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Profanation in Slovenian Contemporary Symphonic Music?
Profanacija v sodobni slovenski simfonični glasbi?

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Izvleček

The common “postmodern concern” over the profanation of the arts is taken as a starting point for analysing works by five distinctive Slovenian composers of symphonic music – by Uroš Rojko, Vito Žuraj, Lojze Lebič, Nenad Firšt and Črt Sojar Voglar. Their artistic intentions and realizations come closer to certain metaphysical, historically speaking rather romantic, ideals of autonomous music, only remotely connected to the ideas of postmodernity.

Aim

The paper was written for the research project on Slovenian symphonic music after 1918, which is part of the national project Slovenian Musical Works After 19181. Thus, a few words on its background seem appropriate. The project aims to gather information about musical works composed in Slovenia after WW I in a rather pragmatic

1 The details about the project, funded by the National Agency for Research (J6-4088 [A]; 1.7.2011-30.6.2014), may be found here: http://sicris.izum.si/search/prj.aspx?lang=slv&id=7013.
archival manner: to build a database of facts regarding musical works in Slovenia. The
database shall include different genres and styles, for the time being also the explicit
musical poetics of the composers as well as reception information. I am working cur-
rently on symphonic music.

The following lines are confined to five glimpses into symphonic production in the
last decade. In line with the common “postmodern concern” regarding contemporary
art music – reading: also the art music has succumbed to profanation, marketing and
the fast-food-consuming logic of the late capitalism; consequently it has lost its social
power – my aim is to address this surmise: if, at all, and to which levels, then, the “post-
modern concern” may be accepted?

Rojko and Žuraj: A Virtuosity of Sound

If two aesthetically appealing events from the near past may stand for a variety of
musical, also symphonic phenomena, I may risk to choose the chamber opera King Da-
vaid, Cither and Sword (2009) by Uroš Rojko (b. 1954) and two sets of symphonic pieces,
published on two CDs, Crosscourt (2008) and Maxply (2010), by Vito Žuraj (b. 1979).

Rojko's opera,² an opera “for children and adults”, is based on passages from the
Old Testament as a “parody [...] of perversity of the current culture of profitability”³:
“The young shepherd and zitherist David is an appointee of God and he seems to be
successful in everything. He, the sweet singer, climbs the social ladder from a shepherd
to the warrior and finally becomes the successor of King Saul.” Here, Rojko does not
depict a single-sided social story, but incorporates the psychological self of the pro-
tagondist: “David is also plagued by fears and is stumbling over his very own needs – the
desire for a man to whom he entrusted his innermost and loves it for its own sake.”⁴ The
compositional means are carefully designed within a stylistically rather compound aes-
thetics, a kind of “expressionist” combination of musique spectrale, new complexity,
micro-polyphonic textures and sound-fascination-expertises of Giacinto Scelsi. I have
chosen his single opera as probably the most plain explanation of Rojko’s creativity,
which is otherwise centred on chamber instrumental and symphonic music. His sym-

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² Published in Verlag Neue Musik as Zither und Schwert (Libretto: Marc Günther), nach dem Alten Testament, for mixed choir,
speaker, tape and ensemble. ISMN: M-2032-1906-4, Product No.: NM11349.
3 »Rojkova uglasbitev zgodbe o kralju Davidu je glasbena parodija. Kot večina primerov te vrste se je porodila iz nuje – pa vendar
je vse prej kot večina o silo. Opera je tako nastala iz perverznosti novodbnega pridobitništva.« http://www.eventim.si/si/
4 The Gesellschaft für neue Musik Freiburg e.V. offered the following text on the opera:
"KÖNIG DAVID / Zither und Schwert / Eine Kammeroper in 7 Bildern für Kinder und Erwachsene
Der junge Schäfer und Zitherspieler David ist ein von Gott Berufener, dem alles zu gelingen scheint. Er, der süße Sänger, wird
vom Schäfer zum Krieger und schließlich zum Nachfolger König Sauls. Doch auch David wird von Angst geplagt und stolpert
über seine ureigensten Bedürfnisse - der Sehnsucht nach einem Menschen, dem er sein Innerstes anvertrauen und der ihn um
seiner selbst Willen liebt.
David muss lernen, dass er in all seinem Handeln auf die Hilfe Gottes angewiesen ist, Gott aber nicht auf ihn. Es wird nie eine
Gegenleistung geben, nur Liebe.”
phonic works from the last quarter century (the last one, for instance, *La Gomera*\(^5\)) are well comparable to this opera regarding its compositional logic and musical aesthetics, including the ethical appeal.

