainly lose its import in the remainder of the work, were it not for some other, subsequent referential points in Kapetanović’s piece that also point to Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*, as its ‘ultimate signified’ – model.²⁰

¹⁹ Ivana Vuksanović, op. cit., 63.

²⁰ According to Mirjana Veselinović Hofman, a model is “not used as a concrete material, but one notes some of its regularities (e.g. in terms of structure, texture, timbre, etc.) that are used or even negated in a composer’s individual utterance”. Cf. Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, *Fragmentsi o muzičkoj postmoderni* (Fragments on Musical Post-modernity), Novi Sad, Matica srpska, 1997, 27.

The next, entirely unexpected ‘referential event’ is the *Cadenza brillante*: an effective choral arpeggiation in the piano part – a simulacrum (floating signifier) of piano virtuosity from Beethoven to Rachmaninoff, serving to announce the main event – the birth of the Little Mermaid.

The Little Mermaid’s leitmotif is the most significant musical sign in this tableau, although it is not exteroceptive!²¹ This high-pitched melodic motive, with tonal harmonic accompaniment, is assigned to the ‘otherworldly’ electronic sound.

The Second Tableau – “wherein we notice the first signs of melancholia, depression, and mental suffering in the Little Mermaid; then, she begins to hear the voices of mortals, which begins to wreck her fragile soul and eventually determines the Little Mermaid’s unfortunate fate” – already turns into a drama!

The thick web of referential signs that are featured in this tableau now also encompasses voices/roles: soprano (The Little Mermaid) and *soprano leggiero* (a coloratura soprano as her “rival” – the modified singing of Florence Foster Jenkins). In this tableau, the Little Mermaid, in her immanent and, as it turns out, tragic duality (‘fish-girl’)²² becomes a feeling Subject, a being that meets the outer world. The Little Mermaid’s musical identity thus becomes ‘two-dimensional’: her leitmotif, as her ‘being’ and her vocal part – ‘voice’ as by now an already troubled “doing”²³ – *espressivo*.

The vocal *samples*²⁴ of Igor Stravinsky mentioned above appear in this tableau as indexical signs that affirm the ‘presence’ of Stravinsky as a historical figure and his work in Kapetanović’s piece.

The intertextual play of signs begins already at the very outset of this tableau. In the piano part, there appears (and persists throughout the tableau) an interesting bichordal progression²⁵ accompanied by accentuated *pizzicatos* in the

²¹ See footnote No. 19.

²² Cf. Ivana Vuksanović, op. cit., 63.

²³ “Being” and “doing” are terms (borrowed from Greimas’s *Structural Semantics*) that Eero Tarasti uses in his semiotic theory. They signify different modalities of musical themes (musical entities). “Being” stands for the “existence” of a theme, whereas “doing” represents the possibility of its acting and entering into relationships with other themes. Cf. Eero Tarasti, op. cit., 40–41.

²⁴ According to the theorization of Mirjana Veselinović Hofman, a “sample (quotation), whether complete or incomplete, is a material that represents the context where it comes from and as such, must be recognized. A sample is a signifier, whereby that which it signifies (the signified) depends on the meaning of its original context – as a sort of code. That code determines the range and type of meanings that may be ascribed to the sample in its new context”. Cf. Mirjana Veselinović Hofman, op. cit., 24–25.

²⁵ The profile of the piano part constitutes an ‘icon’ of the harp part in “The Waltz” – the situation at No. 141 in the score of Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* (Boosey & Hawkes, 1947/1965).

bassoon and double bass: on the one hand, this sound image clearly points to the bi-tonal (and bichordal) quality of Petrushka's motive from Stravinsky's eponymous work, while, on the other hand, it also involves chordal movement in the bass, ascending and descending in alternation, and *pizzicato* effects alluding to the famous fight scene between the Capulets and the Montagues from Sergei Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*! Again, an ambiguous signifier and an ambivalent, floating signified!

