Demetrij Žebre and contemporary stylistic tendencies in Slovenian music

Alongside a thorough overview of stylistic trends in music of the first half of the last century, and its particular terminology, the first part of dissertation explores the most recent concepts of different music theorists and musicologists on hitherto understanding of music modernism, neoclassicism and tradition in the music of 20th century. Their similar findings illuminate for decades prevailing premise of the Second Viennese School as being the leading and the only modernist focused centre – because of its “avant-garde” achievements within musical expressionism - and regard it as misleading. Furthermore, they consider the most recently presented history of music modernism as a national ideological construct. In the dissertation we therefore reveal new views on aforementioned musical and stylistic phenomena and expose the consequences of the “Adornian mistake” present in Slovenian historiography. Moreover, in the thesis we present Danuser’s argument on a wide and “all inclusive” aesthetic concept of “modernist classicism” or “classicist modernism”. Emerging between 1920–1950 it encompassed a variety of different compositional-technical idioms within nationally determined musical tendencies, thus confirming our thesis on polystylistic features of the music of that time. The most recent findings on up to date (pejorative) discussion of neoclassicism and inclusion of traditional tonal elements in contemporary music therefore unravel diverse new questions, and above all they call for a second evaluation of modernism in the Slovenian music of the first half of the 20th century.

In spite of relatively small opus of Slovenian modernist Demetrij Žebre (1912–1970), as we discover in the second part of the dissertation, which concerns with his opus and identification of parallels with other Slovenian artists and stylistic trends, the composer created his works thoughtfully and steadily, with an exceptional music poetics. Nevertheless, from the earliest creations (from 1925) to the last (1949), his poetics evolved in accordance with the contemporary stylistic trends of the time and the environment he lived in. Within the new, free sound world, marked by the break from traditional tonality, he, too, as most of his contemporaries from the first half of the 20th century who were drawn to and inspired by the idea of “progress” or “innovation”, had to search for different solutions for achieving cohesiveness and articulation of music flow, just as it was attainable through tonal system. Even so, in his restrained modernist compositions he did not abandon specific elements of the tonal system. Stylistic and compositional-technical analysis of most of his compositions, especially those written for orchestra, reveals, that his opus progressed through several stylistic changes and that he significantly contributed to Slovenian musical achievements within all stylistic trends of the time – from expressionism, impressionism, neoclassicism, New Objectivity, post-romanticism, socialist realism and modernist classicism.
Some of his expressionist works can be regarded as the most radical compositional solutions in Slovenian music, leaving out dodecaphonic method, which was not fully accepted by neither Alois Haba nor any of Osterc’s students. The fact that Žebre started his compositional path in such manner is surprising, since alongside some of his romantic outsets in orchestral music (Andante), his chamber music and songs displayed an influence of expressionistic stylistic trends and elements of the New Objectivity. Where has he found the inspiration for such original and dissonant non-tonal sound world, for example in Tepežnica (1928) or Trije samospevi (Three songs) on lyrics of Oton Župančič (1929), remains an open question. It is interesting that in his songs and in most of his choral and solo compositions he retained a non-tonal expressionist style with elements of the New Objectivity, until the last three songs from the year 1944, written to the lyrics of Mitja Šabon. Furthermore, this can also be recognized in the Scherzo (1925) and the Nocturno (1944) for piano, and its adaptation for violin and piano (1947), which begin and end his path of expressionist expression. The latter notably escalates in the time between and after Žebrė’s arrival from Prague, in works such as the Godalni kvartet (String Quartet) (1935), Caprice (1935) and Preludij (Prelude) for violin and piano (1936), Trije lirični poemi za violino in klavir (Three lyrical poems for violin and piano) (1937), chamber music and children’s choirs in quarter-tone and sixth-tone system and in the orchestral composition Tek (Run) (1935) and Toccata (1936).

Between his studies with Slavko Osterc (1929–1934) the composer created a few songs, choirs, some chamber works (Intermezzo saxofobico for saxophone and piano, 1932, Burleska (Burlesque) for violin and piano, 1933, Pihalni trio (Wind trio) for flute, piano and bassoon, 1934) and orchestral Suite (Suite) for a small orchestra (1932). Analysis of the Suite shows a stronger sense of neoclassicism, neo-baroque, New Objectivity and American dance music of the time, along with the inclusion of features of jazz music. Especially noticeable is parodic-humorous, light and anti-romantic expression by all of these mentioned works, typical for the music of composers belonging to the “French-Russian axis”.

In 1938 Žebrė starts to incorporate impressionist techniques in his compositional style and consecutively creates two large works, which were influenced by Debussy: Polystylistic Bacchanale, a ballet (symphonic poem in three movements), Dan (Day) with elements of impressionism, expressionism, New Objectivity and post-romanticism, which he finished four years later (1938–1942). By the year 1939 he has already created his first “impressionist jewel” titled Vizija (Vision), which is soon followed by Tretja (The third) (1942), titled also as Prebujenje (Awakening), and Druga (The second) (1943). The cycle Tri vizije (Three visions) remains his most stylistic uniform work. However, impressionism of that time needs to be understood as a historical reference of the wider defined classicist modernism. Under stronger impact of impressionism, and in expression polystylistic, is composition Maja in morje (Maja and the sea) for soprano and orchestra (1944). The composer shifted toward socialist realism with stronger attraction to classicist formal processes, greater diatonic tonal content and romantic expression in his last four orchestral works – Svobodi naproti (Towards the freedom) (1944), Žalna glasba v spomin Slavka Osterca (Funeral music in the memory of Slavko
Osterc) (1945), Concertino for piano and orchestra (1946) and Allegro risoluto-marciale (1949), which can be understood as an instinctive polystylistic reaction of the classicist modernist to the demands of the revolutionary and politically unequivocal time.

Defended on 7 September 2016, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana.