Leon Stefanija

Sisyphean Beauty:
A Portrait of Uroš Rojko


The publication of a new scientific monograph on the composer Uroš Rojko is indeed a suitable occasion for a more thorough study of the life and work of this new corresponding member of the Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts. The author, Leon Stefanija, states that his research engagement with Rojko was first and foremost sparked by his fascination with Rojko’s music and only later by his wish to unveil the origins of its sound energy and efficiency. This fascination emanates throughout the text, regardless of the objective distance required for scientific research. Stefanija does not take a position on the researched subject but nevertheless guides the reader – carefully interweaving facts and arranging them into theoretical frames – to the conclusion that the oeuvre at hand is exceptional and worth researching.

The book is arranged into three larger thematic sections that form a logical whole. The first part is biographical but not in the typical way found in most biographies. Somewhat surprisingly, we are presented with a string of considerations and anecdotes from the composer’s life – in first-person narration. Thereby, it seems as if the composer was freely communicating with the reader, whereas in reality the work is a challenging musicological study. The author’s excerpts, painstakingly collected from different interviews, lectures and notes, are woven into meaningfully composed sections, which were occasionally supplemented by the composer. Behind the appearance of an ‘easy’ read lies vast research and the first-person narration offers a direct path into the composer’s world. This world appears to be a fragile mixture of energetic impulsiveness and contemplation, suggesting that engagement with sound gives meaning to life and liberates because the awakening of human sensibility to the sublime side of sound enables communication on a higher level.

Next, a chapter follows that aims to show the position from which the composer works and how his music produces effects. Although it is divided into several smaller chapters, they can be combined in two larger sections. In the first, the author offers some general aesthetic considerations, while in the second he engages in detail with what is maybe the most important characteristic of Rojko’s aesthetics – space and time. The theoretical part opens with the thesis that a composer’s starting point within modernity is schizophrenic because this music is simultaneously defined by a culture of searching for something special, new, and by an incorporation of everything that can
be regarded as music. This is why the majority of artists are faced with the fear of recognisable influences and naivety. Perhaps, the solution of this double bind lies in the deliberate omission of established habits of a given time, so that one might find one’s own rules as they are dictated by the artist’s conscience and his sense of form. Musical poetics grounded on such presuppositions can be classified into three categories, of which the first is mainly defined by inspiration, the second by rationalization and the third by the philosophy of chance and by improvisation. The music of Uroš Rojko shows that the composer’s sense of form is inexhaustible, combining in his works and mutually supplementing all three poetic categories. We cannot, nevertheless, search for the core of his music in philosophical or aesthetic concepts but in the effectiveness of his sound combinations, in the material sensuality of the created. In connection with this statement, the question of function and expressiveness also arises. In searching for an answer, it is reasonable to proceed from Adorno’s category of musique informelle, as the most influential for Rojko’s creativity in the 1960s. That is to say, texture is the key carrier of musicality, and this can be detected also in his aesthetic views. His music eludes categorization into a single composing tradition, for it always remains “somewhere in between”, on the thin line between extremes, such as progressive-reactionary, elitist-pragmatic/useful, or East-West.

The theoretical framework is complemented by discussion on the question of space and time. Analyses of some of the composer’s comments on his compositions reveal that the ethical role of the artist in space and time is one of the most important themes in Rojko’s aesthetics. The category of musical space is multilayered. It seems as if in Rojko’s work there is a synthesis of different understandings that appeared within postwar modernist traditions. For him, space can be an acoustic phenomenon, a metaphysical comparison, a state of mind, or the category of time-space, which is particularly characteristic of his worldview. Such deliberations are supplemented by analyses of reviews, which can be understood as a correlate to the composer’s poetics of space and time. Recurring labels recognise in Rojko’s music above all its proto-narrative function and they can be arranged into several interconnected thematic sets. The chapter ends with an attempt to place the composer’s output into its temporal and spatial context.

The third part offers a view into the composer’s workshop. His musical textures are mainly characterised by musical gestures or events, all-encompassing starting impulses that are combined into a meaningful and coherent totality. Sketches from the composer’s archive reveal gestures incorporated into the musical time (and space) responsible for the choice of pitch classes and how important it is to accordingly distribute the material among instruments, especially with large ensembles. The majority of sketches and commentaries are connected to Dih ranjenega časa (The Breath of Wounded Time), one of Rojko’s most renowned compositions, written for the Donaueschingen Festival in 1988.

Along the lines of this short summary it can be said that the monograph is a systematically conceptualised and detailed portrait of the composer. It is also important that the composer is still alive and able to influence the path of research work with commentaries, further information and material from his personal archive. Out of the
Slovene composers born in the 1950s, Uroš Rojko has received more musicological attention than others, even before this monograph was published. Why is this new monograph an important step forward then? While reviewing existing material, it became clear that it is dispersed and often difficult to access. The extensive corpus is comprised of TV shows in public media, numerous critiques in newspapers and an abundance of material owned solely by the composer. The monograph therefore offers a comprehensive study of all accessible material: the first, biographical part is based on personal contact with the composer; the second, which is directed towards creative poetics and aesthetic problems, relies on musicological notes; the third is a precious commentary on materials from the personal archive of the composer and offers an insight into his compositional solutions. In addition to this publication and in the framework of the research program ‘Music in Slovene Lands after 1918’, a second monograph was made public in e-form: The Academy Member Uroš Rojko: The Composer on His Work and the Reactions to It, in which the biographical facts, the composer’s commentaries on his compositions and information about the performances with accompanying critical reviews are collected, for the purpose of easier further research.

Both publications comprehensively and extensively deal with the opus of Uroš Rojko and the reception of his work. The study is balanced because all three segments are represented equally. It is intended mainly for readers that are rather well acquainted with contemporary music, both its aesthetic and its compositional-technical sides. The reading demands an established conceptual framework, within which the author clearly defines his understanding of key concepts. Notwithstanding, the inexperienced reader will also find enough useful information for a deeper appreciation of Rojko’s music. The rich content virtually calls for the reader to test newly gained insights on sound images.

The book is a crucial milestone in documenting the development of Slovene music and an example of a living composer’s portrait, as well as a clear presentation of the author’s thought on musical creativity.

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