This bichordal progression is then transformed into a permanent textural layer supporting the alternation of heterogeneous 'referential events': an allusion to the atmosphere of dance numbers from Stravinsky's *Petrushka*,²⁶ assigned to the woodwinds; then, an orientalized and extremely chromaticized passage in the bass-clarinet part – *à la Scheherazade* by Rimsky-Korsakov (simulacrum – allusion); followed, for a brief moment, by a fleeting allusion to classicism (just two textural lines – like a real tattoo).

The un-relatedness of these two adjacent 'appropriated little images' [*sličice*] – simulacra – is enhanced by a technique whereby one is 'framed' by the other and repeated 'at a distance'.²⁷ This procedure of fragmentation, heterogeneity of content, and a hidden line of continuity likewise points to Stravinsky's procedure in *Petrushka*, as well as to the very structure of that work, which by now, in the second tableau of Kapetanović's piece, quite clearly emerges as his specific model – a sort of hypotext for *The Little Mermaid*.²⁸

The initiated intertextual play is interrupted by the voice of the Mermaid's 'rival' (at score mark **J**) – a 'mortal's voice', heard by the Little Mermaid, now perturbed. At this point, the musical flow begins to follow lived, dialogic, dramatic time, wherein the protagonists 'speak in their own voice'. The coloratura soprano, the 'rival', sings an agitated variant of the Little Mermaid's leitmotif (to a suitably pompous chordal piano accompaniment), while the Little Mermaid performs her own, rather personal *espressivo* – her 'immediate lyric I'.²⁹ This

²⁶ At **Q**, the musical flow is 'cut through' by a stylized dance fragment, whose sound alludes to fragments of stylized dances in *Petrushka*. An elusive, floating signifier that is hard to explain! One might also explain the association with *Petrushka* by reference to the preceding 'referential event' that referred to Stravinsky, as well as his voice, which is a potent designator in the understanding of the musical flow at this point.

²⁷ For instance, a fragment pointing to the Ballerina's dance from *Petrushka* appears at mark **C** and then again at **G**.

²⁸ After all, Kapetanović wrote as much in his own text about *The Little Mermaid*. Cf. Goran Kapetanović, op. cit., 12.

²⁹ According to the theorist Käte Hamburger, narrativity serves different functions in the three major eneric categories of literary texts: drama, epic, and lyric. "[T]he lyric poem serves no purpose other than the statement itself"; "What we encounter in the lyric poem

dramatic flow is cut almost as soon as it begins, by Stravinsky's voice: 'Nyet! More violently... more violently...'.³⁰ The musical flow of the second tableau's second part then reverts to musical representation by means of heterogeneous referential signs.

The semantic platform of the second tableau's second part (which continues from the preceding kaleidoscopic series of 'appropriated images') consists of a metrically varied dance rhythmic pattern and 'croaking vocalises' – pseudo-onomatopoeic signs, simulacra of the sounds of birds (at sea), materials heard from the tape. *Vivo delirico, ma quasi una danza*. Kapetanović himself told me that for him, this rhythmic pattern was a "kozachok". I did not have the same impression, which made me realize that this sign, too, was one of many floating signifiers in *The Little Mermaid* – a simulacrum of a widely known and yet unspecified dance pattern. A simulated popular dance genre, without a concrete reference, but sufficiently specified to gain, in synergy with other signifiers, a clear generic determination.

This musical layer from the tape is then quickly 'hybridized' with a new 'appropriated image' – an allusion to the village fair atmosphere of the *Maslenitsa* scene in Stravinsky's *Petrushka* (at score mark **Q**). It is interesting that Kapetanović finds his way out of this referential episode by building a repetitive loop on a single bar from it. A typical postmodernist solution, we might say, but then, a look at the score of *Petrushka* reveals that Stravinsky used the same procedure!

