

NATIONAL AND MODERN IN THE MUSIC OF SERBIAN COMPOSERS FROM THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20th CENTURY

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SUMMARY. The first half of the 20th century unfolds, in the arts, not only in music, under the pressure of the paradigm shift that leaves its mark on the entire period preceding the First World War. Anyway, once the seeds of modernity sprout, they do not grow satisfactorily, because they will be interrupted by the Second World War. The ideas of national and universal had been developing since the middle of the Romantic century, when the revolutions around 1848 favored the idea of national freedom and unity. It was then that national cultures were born that tended to value the traditional heritage of each cultural and ethnic space. Serbia has taken advantage of these dominances and has achieved, in its turn, a synthesis between the national and the universal - a fact presented by this work.

Keywords: national, modernity, culture, ethnic, tradition.

Introduction

The first half of the 20th century unfolds, in the arts, not only in music, under the pressure of the paradigm shift that leaves its mark on the entire period preceding the First World War. Anyway, once the seeds of modernity sprout, they do not get to grow satisfactorily, because they will be interrupted by the Second World War. The ideas of national and universal had been developing since the middle of the Romantic century, when the revolutions around 1848 favored the idea of national freedom and unity. It was then that national cultures were born that tended to value the traditional heritage of each cultural and ethnic space. Serbia has taken advantage of these dominances and has achieved, in its turn, a synthesis between the national and the universal - a fact presented by this work.

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Serbian Composers from the First Half of the 20th Century: national and modern musical patterns

In 1931, because of the parallel action of several different stylistic programmes, there was a special tension between “old” and “new” music. However, the year of J. Marinković’s death represented only the start of the increasing tension within the stylistic cluster which extended to the entire fourth decade. Namely, even after J. Marinković’s demise, the tradition of the 19th century was still active, as it was throughout the third decade, “in the compositions of both the older (Petar Krstić), and the younger musicians, with a conservative orientation, and modest talent (Ljubomir Bošnjaković)”³ (our translation). Representing the most conservative tendency among Serbian composers of the interwar years, these authors chose the means which determined the style and historical position of, for example, Božidar Joksimović and Stanislav Binički. With few exceptions, their work brought nothing essentially new to the stylistic framework implemented by S.St. Mokranjac and J. Marinković, but, adhering to the already known stereotypes, which guaranteed their popularity with the general audience, they represented the last stage in the extinction and disappearance of those lines of stylistic development stimulated for the first time by Kornelije Stanković in the Serbian religious music.

Nevertheless, Petar Krstić’s personality deserves a closer look. It is interesting to note that P. Krstić’s “meeting” with the musical atmosphere of Vienna, where he studied for six years (1896-1902) during the fin-de-siècle period, had no significant visible consequences on his compositional work, or on his views on music. It is hard to believe that a former student of Este Guido Adler, with whom he studied counterpoint, stated as early as 1927, at the premiere of his opera *Zulumčar*, that it had been written in a mixt style, Oriental and Serbian: “We have to preserve it and maintain it because it is the only basis on which we can build artistic music. (...) I am not at all attracted by the last musical revelations in Europe and I believe that each musician (...) should write music for the environment in which they live and which they understand the best. I will be absolutely grateful if my music is well received in Belgrade”⁴ (our translation).

³ Milanović, Biljana, *Poslednji izdanci srpskog nacionalnog romantizma u opusu Ljubomira Bošnjakovića [The Last Shoots of Serbian National Romanticism in the Opus of Ljubomir Bošnjaković]*. Zbornik MS za scenske umetnosti i muziku, Novi Sad, 1994, p. 151-157.

⁴ Tomašević, Katarina, *Na raskršću istoka i zapada [At the Crossroads of East and West]*. Ministarstvo nauke Republike Srbije, Beograd, 2009, p. 211.

The memories of Svetomir Nastasijević, who resigned from the “Stanković” orchestra while it was run by P. Krstić, also indicate P. Krstić’s low level of motivation to contribute to the rise of Serbian musical culture through his work, in opposition to P. Krstić’s position, who believed that “the repertoire should include only simpler compositions because the Belgrade public does not deserve more⁵” (our translation). Obviously, Krstić’s “meeting” with Adler remained a sign of “recognizing diversity”. Both continued their journey: Adler entered music history, while the compositions of his former student Petar Krstić are placed on the modest side of quality and, at the same time, on the most conservative side from the point of view of the stylistic tendencies in the interwar Serbian music.

