

Gregor Pompe

# Skice za zgodovino slovenske glasbe 20. stoletja

Gregor Pompe. *Skice za zgodovino slovenske glasbe 20. stoletja*. [Sketches for the History of Slovenian Twentieth-Century Music.] Glasba na Slovenskem po letu 1918. Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2019. 275 pages. €24,90. ISBN: 978-961-06-0163-0.

The publication of this book, described by its author as a “work in progress,”<sup>1</sup> is an important landmark in the author’s quest for exploring his personal research process, whose origins can be traced back to the last years of the past century, and whose crown jewel is his monumental monograph<sup>2</sup> published late last year that discusses the same time frame as this book. The author’s characterization of his work as “unfinished” is probably due to two reasons: in addition to trying to logically connect individual, narrowly focused studies into a whole, another reason might be the fact that it is difficult to treat the music of that period as monolithic. One of the characteristics of the twentieth century is that it is multifaceted, with personal styles and coexisting trends that greatly differ in their attitudes. Gregor Pompe pursues the goal of covering an entire range of creative choices, which is quite an arduous task given the rapid changes in stylistic features and introduction of perpetually new compositional techniques. Each “sketch”, each article on a chosen aspect of a certain composer’s work, can be seen as a piece of the mosaic that depicts the most common features of the musical twentieth century in Slovenia, which was rich and diverse, but also marked by distinctive breaks. It is thus not just a collection of mostly unpublished texts in Slovenian: rather the author enriches them with a wider view of the Slovenian musical space by outlining a kind of musical map, and at the same time explicitly states his opinions on many issues that had previously been unresolved. The work ultimately, however, remains at a sketch-level as there are still many blank spots on this musical map.

The monograph consists of 18 chapters that could be logically organized into three sections. The first part focuses on the period between the two World Wars. In all the texts on this period, Pompe looks for traces of the ambivalence that is considered a fundamental feature of modernism. On the one hand composers were said to be introducing certain new compositional procedures, while on the other hand they continued to be aesthetically committed to romantic expressiveness. The work of Anton Lajovic appears to sway between the belief that art should be in service of the needs of society

1 Gregor Pompe, *Skice za zgodovino slovenske glasbe 20. stoletja* (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2019), 5.

2 Gregor Pompe, *Zgodovina glasbe na Slovenskem IV: Glasba na Slovenskem med letoma 1918 in 2018* (Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete; Založba ZRC, 2019).

and defending the artist who should follow his inner expressive urge. Janko Ravnik's harmonic language is quite bold, but at the same time the composer is committed to aesthetic concepts from the nineteenth century. Similar could be said for the extensive oeuvre of Lucijan Marija Škerjanc: he typically engaged in many genres that were new to Slovenian music at the time, but in doing so he was still aesthetically immersed in the past. Risto Savin is particularly important because of his operas, in which Wagner's influence is apparent, but he was also open to compositional novelties, and his selection of themes from national history and his inclusion of ethnic melodies demonstrate his desire for a national opera. Emil Adamič, a very prolific composer of mainly choir music, was particularly curious about new trends, although even his last composition shows traces of the past – variations on a folk song. Pompe also draws attention to those oeuvres that are only partially marked by the influences of modernism. Belonging to this group are Matija Bravničar, Marijan Lipovšek and Slavko Osterc in particular. After their youthful works that exhibited features of modernism, all three gradually turned in different directions. While this kind of development seems natural to an extent, the work of composers such as Škerjanc or Blaž Arnič, who persisted within modernism even after it had passed historically, was more unusual. It is also interesting that at the time the most important goal for Slovenians was still to consolidate national identity, which is why great genres like those of their European contemporaries were missing. Compositional, especially harmonic novelties can be found in genres that are more characteristic of the Spring of Nations period.

Pompe continues with two key interwar composers, Škerjanc and Osterc, who have become synonymous with the division of the Slovenian musical landscape between progressive and conservative currents, but who were actually not so dissimilar: under the guise of novelty, Osterc maintained links with traditional forms, while Škerjanc, despite his being cautious and sentimental, also introduced new elements in his works. The chapter containing a detailed analysis of Škerjanc's (First) Violin Concerto from 1927, when he studied in Paris, is quite revealing, showing the composer's most daring side. During his experimental period, Škerjanc was at the edge of modernism and had enough knowledge and talent to join the restoration of worn out compositional devices, but instead he chose the safety of tradition, thus excluding himself from the main current of world history.