The signifiers that focus the listener's attention onto Stravinsky's *Petrushka* (the preceding 'referential event' and Stravinsky's voice from the tape, "All these accents are not mine") get their 'counterweight' in a new dramatic juncture – a duet of the coloratura soprano and the Little Mermaid, who initially sing in parallel thirds and then separate, developing an increasingly prominent discord (the Little Mermaid struggling, in vain, with her 'rival'), followed by a fall: a decelerated bichordal progression from the beginning of the second tableau (the first eight bars), without *pizzicato* effects (a completely 'emptied sign') and an

is the immediate lyric I". Quoted in Ana Stefanović, *Temporality and Narrativity in Music Drama*, Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade, 2017, 31. Indeed, what we keep hearing as the affective tone of the Little Mermaid's part is precisely her immediate, authentic, and tragic 'lyrical I'.

³⁰ We may wonder for a moment: who is the addressee of this instruction from Stravinsky – the Mermaid, her 'rival', or the entire performing ensemble (the conductor)? Or perhaps Stravinsky's words carry no real message at all, but constitute an 'empty' stage effect that invalidates any attempt to find (extra-musical) meaning in this situation. "Killing the reference"?

onomatopoeic (tragicomic)³¹ chromatic line in the viola part – as a rare conventional, mimetic (iconic) sign in this piece.

In the Third Tableau, “which presents the Little Mermaid’s final demise” – the play of referential signs acquires the contours of a dizzying, Bakhtinian musical carnival, penetrated like a ‘stitched point’ [*prošiveni bod*] by the Little Mermaid’s personal drama.

One after another, there is a whole series of ‘appropriated musical images’: a simulacrum of romanticist pianistic virtuosity *à tempo brillante*; classicist ornaments; a ‘revue number’ as a rounded icon (simulacrum) of a popular genre; a ‘popular tune’, performed by the Mermaid’s earthly ‘rival’, with its sound based on the material from the ‘revue number’ (this material is often repeated in the Third Tableau); an incomplete quotation of a melody from the TV series *Otpisani* (The Written Offs; a venture into the domain of popular culture); a baroque ornament (a simulacrum – floating signifier), repeated and then inflated into a ‘baroque episode’, only to end on an endless repetitive loop; the Little Mermaid’s leitmotif (heard from the tape); a pretentious, parodied allusion to the Queen of the Night aria from *The Magic Flute* of Mozart (an iconic sign); another set of ‘ostentatious piano figuration of the salon type’; and, finally, a baroque ornament, now in the minor mode and, according to Ivana Vuksanović, “turning in a Mahleresque fashion into a funeral march rhythm”.³² What a range of musical references!

As though seeking to revive, with sound, a commonplace in every theory of musical postmodernism, the composer combines in this piece, in an almost poster-like fashion, incommensurable signifiers of artistic styles and trivial genres.

The reader may come under the impression that the array of signifiers in the Third Tableau of Kapetanović’s piece, described above, generates only a dizzying series of events, but the matter is complicated by the fact that the musical flow of this tableau is further layered by numerous juxtapositions of referential signs, which enhance the semantic dimension of the work. Hardly by coincidence, almost all of these juxtapositions of referential signs involve appearances of the Little Mermaid.

Here, I will mention only the situation at score mark **E** (in the Third Tableau), comprising four textural layers ‘inscribed’ with different sets of meanings: the coloratura soprano performs the ‘popular tune’, with banal and pretentious ornaments; the Little Mermaid has an understated, intimate expression (a direct

³¹ The tragicomic, in fact, ironic effect is further enhanced by cheerful vocalises in the backing track, which seem like one of those “croaking” sounds (a grotesque icon) of the “big ugly birds” [*ptičurine*] from the sea.

³² The quotations were taken from Ivana Vuksanović’s book, op. cit., 63.

index of her psychological state); the piano part features the harmonic-rhythmic layer from the ‘revue number’; and, finally, the tape emits ‘deafening noise’ (synthesized sound). The sound image of this situation clearly suggests that the Mermaid’s *voice* is in total disharmony with its environment: the trivial elements in the ‘revue number’, the banal pretentiousness of her ‘rival’, and the deafening noise of the indifferent outside World make the Mermaid’s *voice* sound like a ‘subject in isolation’. The dissonance generated in that poster-like juxtaposition of a feeling Subject and the World instantly gets through to every listener and imparts to this entire “sombre, wise, sincere” play with sounds on Kapetanović’s part a tragic note that (for a moment) quite clearly breaks through the mimicry of irony.