On the completely opposite side of Serbian music, which in the fourth decade crossed, both diachronically and synchronically, a large number of musical styles, there is the creativity of the representatives of the youngest generation of composers (born around 1910), who from the very beginning avoided everything related to tradition and left for Prague in search of new possibilities of expressions.

More different than similar from the point of view of their psychological structure and aesthetic preferences, all of the members of the Prague group agreed that, upon arriving in the capital of the Czech Republic, they would forget the Belgrade tradition. Although vast and scattered, the scale of compositional means and stylistic elements – which helped increase their “escape” from the national musical tradition, but also determined the extent of the stylistic framework offered by the school and considered modern – can be reduced to at least two common denominators: 1) nobody showed any interest in folklore or religious music, and 2) all brought most of their instrumental work from Prague. The first common achievement of the Prague group was that they fully updated their orientation towards the Western achievements and laid the foundation for this last dispute in Belgrade concerning the relationship between “national” and “modern”. This raised again the problem of the identity of modern Serbian music. Secondly, on the other hand, it led to a change in the focus of the genres of Serbian music from predominantly vocal forms at the beginning of the period to those predominantly instrumental in the fourth decade. The complete absence of the vocal genre from the works of the Prague group, as well as of the solo music, representative for the Balkan area, was, also, a significant sign of change in the development of the style and genre of Serbian music in the fourth decade. The youngest generation took care to fill in the genre gaps in the area of chamber and symphonic music.

⁵ Nastasijević, Svetomir, *Autobiografija [Autobiography]*. SANU, Belgrade, 1929, p. 17.

Although they were not as motivated to experiment with the completely new and unknown, the representatives of the Prague group managed to reach in their student compositions various types of co-existence between the “old” and the “new”, but also attempted to synthesize compositional and technical processes and stylistic elements of post-Romanticism, neclassicism and expressionism, those styles which occupied the dominant place in the musical context of Central Europe too as legitimate representatives of the aesthetics of modernism. Although Prague, as a town with a rich musical tradition, was tolerant not only with the most radical stylistic movements arriving from Vienna, but also open to and interested in receiving various tendencies and syntheses of modernism, it is noteworthy that among the youngest Serbian composers in Prague, – in their attempts to conquer the “new” language and to catch up with the current modernist and avant-gardist stylistic directions in Europe, – there was no place for the achievements of French impressionism and the post-Debussy movement, and no interest in the extraordinary stylistic syntheses of folklore performed by B. Bartók, early Stravinsky or Prokofiev.

Although the neoclassic dialogue between the “old” and “new” did not fundamentally affect the youngest generation of Serbian students in Prague, it successfully resonated as early as the third decade in the excellent student work of the oldest of them – Predrag Milošević. At the same time, P. Milošević was the only student in Prague who did not “forget” about S. S. Mokranjac during his studies, but in 1926, when he was already a graduate of the class of Professor Jaroslav Kržička (1882-1969), he brought an original homage to him, worthy of all our attention. *Cvekje cafnalo*, that beautiful melody and, at the same time, the melody of the 12th *Rukoveti* by S. St. Mokranjac, was played in 1926 in the second movement of the excellent and inspired composition *Sonatina for piano* by P. Milošević in a completely new, neoclassic style, with a wide range of harmonious colours. “The stylistic world of the five miniature harmonious variations had nothing in common with the style of the melody *Cvekje cafnalo* which was played in the first romantic symphony (1907) by Petar Konjović”⁶ (our translation). Other elements of the musical expression of P. Milošević in *Sonatina*, then in *Gudački kvartet* from 1928 and in *Simfonija* from 1930, were truly a qualitative stylistic innovation for the Serbian music of the third decade of the 20th century. Its texture, the tendency towards the melody, occasionally with coloured harmony in the impressionist style (*Sonatina*), the bitonal, polytonal and atonal segments (*Gudački kvartet*), the dexterity of the counterpoint solutions, as well as the choice of the polyphonic forms and

⁶ Veselinović-Hofman, Mirjana, *Milivoje Crvčanin [Milivoje Crvčanin]*. UKS, Beograd, 1972, p. 34.

