

THE STYLISTIC FEATURES OF VASILIJE MOKRANJAC'S PIANO COMPOSITIONS

VIRĐINIA TOTAN¹, PETRUȚA-MARIA COROIU²

SUMMARY. Vasilije Mokranjac can be seen as a paradigm for an entire generation of Serbian composers who started creating at an unfavourable historical moment. In time, he moved away from his initial stylistic ideas and, by constant transformation of his practically neoclassical style, he created a heterogeneous work. He dealt most intensely with piano music and, as a result, he contributed the most, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to this area.

Keywords: Vasilije Mokranjac, piano compositions, stylistic

1. Introduction

Vasilije Mokranjac can be seen as a paradigm for an entire generation of Serbian composers who started creating at an unfavourable historical moment. In time, he moved away from his initial stylistic ideas and, by constant transformation of his practically neoclassical style, he created a heterogeneous work. He dealt most intensely with piano music and, as a result, he contributed the most, both quantitatively and qualitatively, to this area.

“According to Mirjana Šuvaković, modernism is a mega-culture of the organization and development of culture and art from the end of the 18th century to the 60s in the 20th century and it is determined by the

¹ *PhD student, Transilvania University Braşov, E-mail: totan.v97@gmail.com*

² *University Professor PhD, Transilvania University Braşov, maniuțpetruta@yahoo.com*



modernity project, which means that it establishes itself as a culture occupied with the revolutionary or evolutive separation from tradition and progressive advancement”³. The same author states that moderate modernism transforms the excessive results of neo-avant-garde and avant-garde in a moderate, consumerist mass culture of the bourgeois class and of the medium social strata. After WWII, in USSR, Eastern Europe and the Balkans, in the countries with real socialism after the ideology of socialist realism weakened while the bourgeois class continued to exist, moderate modernism emerged as a decorative art, neutral from an ideological, expressive-figurative point of view. The author also underlines that modern modernism, as autonomous aestheticized and compromised art, is an expression of the aesthetic, artistic and cultural values of the bureaucratic and technocratic strata of post-revolutionary Europe.

2. Modern Serbian Music Tradition

When the questions relating to the relationship between the tradition of classical music and the modernist innovation are at the centre of musicology research, the answers are usually sought by examining those phenomena and creations which to a certain extent radicalize or completely redirect the relationship established in the given context between the traditional and the new. Hence, different types of evaluation and positioning of the phenomena under investigation, most often within the canonical musicological discourse which, also most often, favours those who, according to tradition, act in a radical manner. Even though some of the most “radical” artists of the last century indicated their links to tradition, a part of the musicological research of the last century concentrated on establishing the main current in the history of music according to the principles mentioned previously. It is precisely because of this legacy that the attempts to uncover “hidden” historical details and to prove the importance and the meaning that some of them, at first sight, not so radical phenomena in the music history of the 20th century, seem essential because they offer the chance of a more significant contextualization, complete and up-to-date, of the composer’s creation, especially when the composer belongs to “small” cultures, like the Serbian one.

³ Mikić Vesna. “Different types of modernism/neoclassicism by Dušan Radić, Belgrade”, *Journal of the Musicological Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts*, 2006, p. 267.

Taking into consideration the circumstances and features of the development, as well as the artistic achievement of the Serbian music of the last century, it is understandable that considerable attention has been paid to the progress in the Serbian musical creativity in the sense of "closing the gap" between the current European music and the world music, usually accompanied by a radical disturbance or abandonment of tradition, while its other aspects, those whose connections to tradition were apparently stronger and more visible, are again slightly neglected in such interpretations.

On this occasion, we "defend" those phenomena of Serbian music of the last century, which, although significant from the point of view of the production volume, because of the apparently strong links with tradition, although acknowledged and respected, were somehow left aside in the debates. Namely, our "fight" here is meant to indicate the possible interpretations and contextualization of musical neo-expressionism as a modernist phenomenon specific to the history of (Serbian) music, and we will try to "evidence the evidence" in case of certain accomplishments which belong to the piano compositions of the Serbian composer Vasilije Mokranjac.