A very similar situation begins at score mark **O** – *Lugubre*, when the Little Mermaid’s drama has already come and gone – upon her defeat in the battle with the outside World. In this segment of the musical flow, there are several clear signifiers simultaneously at work: the incomplete quotation of the theme from the TV series *Otpisani* in the flute (an indexical sign, here serving the function of an unequivocal symbol of the Mermaid’s demise); a baroque, richly ornamented figure repeated in the clarinet part (a floating signifier of the baroque music vocabulary); harmonic accompaniment in the strings and the piano (a sort of counterpoint to the Little Mermaid motive); and the Little Mermaid leitmotif, assigned to electronic sound (this leitmotif affirms the impression that the quotation of the melody from *Otpisani* is associated with the Little Mermaid’s fate!). Predicated on the ‘sum total’ of the combined meanings of all the signifiers present in it, this situation clearly attests to the demise of the Little Mermaid’s ‘fragile being’.

But the operation of the various signifiers present in the music of *A Brief Account...* does not exhaust the ‘secret’ of this piece. It is not only a “play of signs” or an intertext in Gérard Genette’s sense. The unique *heteroglossia* of Kapetanović’s piece also contains a powerful element of drama.

The Drama of the Little Mermaid

A Brief Account of the Inexorable and Tragic Course of Destiny that Led the Little Mermaid’s Fragile Being to Total Disaster is an interesting postmodern collage musical structure that is shaped, in fact, by a peculiar interference of an intertextual play with signs and a subtly shaped dramatic flow that appears and vanishes here like a ‘subterranean river’.

The drama begins in the Second Tableau, with the appearance of the vocal parts – the soprano and the coloratura soprano, a direct reference to the introduction of ‘characters’. At first, the soprano part is fragmented, with wide leaps, descending glissandi, and even stylized sighs (conventional signs meant to de-

pict feelings). Profiled in this way, the soprano part is constantly ‘clashing’ with signifiers from other musics in the surrounding musical flow of the second tableau – which clearly indicates that the soprano part carries the role of the Little Mermaid.

It is opposed by the appearance of the coloratura soprano part, which at one point even performs an agitated variant of the Little Mermaid leitmotif. This is her antagonist, a mortal woman – her Rival, whom the Little Mermaid attempts to fight for her place in the World. The Little Mermaid’s part is constantly presented in relation to that of her rival. Even when they are singing together (at score mark **V**), there is a growing tension between them. This tension is constantly enhanced by the dense polytonality of various textural layers and successions and juxtapositions of various signifiers, which is allocated to the instrumental parts, using the power of its peculiar narrative flow to comment on the action between the two main characters.

There are opinions that the fragmentary, collage flow of postmodern works of music always generates a peculiar impression of musical narrativity.³³ Like in film editing, when meaning is not ‘inscribed’ in each and every individual shot, but lies hidden in the relationship between specifically edited adjacent shots,³⁴ in collage, textually heterogeneous and fragmented postmodern music, a series of signifieds produced by the operation of a series of signifiers generates a sort of narrative flow. This kind of flow branches out and only grows further complicated in situations where multiple signifiers appear simultaneously, when the resulting meaning is the product of their specific interference, always guided by context.

That is why the Little Mermaid’s drama acquires its more concrete meaning only in the Third Tableau of the piece, where different signifiers quite often appear at the same time, in different textural layers of the score.

The Little Mermaid’s marginal position in this world is visible already at the beginning of the Third Tableau (at mark **E**), where her *espressivo* passage is conspicuously overpowered by a fragment (simulacrum) of a popular tune, performed *giocamente* by her ‘rival’, accompanied by the piano part from the

³³ This problem is discussed by Adam John Kolek in his doctoral dissertation, “Form and Narrative in the Collage Music of John Zorn”, in the chapter “Finding the Proper Sequence” (2013), 111. *Open Access Dissertations*, http://scholarworks.umass.edu/open_access_dissertations/733, accessed 9 October 2017.