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methods of the Baroque (*pasacaglia* in the second movement of the quartet, the fugue in the third; the imitations, *fugato*, as well as the homage to the greatest maestro of the Baroque) – the theme B-A-C-H in the last part of the *Quartet*), situate beyond any doubt these compositions of extraordinary success written by Predrag Milošević within the stylistic framework of neoclassicism, that is neobaroque. (E.g. 1)

E.g. 1

2.

TEMA (narodna melodija)
tempo pp

p espressivo

VAR 1

M. M. 13



Predrag Milošević - Sonatina (1926)

The overlap between the “old” and the “new” in the Serbian music of the interwar period was enriched by a new stylistic dimension in the works composed in Prague by P. Milošević. Balanced from a formal point of view, efficient from a pianistic point of view, sometimes motric and, at the same time, not at all sentimental from the point of view of the romantic style, but fine and graceful from the point of view of the neoclassic style, P. Milošević’s *Sonatina* quickly and easily found its place in the repertoire of national musicians, but also of foreign pianists”⁷ (our translation). It is regrettable that upon his return to Belgrade, P. Milošević, attracted and absorbed by his activity as the conductor of the Opera, stopped composing almost completely. Rather neglected in subsequent musicological research (the only relevant study belongs to Jelena Mihajlović-Marković, published in 1987), Predrag Milošević’s neoclassicism was anticipated, even during the third decade, as a stylistic

⁷ Peričić, Vlastimir, *Muzički stvaraoci u Srbiji [Music Creators in Serbia]*. Prosveta, Beograd, 1969, p. 301.

orientation meant to capture all the attention and to gather the strength of the generation of composers that would later take the stage of the Serbian music history, in the mid-1950s. In connection to the cluster of stylistic phenomena during the fourth decade, it is interesting to note that P. Milošević's neoclassic *Simfonija* premiered in Prague in 1931, and was presented in Belgrade only three years later.

In the learning stage, the attention of P. Milošević's younger colleagues focused almost exclusively on the new music tradition of Central Europe, on its current stylistic trends and on the newly emerging style, i.e. expressionism. If Stanojlo Rajičić's student compositions express the author's generally positive attitude towards the last layer of the late Romantic tradition whose domain, observing the laws of the "old" classic forms, was expanded and deconstructed (up to atonality) by S. Rajičić through expressionism – on a scale of deviation from the "old"; the most developed position is occupied by the Prague compositions of *Dragutin Čolić*, *Vojislav Vučković*, *Ljubica Marić* and *Milan Ristić*, composers who recognized the patterns of their creations in the younger expressionist influences of contemporary music. Among the most daring decisions of this group of young composers there is the style of the Second Viennese School, A. *Schönberg's* dodecaphony principles, the quarter tone system by *Alois Hába*.

These coordinates mark at the same time the maximum point of the deviation from the ensemble of stylistic elements which, from a diachronic point of view, can be placed at the beginning of the Serbian music of the interwar period. In the context of the creation of the Prague group, they are the result of continued acceptance of the impulses and approach of the most modern layer of the Czech music, which at the same time acted as a mediator between, on the one hand, those musical towns who represented the centre and, on the other hand, Belgrade, one of the important receptors in the process of spreading the musical modernism towards South-East Europe and the Balkans. Defined as antiromantic and antifolklore, the area of expressionist elements represented its most radical stylistic layer for the local context of the interwar Serbian music.

Nevertheless, as long as the representatives of the youngest generation were outside the country, as long as their tonal searches remained unknown at the national level, this continuity determined by expressionist elements represented a completely independent stylistical movement, running parallel, with no contact points, with the stylistic discourse dominant on the Serbian territory. Regardless of the years during which the members of the Prague group composed their student work, it is important to remember that the "collision"

between the “new” and the “old” poetics in the Serbian music was really present only during the years that the compositions of the younger generation were presented in Belgrade. In many situations, the “collision” could not actually take place because the compositions of the young generation were either not performed, remaining in manuscript form (subsequently lost or unavailable), or interpreted (perhaps just once?) outside the country, in Prague, during students’ concerts. However, since the expressionist direction continued and expanded in the independent auctorial creations that the two youngest composers, *Vojislav Vučković* și *Stanojlo Rajičić*, authored after returning to Belgrade, – we consider its position in the fourth decade (and especially in the four important years before the war, 1935-1939) as the most advanced path towards the “new” of this dominant, modernist stylistic tendency, which began in the work of the previous generation of composers.