3. Vasilije Mokranjac: Musical Stylistic

Vasilije Mokranjac stands out as one of the most important Serbian composers who dealt most intensely with piano music and, as a result, contributed the most to this music, both quantitatively and qualitatively. His creations for piano are still alive and current today. This is important because many creations by Serbian composers, even during their lifetime, were neglected, forgotten, considered uninteresting by the interpreters. Nevertheless, Mokranjac's entire piano work is still inspiring for both interpreters and listeners. His compositions did not have to wait the objective judgement (which is sometimes primitive) of time, because, since their creation, they were accepted warmly and assimilated in the small music fund by Serbian composers, which can be heard on concert stages regularly. This type of favourable reception of Mokranjac's compositions was facilitated to a certain extent by their traditional character – namely, these works did not have to create a special space in our environment, which means to fight for the acceptance of the "novelty" they introduced. Mokranjac moved within the standard compositional means, but he created piano compositions which managed to survive their historical moment and can be re-evaluated today.

Vasilije Mokranjac belongs to the generation of Serbian composers who started their composition studies immediately after WWII, in a creative environment which forced a distance from the pre-war avant-garde. The avant-garde period, represented by composers trained in Prague, lost its power right before the beginning of the war; after the liberation, this episode was completely ignored. This was followed by a return to the traditional compositional and expressive means. The tonality, as an intangible guarantee of order and harmony in music, was once again crowned; the continuation of strict formal models from previous stylistic epochs, firstly, classicism and romanticism; they were the mould in which to pour the music built on national foundations, full of quasi-folkloric intonations. Europe was looking for a new sound; our musical environment went back several decades. The training of the young Vasilije Mokranjac at the beginning of his career as a composer was influenced by a complex of social circumstances, academic rules, (lack of) cultural and artistic opportunities... From this point of view, he was in the same position as the other Serbian composers of that time. As stated by Vlastimir Peričić, soon after 1945, generations of composers wrote nearly in the same style, because of the “turn” of the representatives of modernity from before the war, which brought them closer to the older generation and, at the same time, constituted a starting point in the development of the young. In what follows we will discuss to what extent this can be seen in Mokranjac’s creativity, and which was his answer to it.

The musicologists who dealt with Mokranjac’s piano compositions reached the conclusion that there was a stylistic evolution, because the composer moved from neo-romanticism to neo-expressionism, which was then interpreted as gradual mastery of increasingly complex harmonic means and compositional procedures. At the same time, the compositions which were created in the same period, but outside this “mainstream” and incorporating elements from the objectivist neo-classical direction, were mostly neglected.

Based on the same construction, the neo-impressionism of the third stage in Mokranjac’s creation, after the neo-expressionism of the symphonic trilogy, has been interpreted as a return to the traditional means of expression, because, guided by the logic of the chronological development of historical styles, we would expect neo-impressionism to occur before neo-expressionism. Nevertheless, the term “stylistic evolution” must be understood very conditionally because its true meaning does not incorporate evolution – all the stages of Mokranjac’s development can be subsumed to the common denominator of neo-classicism. Within this unique term, we can notice certain

subcategories, we can say that Mokranjac's neo-classicism had its neo-romantic, neo-classical, neo-expressionist and neo-impressionist manifestations, and that, through each of them, elements of national music were interpreted, emphatically.

The composer communicates with the musical past, problematizes different styles, and occasionally infiltrates them or contrasts them. Also, we can follow the gradual conquest by Mokranjac of increasing areas of creative freedom, but also the consistent implementation of certain specific compositional procedures. The various manifestations of Mokranjac's neo-classicism can be seen as evolutive stages, but he is always aware of the road he took and occasionally he goes back to already conquered areas.

In the study dedicated to Mokranjac's symphonic compositions, Marija Kovač offers a detailed overview of the active musicologists of the time and takes into consideration the influence of the socio-cultural environment on their activity. Jasenka Anđelković describes Mokranjac as a moderate contemporary composer, and in her presentation, she seems to defend him in a way for not being more avant-garde. A similar position is adopted by Dejan Despić. Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, in her text about Serbian music after WWII, offers an overview of the post-war stylistic directions of Serbian composers, with their interpenetration and mutual links. Like most of our composers, he defines Mokranjac as a neo-classicist, using the term neo-classicism in a broader sense – as any type of appeal to some of the styles in the musical past, not only the Viennese classic composers (which would be the narrow sense of the term). Vasilije Mokranjac's neo-classicism has various manifestations, because in his compositions he reinterprets many styles, he infuses them with popular music genres (such as jazz and blues) and creates new combinations.