³⁴ For more on the production of meaning in the process of film and musical editing, see Nicholas Cook, “Uncanny Moments: Juxtaposition and the Colla Principle in Music”, in: Byron Almen and Edward Pearsall (Eds.), *Approaches to Meaning in Music*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2006, 121–122.

‘revue number’ and a deafening electronic noise (which does not even belong to the time or place of the fairytale, but represents the noise of the age that gave rise to the piece!).

Frequently interrupted by other happenings in this world (also resembling, to a degree, a village fair), whose narrative flow is produced by a succession of textually heterogeneous fragments, signifiers of various musics, the Little Mermaid’s drama continues, throughout the Third Tableau – through her dialogue with her Rival, which unfolds in several stages. Especially significant are two ‘dramatic’ situations – when the Little Mermaid struggles to become a human being (at marks **G** and **I**) and when her Rival – the ‘Queen of the Night’ decisively overpowers an already disheartened Little Mermaid (from mark **S** to mark **V**).

The first situation – *Maestoso* begins with a statement of a slow-moving rising melody (built on arpeggiated triads), first performed by the Rival, against a background of slowed down arpeggiated fourths followed by a dissonant parallel motion of chromatic lines (a distant reference to the fourths motives from “Petrushka’s Room”) and then by the Little Mermaid as well (in a sort of *stretto* with the Rival’s part – at mark **I**). This ‘semiotic juxtaposition’ is further complicated when the Mermaid’s part first appears: the dissonant parallel movement of the woodwinds (which continues) is then joined by the harmonic-rhythmic layer from the ‘revue number’ as well as a two-bar sequential model in the viola (ascending and descending seventh-chord arpeggiation) moving upwards and enhancing the growing tension between individual textural layers. This is the Little Mermaid attempting to “sing in an earthly voice”, imitating her Rival – in total disharmony with her musical surroundings.

Following another (repeated) episode of failing to fit in her musical environment, which comprises a fragment from the Rival’s popular tune with the harmonic-rhythmic accompaniment from the ‘revue number’ and electronic sound from the tape, the appearance of an incomplete quotation of the theme from the TV series *Otpisani* (at mark **O**) in the collage narrative of this tableau – is a harbinger of the Little Mermaid’s cruel fate.

The decisive point in her struggle for a spot in the Discourse of this world is the situation (at marks **S** and **T**) where the respective vocal parts of the Little Mermaid and her Rival appear alone, without instrumental accompaniment. An already discouraged Little Mermaid performs her *espressivo* (the melody from the section at mark **G**), eclipsed by a glamorously pretentious, virtuosically out of tune and ‘blithering’ parody allusion to the Queen of the Night’s brilliant aria from Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, performed by the Rival, a creature with a ‘prominent’ place in the Discourse of this world. One can simultaneously hear this sim-

ulacrum of a classicist *aria brillante* and the Little Mermaid's almost lamenting *espressivo*, right until the Mermaid (following a lamenting final vocalise) grows silent, losing her 'voice', like in Andersen's fairytale. Immediately after this, the orchestra plays the theme from the TV series *Otpisani*, which sounds sobering and cruel, like a direct commentary on the "total disaster" that befalls the Little Mermaid.

Although her (musical) drama is realized with the aid of surrounding signifiers and other musics and codes, the musical utterance of the Little Mermaid's personality rests on a specific, trans-stylistic code of the *tragic expressive genre*, a code that is generically different from all other discursive codes in this piece, which, seemingly at least, does not have an underlying generic identity of its own. In every appearance, the Little Mermaid's ubiquitous *espressivo*, containing no 'inscribed meanings', 'touches upon' the tragic affective note (pain, resignation) and anticipates the real tragedy, the tragedy unfolding on the stage, wrapped in the collage simulacrum of a postmodernist farce.

