Vilko Ukmar and Modern Concepts of Music Historiography

Vilko Ukmar is often defined as a Slovenian composer of the 20th century, although his work was set broader. During his long life, Ukmar focused on various fields, proving to be an expert on aesthetic-philosophical issues, a lucid writer about art, specifically on musical idea, aesthetics and style. The fact that he was trying to find music – the meaning of life and the meaning of art in general was equally reflected in his publications and in his extensive music opus. Despite his law school education, he devoted his life to music, which accompanied him throughout his whole life. Ukmar’s artistic achievements and selfless efforts testify to exceptional creativity and a fountain of thought, which originated either from his musical opus or were closely associated with him.

His publications Pogled na zgodovinski razvoj glasbene umetnosti (A View on the Historical Development of the Art of Music, 1937), Zgodovina glasbe (History of Music, 1948), Glasba v preteklih dobah (Music of Previous Epochs, 1955), Glasba v preteklosti (Music in the Past, 1975), Razvoj glasbe in glasbene oblike (The Development of Music and Musical Forms, 1961) and Uvod v umetnosti v glasbenem svetu (Introduction into the Understanding of the Art of Music, 1963) as well as a contribution on the issue and concept of style in music – Glasbeni stil in estetika (Music Style and Aesthetics) and Po lepoti k resnici (From Beauty to Truth, 1972), represent in many ways a basis even for today’s aesthetic, ethical and sociological critical aspects of critique in Slovenian music.

I compared the above mentioned books and handbooks to equivalent foreign and Slovenian literature and analysed Ukmar’s work in comparison with the work of other authors. I structured and linked the characteristics of individual writers and analysed their views in music historiography. The findings are interesting as they show that these authors had an important influence on Ukmar’s writing. This cannot be indirectly identified in the books because he did not use footnotes – that made the analysis of his work somewhat more difficult. The results are nonetheless interesting; besides Ukmar’s own style and language development we can also observe the connection to other authors. Despite the fact that he took many thoughts from leading writers of his time, Ukmar always kept his own style and ideas. This is also visible in the upgrading and updating of materials, from which we can observe the Apollonian and the Dionysian, human spiritual and spiritual-style development, as well as a strong attachment to nature, man and man’s art-work. Order, beauty and in the end aesthetics, were the main guidelines not only for his ideas but for his entire creative work.

Cankar established Dvořák’s direction in Slovenian art history, namely the concept of “art history as an exact history discipline” resulting from style, whereby style needs to be understood as the development of the intellect in the sense of Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte – art history as intellectual history. This direction of Dvořák and Cankar was successfully continued by Vilko Ukmar through Vurnik in the music field. Ukmar did not merely list years or facts while explaining history but used insights into the human intellect in individual historical episodes instead.
In this, he was a follower of Guido Adler’s path, and the basis was set by the Viennese School of Art History.

The above mentioned authors were an important influence on Ukmar, each in their own field, but never completely. He summarized Adler’s texts for his publications and the art history periodization after Dvořák and Cankar, but it is clear that he ‘borrowed’ only the basics, and upgraded them with his own ideas and thoughts.

He constantly further developed and supplemented his thoughts, but man and man’s works of art remained always at the centre of his interest. Like with all art, the starting-point and the aim of music is beauty, and this beauty was accompanying Ukmar throughout his whole life – alongside music itself. This is noticeably reflected in his publications, which were always concisely and well designed. In his publications, he was seeking the human truth and its apotheosis through art and social development, always striving for improvement. Music was of utmost importance for Ukmar. It was closely linked to his essence and meaning of life and development – not only his but for humans in general, with whom he shared the developmental path.

Defended on 14 June 2016 Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.