In Mokranjac's late works, from the 70s and 80s of the 20th centuries, we can notice certain compositional procedures which can be interpreted today as post-modern. Nevertheless, as far as the ideas and concepts are concerned, Mokranjac remains mostly in a moderate mono-modernist position. Although in his compositions, he attempted to offer universal replies, believing in the possibility of men's spiritual progress and of the transformation of the world through art (or this is what the previous interpreter of his work states), there is nothing militant or radically avant-garde in it. On the other hand, behind Mokranjac there is no extremely modernist ideology, implicitly or explicitly defined, of aesthetic autonomy, or a self-referencing awareness of the role and function of his creation in the context of the development of the musical art and, eventually, of the artificiality and conditionality of the

acquired knowledge. During his formation, Mokranjac adopted musical understanding as an autonomous self-sufficient art, whose values are universal and sublime – and he never doubted it.

In the last stage of his creation, Mokranjac re-examines his own compositional activity, but he does not have the power to contradict himself declaratively, preserving his faith in intuitive knowledge, in the capacity to create and in the possibility of expression. Apparently, he acquires in the end a deep modernist self-awareness as an isolated and detached individual; he pursues self-reflexive searches, and projects his life convictions in music. However, Mokranjac does not want to transform his entire life in a total work of art, he is satisfied with the role of a composer who is preoccupied with the autonomous institution of music and is not involved in expanding the borders of the media. Although in Mokranjac's later works we can notice compositional procedures which resemble the post-modernist ones, they do not represent postmodernist ideology, the awareness of the end of history and the absence of final answers. In fact, the emergence of the first postmodern works in our country, mainly in the period of composers belonging to the generation born in the 40s of the last centuries, was in a way foreshadowed by the sounds and compositional techniques that Mokranjac applies in his later compositions for piano, orchestra, and concerts. Nevertheless, at the time Mokranjac implemented these innovations gradually and timidly, his work was not of interest for the first generation of Serbian post-modern composers – they did not see him as a leader or ideological predecessor and did not directly follow his achievements. In this respect, Mokranjac's late creation remained an impasse, and his achievements can be interpreted today only as postmodernist.

The third creative stage in Mokranjac's work coincides chronologically with the postmodernist turn in the Serbian music. M. Veselinović-Hofman highlights the former avant-garde representatives as supporters of this turn, which took place in the mid-70s of the 20th century; this determination resulted in the fact that the author identified the modern and avant-garde, that is the post-modern and post-avant-garde. In interpreting the post-modern turn, the author observes the following paradox: "making more dynamic the relationship between signified and signifier began in the Serbian music in the middle of the eight decade, after certain crucial facts of tradition were reinterpreted (such as, for example, the cell of motive, the chord, the formal and textural discipline of the baroque or the renaissance, the emotional refinement of Romantic origin...), and especially in the field of avant-garde itself, more precisely in the compositional, technical and semantic area of reaching the traditional musical concepts and data.

Mokranjac's Symphony No. 4 can serve as an example for this construction: in its linear compound structure, built in a series, whose vertical consonances come from horizontal movements, we encounter major and minor quintal chords. The introduction of the twelve-note system and of the diatonic system in 1972 can be seen as a post-modern procedure, namely as a return to certain traditional compositional means within the dominant avant-garde style. However, this is possible only if Symphony No. 4 by Mokranjac is seen as a musical artefact independent of the rest of his work; but, if we look at it in contrast to the works created before it, we can see that only in Symphony No. 4 by Mokranjac, the composer truly reaches serial procedures. This is not about a return to the diatonic language after a period of seriality, but about a combination to which Mokranjac arrived gradually and spontaneously. The paradox is reflected by the fact that, at the same time, the former avant-garde movements, in the world and at the national level, starting from completely different positions than those held by Mokranjac, reach analogous procedures and solid results.

The following postmodernist feature may be self-referencing, present in some of Mokranjac's later works; for example, in *Lirska poema* from 1974, the composer quotes a fragment from his overture, composed twelve years earlier; this motive is, again, an allusion to *Petruška* by Igor Stravinsky, thus the musical paradigm is double. And the *Poem for piano and orchestra* from 1983 was built in a sort of déjà vu, with allusions to some of Mokranjac's previous works.