Viewed from the vantage point of the present moment, the Little Mermaid's drama unfolds in a struggling attempt by a "fragile" (feeling) Subject to enter the Discourse of the contemporary World, wherein she is overwhelmed and decisively defeated by the voices of more powerful Others.

The Little Mermaid as an Inter-text, Hypertext, Palimpsest ... and Tragedy

Goran Kapetanović himself, as well as a number of authors who have written about *A Brief Account...*, discussed "the principle of play as the basic creative impulse"³⁵ of this piece. A part of that creative play that gave birth to *A Brief Account...* was Kapetanović's view of the "perfect playing with music" that Igor Stravinsky achieved in *Petrushka*.³⁶ The other part of this lucid game belongs to the creative musical imagination of Kapetanović himself, who played here with the entire postmodernist practice of quoting, exploring the ways in which musical signifiers may realize their elusive, verbally almost ineffable meanings. His invention of the ambiguous floating signifier (the jazzed up melody *à la* Ballerina from the First Tableau, or the "Stravinsky-Prokofiev" signifier from the opening of the Second Tableau), which fails to 'convince' the listener about any of its potential signifieds, as well as his subtle way of 'emptying the signifier' by means of gradually slowing down or depersonalized repetition – constitute the triumph of his creative, "wise, sincere, and serious" play.

³⁵ Ivana Vuksanović, *op. cit.*, 63.

³⁶ "Since *A Brief Account...* is itself a game, it was natural to include into the whole thing the voice, character, and oeuvre of Igor Stravinsky." Cf. Goran Kapetanović, *op. cit.*, 12.

A number of signifiers at various levels in this musical discourse point us to *Petrushka* as the hypo-text of *The Little Mermaid*.³⁷ The analysis undertaken for the purposes of this study showed that these are not just rounded simulated 'little images' – signifiers alluding to the bi-tonal (bi-chordal) quality of the *Petrushka* motive, the Ballerina's dance, the atmosphere in *Petrushka*'s room, or the *Maslenitsa* fair celebration. The idiolect of this piece also contains small, individually unnoticeable elements, such as: the constant changes of direction in the figurations, thematic melodic lines, and even harmonic progressions; the characteristic texture of the piano part; constant re-alternations in the parts; dyadic chordal arpeggiations; peculiar instrumentation, and even texture; and, finally, the work's fragmentary structure. Last but not least, there is also the voice of Stravinsky. Their 'joint' operation exerts a powerful impact on the listener, who is subtly introduced, amidst a whirlpool of different but similarly coded signifiers, into the 'magnetic field' of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. The overall presence of various 'traces' of *Petrushka* centres the semantic plane of *A Brief Account...* and establishes relations between different stylistic and generic codes in Kapetanović's work.

The musical code of *Petrushka* is the designator³⁸ that guides the listener through the play of representation in *The Little Mermaid*. That is why, for instance, the rounded simulated 'little image' [*sličica*] in the Second Tableau of *The Little Mermaid* reminds us of the fairgrounds atmosphere of *Maslenitsa* – even though there is no tangible proof of that in Stravinsky's score! Nor do the appearances of the Ballerina in Stravinsky's work sound like simulated signifiers that we recognize in the Second Tableau of this piece. These are powerful "referential illusions",³⁹ generated by the interaction of the musical context resulting from those situations and the "over-coding" effected by the subtle presence of Stravinsky "the man and his works" in Kapetanović's work!

Even the characteristically postmodern merging of signifiers from "high art" and trivial genres is achieved in Stravinsky's manner: the signifiers from trivial genres are simulated or 'stylized' as such, translated into the discourse of art, while the signifiers of artistic styles are parodied or 'contaminated' with elements of jazz and translated into the discourse of 'popular' music. In other

³⁷ Discussing *A Brief Account...* from the perspective of using trivial genres, Ivana Vuksanović lucidly notes that "*A Brief Account* shows numerous associations to *Petrushka*...". Cf. Ivana Vuksanović, op. cit., 63.