In Belgrade, like in Prague, *V. Vučković* drew support for its own avant-garde through ideological and artistic programmes and ideological practices which were still valid at that time. The case of *S. Rajičić*’s turn towards extreme modernism is different, especially to the extent to which, during the years that *S. Rajičić* spent in Prague he did not completely deny the traditional stylistic elements. *S. Rajičić*’s meeting with (what he perceived back then as) the archaic and conservative musical environment of Belgrade, and, more so, with its resistance to the international evolution represented by his generation made this composer (known for his tenacity and stubbornness) defy even more radically the dissidents who were stylistically opposed to him (“a rebellion-type reaction”). Strongly disturbed by the call to return “to the right path” and to “use the clear source of folk music”, *S. Rajičić* hits back in the most incongruous way against the national tradition in the genre of the solo song, precisely the genre with the longest history in the Serbian music and which recorded, before *S. Rajičić*’ intervention, leaps into the unknown. Athematic and atonal, the cycles of expressionist songs composed by *S. Rajičić* – *Čuvari Sveta*, *Jazz*, *Jesen* and *Jedanaest motoričkih pesama* – differ greatly also in terms of the vocal style from the Serbian *Lied* considered modern by the older generation (*P. Konjović*, *M. Milojević*, *S. Hristić*).

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E. g. 2

à Mme F. Pellée

Protivnosti

Pei - Lo - Tien

Allegro con fuoco (J. 132)

Vojislav Vučković

Sopran

Oboe

Clarinetto in B

Fagotto

ff *p* *mf* *cresc.* *ff* *mp* *cresc.*

Pro - lo - z i sja na

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C. M. 10

Vojislav Vučković – solo piece Protivnosti from Dve pesme (1938)

Miloradu Jovanović 13

Čuvari sveta

(St. Vinaver)

I

Allegretto (♩ = 176) Stanjo Rajčić op. 5

Ved-ri san no-si no-si, pre-de-li sja-j-ut i sve. 11, 12-la-re pred o-či, 12-la-re pred o-či

1 ne-sla-ja.

1 u-er-li-kom sa-zna-ju svet-ho-sti, u okro-ve-o-ju

sub p

S. Rajčić – Čuvari Sveta

Nevertheless, the musical gestures of *S. Rajičić's* "rebellion" were not just a simple "translation" of the "progressive" achievements of the Western musical centres. "The fact that they were immediately encouraged by the exciting and revolutionary events on the Belgrade literary scene is confirmed convincingly by the direct link between *S. Rajičić's* avant-garde confrontation with tradition and Stanislav Vinaver's name and poetry"⁸ (our translation).

Which were the real effects of the radical penetration of the "new" in the Belgrade system? One thing is sure: the "horizon of expectations" of the Belgrade audience was moved forward by a few steps. While accepting the absence of the folklore and of the "classic" forms, as well as of the harmonic language imbued by free dissonance, the audience, after having been exposed to the works of the young composers, easily accepted the accomplishments of the older ones, the so-called modern "national school". At the end of the 1930s, the modernism of the older generation was already widely considered the "classic" element of the Serbian music of the 20th century. On the other hand, although there is no doubt that the promotion of the compositions by the representatives of the youngest generation at the national level acted as an "avant-garde blow", the long awaited "breath of fresh air" did not take place as a result of the creativity fostered by the main stylistic tendencies: thus, the youth's radicalism remained without a distinct answer or echo in the creation of the older composers. A look at the line of the development recorded in the individual compositions of key representatives of the dominant modernity movement – for example, P. Konjović, S. Hristić – clearly show that the continuity of their stylistic preferences was not disturbed by the immediate meeting and familiarity with the "new" orientation of younger composers.