Another post-modernist feature can be the presence of a musical paradigm from a different epoch or style, thus building a bridge over historical barriers – temporal, stylistic – and spatial. For example, in *Ođeci* from 1973, Mokranjac quotes a medieval melody. This allows him to face two spaces and two periods. The musical paradigm acts here as a sample, because it is a quote, but also as a model, because it is about converting the vocal melody to the piano, as well as to the predominantly neo-impressionist musical language of this composition. The above-mentioned melody symbolizes Mokranjac's search for spirituality, returning to the past, but it also serves as a general representation of our medieval music, tradition to which Mokranjac refers in this composition.

ОДЈЕЦИ

В. МОКРАЊАЦ
(1973)

I. Lento, quasi improvisato (♩ = 60)

ppp (sempre)

pppp

poco espress.

Vasilije Mokranjac, *Odjeci*, m. 1-3.

To define theoretically various compositional methodologies and ideologies in the post-modern era, M. Veselinović-Hofman sets the logic of continuity for the composers who never participated directly in the avant-garde

adventures but wanted to develop musical means and the musical language of the 20th century, and their poetics include avant-garde compositional and technical procedures. As the most impressive examples for this position, he quotes Rodion Shchedrin's "extended neo-classicism". In the same way, the author defines the theoretical problem of the overlapping of compositional directions: the one that moves from the avant-garde to restoring the tradition – the one consistently traditional and the one that moves from the traditional, thus moving away from the neo-context, towards the avant-garde – that uses tradition as a sample and understands avant-garde as tradition. Nevertheless, the author herself admits that, although these ways are clearer and more separable theoretically, based on the resulting musical features, it is difficult to distinguish them with certainty.

Thus, we can distinguish Mokranjac's stylistic positions: on the one hand, if we identify something modern and avant-garde, Mokranjac cannot be post-modern (that is post-avant-garde) because he was never avant-garde. Nevertheless, at the post-modern turn, his poetics was situated in one of the overlapping points of the compositional orientations. On the other hand, at exactly that moment, Mokranjac leaves his personal "avant-garde", and heads for neo-impressionism and the new simplicity, which is the personal "post-modern".

More precisely, Mokranjac's creative road from the national neo-romanticism to neo-expressionism can be understood as the conquest of his own avant-garde space – for this reason, neo-impressionism and the "new simplicity", his third creative stage can have the meaning of a post-modern turn (and accidentally, they coincide at the level of the sound with the first post-modern compositions). Thus, Mokranjac, who during his first and second creation stages in Europe, and in the 60s in our time, was a creator – a traditionalist, who did not follow the current compositional tendencies and innovations, was put at the beginning of the 70s in the position of keeping up with the modern world tendencies and preserved this position until his death.

In Vasilije Mokranjac's creation, the piano compositions occupy a very important place. The piano and the orchestra are the two media interpretation which occupied the composer's attention and inspired him to create. Besides the compositions for piano and orchestra, Mokranjac also composed very many applied musical pieces – for theatre, film, radio drama, etc. There are only very few chamber and vocal-instrumental compositions and are mostly compositions authored during Mokranjac years of training, when he had to fulfil the requirements of the curriculum when writing for certain interpretation groups. Mokranjac grew with the piano; to whom the young composer dedicated his first composition attempts. In addition,

Vasilije Mokranjac studied the piano: from 1932 to 1942, he studied piano with Aleksej Butakov, then he studied the same instrument in the class of Professor Emil Hayek at the Music Academy of Belgrade that he graduated in 1948. However, during these studies, he decided to devote himself to composing, so in 1946 he enrolled in the class of Professor Stanojlo Rajičić. After finishing his composition studies in 1951, his pieces for piano gradually became the central genre of his creation until the end of the 1950s. Although Mokranjac did not perform later as a pianist, all his compositions for piano, regardless of the creation period to which they belong, reveal the steady hand of an experienced pianist, who knows perfectly the instrument and its technical, virtuosic, agogic, timbral, factual possibilities, as well as other expressive possibilities. The fact that these compositions were skilfully created by a pianist help made them an indispensable part of the repertory of our pianists, and of that of piano students.