³⁸ The term comes from Lawrence Kramer: "More definite or individualized representations usually require something more: a designator, as we call it, that implicitly or explicitly identifies what is being represented". Cf. Lawrence Kramer, op. cit., 69.

³⁹ See in: Majkl Rifater, „Referencijalna iluzija”, *Treći program*, 85, 1990, 196–202.

words, even combining the ‘high’ and the ‘trivial’ in this piece is parodied in Stravinsky’s manner.

Indirectly, this piece problematizes postmodernism’s position regarding the concept of presenting. Kapetanović’s *Little Mermaid* is a deft example of striking a distance between postmodernist referentiality and the traditional concept of representation. It does not correspond to the realistic notion of representation because it relies on the practice of ‘double’ or even ‘multiple’ coding. In every postmodernist piece, there are different codes decoding different referential signs – this disables the usual ‘single’, ‘linear’ musical presentation (which is also present in postmodernist styles), but still enables presenting as such, *qua* the principle of representation in the widest sense, predicated on the mechanism whereby signifiers act in a characteristically postmodern – multifocal field of signification.

Its dramatic points provide *A Brief Account...* with a special layer of meaning: their discontinued existence in this piece, as its ‘stitched point’, attest to the flexible, hybrid, and multifaceted quality of Kapetanović’s work, which reconciles and combines incommensurable discursive codes, expressive genres, and layers of signification. And yet, the work’s declared postmodernist ‘disjointedness’ of discursive flows does not inhibit or manage to hide the existence of an essentially tragic poetic core of the piece.

It is certainly conditioned by Andersen’s fairytale (Kapetanović’s inspiration for this piece), which incorporates an encapsulated tragedy with all of its hallmarks: its tragic heroine is undone by her predetermined wicked fate; she violates the rules of the (underwater) world where she belongs by birth, persisting in her (vain) attempt to gain entrance to the world of humans, where she does not belong (which forms her tragic guilt). And of course, there is the tragic ending as well.

All of these elements of tragedy as a genre (which one might find in every textbook on literary theory) are present, incredibly, both in the music and poetic concept of Goran Kapetanović! Even the work’s title itself uses tragic topoi – “the inexorable and tragic course of fate” that leads the tragic heroine “to total disaster”.

Due to the pervasive mimicry of our time, all of us – contemporaries, who ‘witnessed’ the making of Kapetanović’s work – have been seduced, on the one hand, by his definition of Andersen’s fairytale of the Little Mermaid as a melodrama⁴⁰ and, on the other hand, we came to ‘believe’, due to the dominant ironic Discourse through which we observe reality, that this is only an ironic persiflage,

⁴⁰ Goran Kapetanović, op. cit., 11.

yet another creative contribution to the postmodernist practice of signification. No one has had as much as an inkling of the tragedy hiding in the title. Likewise the music itself does not right away reveal elements of the tragic genre – rather, they emerge imperceptibly throughout the piece and appear from under the “sediment of mass production”, as Kapetanović wrote.

Here, the role of the tragic heroine is assigned to the soprano vocal part (the Little Mermaid), whose musical tragic guilt is shown in its conflict with a web of unrelated signifiers and their generic codes, while a trace of the *sublime style*, also characteristic of the tragic genre, may be read here in the ‘lonesome’, expressive, and intensive affective tone prevailing in the Little Mermaid’s part, which, as I already emphasized above, with the exception of its mighty emotional envelope of musical expression, contains no conventional ‘inscribed meanings’ and hopelessly fails to fit in the lively heteroglossia of the ‘outside (musical) world’.

The only defining feature of tragedy that is missing in *The Little Mermaid* is catharsis. It is difficult to image how catharsis might sound in a postmodernist musical work, but it is certain that (postmodernist) irony directly and ‘inevitably’ prevents any explicit appearance of it. Consequently, the absence of a catharsis prevents the listener from recognizing the piece as a tragedy. And so, in an ironic play of various identities and generic codes, the tragedy in Kapetanović’s work hides its traces.