The only step towards the "new" within the composer's musical language up to that moment is visible in the convoluted stylistic itinerary of *Miloje Milojević*. It is symptomatic that in the mid-1930s, M. Milojević decided in 1935, in his piano composition *Ritmické grimase*, to deviate from the stylistic basis on which he had already built his personal modernist impression. On the other hand, it is not logical to assume that *M. Milojević*, while preparing for the 14th edition of the Festival of the International Society of Contemporary Music (SIMC), wanted to put forth his "most modern" image all the way from Paris, as one of main music capitals of the world. On the other hand, *M. Milojević's* radicalism in reaching the recognizable attributes of the expressionist musical discourse in *Ritmické grimase* can be interpreted as the composer's impulsive reaction, an immediate creative "answer" to the challenge of the stylistic

⁸ Tomašević, Katarina, *Na raskršću istoka i zapada [At the Crossroads of East and West]*. Ministarstvo nauke Republike Srbije, Belgrade, 2009, p. 219.

orientation of the younger generation. Considering that M. Milojević's overall creation, *Ritmčke grimase* for piano (as well as a decade earlier, music for ballet – *Sobareva metla*) meant a new adventure in the search for the “new” that he would not use later. On the other hand, a general look at the chronology of the compositions of the fourth decade (up to 1939) clearly shows that, despite the new additions, the most radical layer of the Serbian music discourse from a stylistic point of view was represented by a relatively small number of compositions. The second, more important, reason refers to the stylistic “turn” which took place (again, obviously) in the compositions of V. Vučković and S. Rajčić. If the Prague group led to a new moment of discontinuity in the tendencies in the development of the recent Serbian music, their “turn” towards tradition also caused a break in the continuity of the youngest line of its stylistic development made up of expressionist elements.

A complete overview of the features of musical creativity in the interwar period shows clearly that the moment V. Vučković and S. Rajčić suddenly abandoned the expressionist means of expressions and returned to a more traditional musical discourse was at the same time the only obvious and profound stylistic turn in the general development tendencies of the period. The choice of “new” means made by the two avant-garde movements in the fourth decade had a lot to do with the choice of stylistic elements which represented the foundation of the creativity of their immediate predecessors. In the following compositions, both V. Vučković and S. Rajčić, who had been previously “opponents” of the traditional framework of Serbian music, expressed for the first time their interest in folklore, addressed tonality and opted for classic forms and the thematic organization of the form. As the “older” world came to life again in the music of the younger composers, it seems to confirm J. Cocteau's idea that “each artist who jumps a few steps on their way will come back to the beginning and make the same journey gradually”⁹ (our translation). This clearly explains his turn as an orientation towards the “new”, this time V. Vučković was in fact the most radical in his withdrawal towards the “old”, acknowledging Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac's work as a real guide to the so-called “new” music. He was the only representative of his generation who came back to the “old” choral genre. V. Vučković's acknowledgement of S. St. Mokranjac as a model to follow was a symbolic sign, clear and sharp, that the “lightning fight” of Serbian music in the interwar period was over.

⁹ Radman, Zdravko, *Proces, povijest i progres umetnosti* [The Process, History and Progress of Art]. Umetnost i progres, Belgrade, 1988, p. 20-27.

Conclusion

However, the historical events and the change in the course of the general ideology which followed after WW2 meant that the stylistic turn in the creativity of the youngest generation marked not only symbolically, but also objectively, the end of a short, but stormy, expressionist chapter, during which the youngest movement of Serbian music completely embraced the more current movements of Western music. This look back, towards *S. St. Mokranjac* and tradition, was meant to attract the youngest composers at this stylistic junction in which, for three decades, important creators of the previous generation carried out lively, creative and productive dialogues not only with *S. St. Mokranjac* and *J. Marinković*, but also with musical Europe itself – its modern Orient and its modern Occident. During the entire fourth decade, the creativity of the most numerous group of Serbian modernists filled the large space among the extremely polarized stylistic currents of Serbian music. The polyphony of the individual modernist syntheses in a stylistic space delimited by what was the most conservative (at the same time non-evolutionary) and the most radical, towards the stylistic development direction oriented towards expressionism, also determined the stylistic landscape of the main, dominant discourse in the development of the interwar Serbian music.

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