Many compositions for piano show Vasilije Mokranjac as a masterful improviser. It is usually claimed that Mokranjac composed slowly and with a lot of effort: "For Mokranjac, composition was never an easy emotional or intellectual game. He worked with fatidic gravity, filling carefully and minutely an area on the unique map of life and in the context of his creative impulses...". This observation is true to a certain extent, and it perhaps applies to the orchestral music by Mokranjac. Nevertheless, many piano compositions – studies, dances, fragments, preludes, intimate and even certain echoes – seem to have been created very quickly and easily... in fact, as if they were written improvisations. This does not mean that they have less value, but it underlines the fact that Mokranjac excelled around piano compositions and wrote with ease for his instrument.

Another confirmation of the thesis that improvisation was very important for Mokranjac is the fact that he loved jazz music, which he listened to and played long before he decided to compose. In a conversation, Mokranjac stated that during his studies at the Academy it was forbidden to play jazz – but this did not mean that the students did not play and improvise in their spare time. In many compositions for piano by Mokranjac – sometimes latently, other times explicitly – the influence of jazz can be noticed, a genre which at that time was the symbol of "trivial" popular music.

Vasilije Mokranjac's piano creations include approximately 20 compositions. The musicologists often discover unknown, unpublished, or unfinished works in the estate of late composers, so that the number of known piano compositions by Mokranjac sort of increased in the past years. This study takes into consideration all compositions by Mokranjac for piano solo, including the ones created during his studies, such as the three concertos for piano and orchestra. We refer here to the following creations, in chronological order: "1947 - Sonata Romantica - F# minor, theme with

variations; 1950 - Prelude, dance and march; 1951 - 1952 – seven studies: G minor, E minor, G minor, B flat minor, C# minor, F minor, F sharp minor; 1953 - 1954: two sonatas: A minor, C major; 1956: fragments; 1957: six dances: F sharp minor, E minor, G sharp minor, E minor, G# minor, G minor; 1958: concertino for piano, string orchestra and two harps; 1973: intimate and echoes; 1975: 5 preludes; 1976: music for the Concert for piano and orchestra; 1983: Poem for piano and orchestra; 1984: Prelude (added to the cycle in 1975)⁴.

When in time Mokranjac stopped performing as a pianist, other musicians interpreted his creations. There is virtual no pianist in our country who does not have in their repertory at least one of Mokranjac's compositions, and some of them perform his compositions regularly. As for the place that that piano music occupies in Mokranjac's creation, Vlastimir Peričić supports the idea of a global division of his creativity into music for orchestra and for piano, in which "symphonic music is the scene of dramatic conflicts and fatidic resolutions", while piano music reveals the "lyrical nature of his creative temperament"⁵.

The same position is supported by M. Kovač, who states that "a complete overview of the dimension of his personality is the symphonic music", and that the orchestra is the composer's musical universe, while the piano is a lonely friend, the instrument of the composer's intimacy. I would like to re-examine this vision, perhaps even reconsider it, in any case, I would like to shed some light on it from other possible angles. Firstly, it is worth noting that the composer's interest for the piano and that for the orchestra music do not run simultaneously: the first period of Mokranjac's creativity is dedicated mainly to the piano, the second one to the orchestra, while in the third the composer's treatment of the two media is identical. Also, we cannot agree with Kovač's statement, according to which Mokranjac made his main discoveries – expressive or compositional-technical – in the compositions for the orchestra, then he applied them to other areas of his creative interest. This statement is not even close to the truth because, during the entire first period of his creation, Mokranjac wrote almost no music for orchestra – and that period is not uniform at all. As for the third period, although Mokranjac's creative dislocation was announced in Symphony No. 4, the new sonorous language was defined explicitly in the piano cycles *Intima* and *Odjeci* from 1973 and was followed by *Poemska lirika*.

⁴ Medić Ivana, *Vasilije Mokranjac, music for piano*, Belgrade, National Library of Serbia Belgrade, 2004, p. 29.

⁵ Peričić Vlastimir, *Portrait of the artist - Vasilije Mokranjac*, Belgrade, Pro musica, 1968, p. 12.

Largo (♩ = 52)

I.