A Brief Account by Kapetanović is at once an inter-text and a hypertext (whose hypo-text is Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*) and a sort of postmodernist palimpsest, consisting of various stylistic, generic, and semantic layers ‘spliced’ together, but also hiding a ‘suppressed’ presence of tragic elements, which sets it apart and clearly distinguishes it from other postmodernist collage pieces composed in Serbia during the 1990s.

I am not sure if this conclusion/ending of my text would please the “fragile being” of Goran Kapetanović, lucid and guarded by irony, but that is what I, following my “mature awareness of life and its main features”,⁴¹ hear, see, recognize, think, and feel when I listen to his beautiful and quite extraordinary piece.

⁴¹ A paraphrase of Goran Kapetanović’s words from his text on *The Little Mermaid*, quoted above.

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Summary

This text is a discussion of postmodernist intertextuality, specific narrativity, and the “underlying” dramatic thread in Goran Kapetanović’s work *Sažeti prikaz neumitnog i tragičnog toka sudbine koji je krhko biće Male Sirene odveo u potpunu propast* (A Brief Account of the Inexorable and Tragic Course of Fate that Led the Fragile Being of the Little Mermaid to Total Disaster) from the perspective of musical semiotics.

An intertextual ‘play of signs’ reveals different categories of referential signs that “inhabit” the musical flow of *The Little Mermaid*. These are indexical signs (vocal samples of Stravinsky and a modified vocal sample of Florence Foster Jenkins, as well as an incomplete quotation of the main theme from *Otpisani* (The Written Offs, a cult Yugoslav TV series), which point directly to their objects; referential signs (all kinds of simulacra and *floating signifiers* of generically or historically remote musics); and a self-referential, that is, *interoceptive sign* – the Little Mermaid’s leitmotif, which comes from the ‘natural musical language’ of this work by Kapetanović. The synthesized sounds that are heard from the backing track throughout the piece likewise constitute a sort of sign – signifier of the (aggressive, threatening) techno-music of our time.

One after another, or one with another, the signifiers in *The Little Mermaid* by Kapetanović refer to a multitude of signifieds. At certain points in the work’s musical flow, semiosis becomes so fast that the listener discerns the relations between the signs more quickly than their individual meanings. And it is precisely those relations between signifiers, their succession, juxtaposition, repetition, intertwining that make up the specific narrative structure of Kapetanović’s musical text.

On the other hand, a number of signifiers at various levels of this musical discourse point us to *Petrushka* as *The Little Mermaid*’s hypotext. Their ‘joint’ action makes a powerful impact on the listener, taking her, imperceptibly, in this whirlpool of different but similarly coded signifiers, into the ‘magnetic field’ of Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*, the piece that seems to be the most likely source and hypotext of *The Little Mermaid* by Kapetanović.

Also, analysis shows that this hybrid, textually heterogeneous and fragmentary work by Kapetanović was in fact driven by a special *interference between an intertextual play of signs and a subtly shaped dramatic flow*, which emerges and submerges again throughout the piece like a ‘subterranean river’.

Surveying the dramatic flow of the piece brings us to the final claim made in the conclusion of this text – that *The Little Mermaid* by Kapetanović contains an encapsulated tragedy with all of its defining traits: the fairytale’s *tragic heroine* is undone by her predetermined (*tragic fate*); she violates the rules of the (underwater) world, where she belongs by birth, persevering in her (futile) attempt to enter the world of humans, where she does not belong (*tragic guilt*). There is also the *tragic ending*. The text shows that all of those elements of the tragic genre are present in Goran Kapetanović’s music as well.

Thus we reach the conclusion that *The Little Mermaid* by Goran Kapetanović is simultaneously an intertext and a hypertext (whose hypotext is Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*) and that the hidden and “muted” presence of tragic elements is what sets it apart and clearly distinguishes it from other postmodernist collage pieces created in Serbia during the 1990s.