“I search for beauty, yet this beauty has certain depth, certain foundation [Grund]. This foundation is not from our world, it is something that our world cannot offer and it is nevertheless based on it. I could not connect my music to the New Age or the like, where one only strives for therapeutic achievement of a certain state [...]. My music does not have any therapeutic purposes, it is much more contiguous to a natural experience of well-being.”\(^6\)

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6 V izvirniku: “Ein System sagt noch gar nichts aus, was du daraus machst ist wichtig.” “Die Idee, etwas Neues zu machen, war damals, als ich mich mit Serialismus und Neuer Musik beschäftigte, sehr wichtig […] Es geht mir in der Tat um Schönheit, aber
Anchored in a comparable modernist tradition, Vito Žuraj won several prizes for his work, probably the most outstanding of which are the nomination of his piece Warm-Up for French horn and percussion for a recommended work at the 201 International Rostrum of Composers in Stockholm and the 1st prize at the „57. Kompositionspreis der Landeshauptstadt Stuttgart“ for his work Changeover for instrumental groups and symphony orchestra. Both – as the majority of Žuraj’s – works excel in virtuosity:

“Žuraj’s ‘Changeover’ is a brilliantly set score for a total of 114 instruments, some of which are positioned to play among the audience […]. In its block-like structure of the whole, the sound-worlds of the piece and its sound-exchanges bear witness of great connoisseurship [Kennerschaft]. The language of sound is spectacular, the dramaturgy of the composition surprising and the mastery over the material in the treatment of unexpected pillars of noise and hurricanes impressive.”

Žuraj gains the mastery over the compositional métier through a superb technical skill. His knowledge of pitch distribution and imagination in software usage (Max and Finale) is to some degree comparable to his imaginative poetics of ‘game’, as developed in both sets of symphonic pieces pertaining to the tennis game: individual concepts from tennis are taken for initial stimulus (for instance: Overgrip = tape around the grip of a racquet; Deuce = for equal score after the 40 has been reached; Net Cord = the wire holding the net; Crosscourt = the hit to the diagonal opposite side, etc.) He defines his integrative ludic aesthetic in broad terms of erasing existent geographical, cultural as well as aesthetical borders:

“When and if we ever manage to look at the art and consider artists with the same measure of respect regardless of their nationality, race, religion, stylistic direction and ideological attitude, then we shall perhaps be able to anchor more steadfastly in the arts the function of uniting and connecting people. […]. I believe that we should see the future of the arts in the amalgamation of all insights from the past with the visions of times to come.”

Lojze Lebič: The Rational Esotericism

On the other side, Lojze Lebič (b. 1934), probably the most revered Slovenian composer and academician – symphonism is central to his output –, creates somewhat different art worlds. As Renata Salecl aptly notices for love (and hate) relations: “barriers
and symbolic prohibitions greatly contribute to the attractiveness of the love-object.”

Probably his carefully designed and even more carefully elaborated symphonic pieces tend to merge different aesthetical utterances into what may be described as a post-modern modernism: very subtle quotations, allusions, aesthetic rather than technical vicinity of certain acoustic phenomena from the art world and the other worlds may be found in his works. Since he understands composition as a process of “framing, when something from one finds its way into another world”, his symbolic gestures differ if juxtaposed to Rojko’s expressive sound textures and Žuraj’s almost picturesque soundscapes in the first line regarding its symbolic pregnancy, where clear-cut barriers exist between the “lowlowbrow” styles and “artificial music”. An allusion, or a quote, is hardly to appear in a clear-cut manner in a sense of “closing the gap” between different art

Example 2: Vito Žuraj: beginning of Changeover, p. 27.

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worlds, leaving ambiguous, cognitively uncertain and semantically contiguous experience, as, for example, in his *Cantico I* for orchestra (1997) and its cosmogony-imagery at the beginning:

With apparently any explicit semantic ambitions, the view on contemporary symphonic musical poetics would hardly change, even if two more prolific symphonists are introduced, Nenad Firšt (b. 1964) and Črt Sojar Voglar (b. 1976). Firšt comments on his Concertino for flute, saxophone and chamber orchestra (2006), a piece that may be considered as typical for his symphonic work in its entirety, as a piece that

“represents the soloists in the intensive interactions of improvisatory nature in the first and rhythmical, sporadically virtuosic playfulness in the second part. Unitary musical events are summarized in the solo cadence, followed by a brief bravura conclusion.”

He sees himself strongly connected to the classical-romantic tradition:

“I cannot embed myself nor any other anywhere. I feel close to many things within the tradition of art music, conditionally speaking, I am closest to the expressionists’ legacy.”

Comparably, Črt Sojar Voglar – he speaks of concerto and symphony as his favorite “orchestral forms” – finds his Violin Concerto (2009-10) to be one of his best pieces. He described his main compositional features with the following words:

“In my works after 2010, I search for contrasts between the simple and the complex, between the well-known and the more daring, between rhythmic clarity and the aleatoric dispersed, between modality and tonal ambiguity, between simple chords and dissonances, sometimes extending to clusters. I gradually achieved a synthesis of impressionism and neoclassicism, adding to it some other compositional means of the contemporaneity, here and there also a neoromantic expression, when I feel that the piece needs it.”

A kind of “purely musical” poetic imagery may be supposed, positioning itself in line with different historical (neo-)styles and, in the case of Sojar Voglar’s work, aspiring toward polystylism.

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11 From the CD booklet for Divisions, Simfonični orkester RTV SLO, dirigent Jürg Wyttenbach (Ljubljana: Založba kaset in Plošč RTV SLO, 2008). The concerto is published by the Society of Slovenian Composers, EdDss 1876.
14 Ibid.
Integrative, Humble, Delicately Uncertain

In general, the mentioned musical poetics emphasize certain *levels of integrity* of different historical as well as phenomenological variables. They may be summed up with a metaphor of a chain, one side of which encircles ideas of “acoustic universals” as artistic means – ideas of the soundscape as art medium. The “voice itself” is, as it were, a “modernist soundscape’s world” to paraphrase Simon Frith’s tripartite usage of Danto’s concept. On the other side, the “acousticism” of Rojko, Žuraj and Lebič – musical poetics developed out of the modernist sound inventory – is displaced in Nenad


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Firšt’s as well as Sojar Voglar’s poetics: it is displaced from the realm of acoustic universals into a field of more historically – also geographically – determinable variables. In Firšt’s and Voglar’s poetic music sticks to what common sense knowledge labels as the classical heritage. And it is seen as a foundation out of which the modernist phenomenological “extensions” have been raised.

Of course, this opposition between phenomenological and historical stance is but a virtual contrast of complementary capacities of perception. And here I do not offer a corrective with information regarding reception as well as the inherent poetics of the mentioned works. Instead, I am tempted to make a certain methodological slip into Slavoj Žižek’s view of music as a “supplication: a call to a figure of the big Other (beloved Lady, King, God ...) to respond”16. His argument rests on a premise of melody as a subjective voice, prevailing in the era of Classicism, becoming complex in the era of Romanticism and somehow evaporating in the modern music objectified in Schönberg’s Sprechgesang. The modern music, says Žižek, is a “renouncement” of that “endeavor to provoke the answer of the Other”17, thus remaining on a certain “speechless vacuum”, on a level of “dissolution of the romantic subject”.18

This methodological, or rather semantic, slip into Žižek’s “structural substantialism” of musical textures seems to me as a rather handy, plastically described view on modern music as propagated in the 1970s and still in the 1980s. To the contrary of Žižek’s belief, the modern music addressed above is but a fan of views on restitution of what has been for decades now thematized as a “postmodern turn” – a turn away from the “big stories” of the modernity into the “small stories” of the era without anything substantially new: an era of idiosyncrasies, “dialects” and differences.

Idiosyncrasies are actually emphasized in each of the five mentioned musical poetics – surmising the inevitability of heterogeneous semantic potentials and skillful technical features of the music. As for the works addressed here, they remain within the unproblematic milieu of musical handcraft – in a typically pre-classical, as it were pre-instrumentalized, position of music as an “innocent luxury”: as a phenomenological 16 Slavoj Žižek, The Plague of Phantasies (London/New York: Verso, 2008), 245.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 270.
challenge to the listener’s capacity of imagination – not of his musical predispositions or expertise, or compositional knowledge. What at least the explicit musical poetics of the addressed pieces is concerned – beside their heterogeneous and heteronomous idea(I)s of performativity –, a certain, rather humble, position may be contemplated. None of the mentioned musical poetics appears to venture into the realm of experiment, research, explicit semantic goal, technical or stylistic unicum. On the contrary, they are all aspiring toward a certain aesthetic efficiency comparable to the ideas of the early romantic era. Whether one may speak of more or less profane, or sacred, is difficult to say. But it seems difficult to doubt in what I would suggest as a common feature of the contemporary (perhaps not only Slovenian) music: avoidance of any overtly semantic pregnancy, except a certain exuberance in acoustic ludism.

Of course, there are many more profane – or at least on the level of explicit musical poetics more sacred, more “geistig” – versions of symphonic music. Yet I do not believe they can change the offered view of the symphonic music today as an art of luxurious “acoustic ludism” beyond the ideas of profanation and sacredness: aiming at a certain aesthetic pregnancy, not semantic utterances, even less stimulating actions beside listening to the “musicality” of a piece.

Another “metaphysics of the absolute”, “just” a meta-religious pragmatism, substantialism or …?

POVZETEK

Prispevek je uvodna refleksija k raziskovalnemu projektu o slovenski simfonični glasbi po letu 1918, ki je potekal od leta 2011 do 2014 pri Javni agenciji za raščlajočo dejavnost Republike Slovenije. Projekt si prizadeva zbrati in muzikološko obravnavati glasbena dela, ki so nastala v Sloveniji po prvi svetovni vojni na čim bolj arhivski način: ponuditi bazo muzikoloških podatkov o glasbenih delih na Slovenskem. Baza bo v končni fazi vključevala različne zvrste in sloge, vključno s pričevanjem o glasbenih poetikah skladateljev in ustvarjalcev ter podatki o recepciji. Trenutno raziskujem slovensko simfonično tvornost tega obdobja.