В. Мокраняц, VI. 1973

The musical score is written for a piano and consists of eight systems of staves. The first system includes a tempo marking 'Largo (♩ = 52)' and a dynamic marking 'p'. The second system has a dynamic marking 'pp'. The third system has a dynamic marking 'mp'. The fourth system has a dynamic marking 'pp'. The fifth system has a dynamic marking 'ppp'. The sixth system has a dynamic marking 'pp'. The seventh system has a dynamic marking 'pp'. The eighth system has a dynamic marking 'pp'. The score features various musical notations including notes, rests, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Vasilije Mokranjac, Intime, m. 1-3.

According to the stages of Mokranjac's work, the compositions for piano created after 1958, which end with *Končertino*, belong to the first stage, and the compositions dating from the period 1973 - 1984 belong to the third stage of his creativity. This gives the impression that the composer did not play this instrument for 15 years; that the piano remained outside his interest during this period. Nevertheless, Mokranjac does not completely "abandon" the piano, he includes it in the set of large instrument ensembles. The piano is one of the most focused on instruments in Mokranjac's orchestra; in the symphonic trilogy of the 1960s, the piano plays a prominent role. Consequently, it cannot be said that Mokranjac completely neglected his instrument, to which he dedicated the most beautiful pages in his early creation stage. In fact, it could be said that: The piano was present, but there was no music dedicated to the piano.

Peričić classifies Mokranjac as a composer who started his career under the influence of late romanticism, full of folkloric nuances, as part of a group who modernized their means of expression in the 1950s by sharpening the emotional tone to the expressionist tensions; however, unlike the "original" expressionism, the expansion of the tonality is not accompanied by the dissolution of the form, on the contrary, it remains solid and compact, especially when it comes to the architecture of the sonata-symphony. Peričić admits that this is not simply a matter of personal compatibility with certain authors, but also about the mark left by the years of study at the Music Academy of Belgrade, when the teachers insisted that the students master the great formats of the classical model.

After an analysis of Vasilije Mokranjac's compositions for piano and of his concerts, a conclusion can be drawn about the composer's creative journey, the "evolution" of Mokranjac's expressive means in contrast to the most current stylistic directions in Western Europe, and about the fact that the postmodern dislocation of European music coincides chronologically with the composer's last creative stage which, as we have seen, brings certain compositional procedures close to postmodernism.

4. Conclusion

Composer of the broader vision (of the symphonic type), V. Mokranjac nevertheless invests affectively significantly in the piano repertoire, which ends up taking over the functionality of the orchestral discourse. Anchored only marginally in tradition and in tonality, the sparks of his speech cut through non-functional areas of sonic expression, thus leading his country's post-war music into modern territories at the end of the 20th century. "In

2009 we marked the 25th anniversary of the death of one of the most distinguished Serbian composers, Vasilije Mokranjac, whose diversified opus of predominantly symphonic and piano music, greatly influenced on composers of his and subsequent generations his anxiety over life and death, his wonder at the sense and absurdity of the things man does, the things he longs for and what he is preoccupied with. Written in a simple and clear form, the work carries traces of excitement, expressionism and neoromantic dualism which is the basic characteristics of Mokranjac's composing handwriting"⁶.

Pianist by vocation, V. Mokranjac stylistically synthesizes at a very complex level impressionistic suggestions (both on a sound level and on the level of the works'vision), romantic (through virtuosity and anchoring in well-grounded harmonic tonality), modern and postmodern (by the size of the dissonant extent and by the modal and rhythmic complexity).

REFERENCES

- Branka, Bugariska. "Al niente: The last opus of Vasilije Mokranjac: After a quarter of a century", *Muzikologija*, no. 9, 2009.
- Medić Ivana, *Vasilije Mokranjac, music for piano*. National Library of Serbia, Belgrade, 2004.
- Mikić Vesna. "Different types of modernism/neoclassicism by Dušan Radić, Belgrade", *Journal of the Musicological Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts*, 2006.
- Peričić Vlastimir, *Portrait of the artist - Vasilije Mokranjac*, Ed. Pro Musica, Belgrade, 1968.

⁶ Branka, Bugariska, "Al niente: The last opus of Vasilije Mokranjac: After a quarter of a century", *Muzikologija*, no. 9, 2009, p. 85.