Three further chapters are dedicated to the interwar period: in the first one, Pompe offers an analytical overview and evaluation of Bravničar's violin compositions, in the second, of Radovan Gobec' operettas, and in the third, the piano oeuvre of Zvonimir Ciglič. In Bravničar's violin oeuvre, one can observe the gradual movement from expressionist expressiveness towards "classicism", which can be understood as stylistic regression, apparent on two levels: from improvisational-explorational formal freedom towards classical formal patterns, and from a harmonically complex language towards simpler tertian formations with hints of modality. This again creates a dichotomy where Bravničar keeps mastering his compositional perfection, but at the same time abandons the idea of progress. In Ciglič's piano works, the duality is presented differently, not relating to stylistic alterations, but as oppositions within an invariable style, perhaps best summarized within the duality of intellect – intuition.

Gobec created several musical works for the theatre of lighter genres, which is rare in Slovenia. In general, the guiding principle of his creative approach was the quest to be widely understandable and communicative. His two interwar operettas present considerable innovativeness and knowledge of contemporary trends, but the chapter still seems somewhat alien to the volume's conception, since even within musicology, Gobec is defined above all as an author of works intended for popular performances by amateur ensembles. Its inclusion is perhaps meant to expand the margins of the pre-war as well as the post-war Slovenian musical landscape.

The second group of chapters encompasses the period after World War II, marked by specific political and cultural-historical contexts. Pompe lays out his thesis that politics was not particularly interested in music because it had no ideological potential, nor was it seen as harmful. Declaratively, it had to "serve the nation," but under this banner, conflicts between different personal orientations, and especially between tradition and novelty, were taking place. This period is linked to ideas of socialist realism, which never really came to life in Slovenia. The works by composers from this period exhibit an immersion into the past mixed with folklore and neoclassical elements, but not for political or ideological reasons. During the 1950s, younger composers especially started to unite and demand space for more progressive ideas, but due to aesthetic regression and political isolation directly after the War, their development was reset at point zero, just as was the case with their European colleagues right after the War ended. This rift left a significant mark on subsequent generations as well.

There are quite a few common features among the most prominent composers of the post-war period, namely that they went the furthest in their use of harmonic novelties, although even those were introduced selectively and belatedly compared to contemporary currents in Western Europe. Solo vocal compositions by Vilko Ukmar are a good example of this, as well as the limited use of the dodecaphonic technique. The masterfully created compositions by Uroš Krek reflect the contemporary stylistic shifts in the Slovenian space, for which he is described as a classicist by Pompe, but only in the local context. The only chapter to depart from the charted course is the one on Lipovšek's musical adaptations of Svetlana Makarovič's poetry, which the author compares to Pavle Merku's adaptations of similar texts and thus touches on the dilemmas of considering the external and internal literary logic as opposed to musical immanence.

The third part discusses the still living composers of the older generation, born in the 1920s and 1930s, Janez Maticič, Jakob Jež, Lojze Lebič and Vinko Globokar. Even though Maticič's work was indebted to Parisian influences, and especially through his work in the electronic studio GRM – the cradle of *Musique concrète* – his musical core has not changed considerably as the common feature of his composing is still an interest in musical immanence, loaded with Dionysian energy, and his commitment to the piano. Jež invented a very personal composing expression, spread between tradition and the eager search for the new. It draws largely on the relationships between music and words, and shows a great fondness for the human voice. While the texts on Maticič and Jež read more like anniversary notes, the part dedicated to Lebič is much more thorough and extensive, as Lebič is one of Pompe's central research topics. In all three chapters devoted to this composer, the main narrative seems to be that his

modernist-oriented music is imbued with folk material which carries semantic potential, and such a juxtaposition is precisely one of the fundamental features of postmodernist music. The author finds a similar mixture in the works of two foreign composers who come from similar political and cultural-historic situations – the Lithuanian Bronius Kutavičius and the Estonian Veljo Tormis. Beside the use of music from an imagined ancient past, all three are also linked by ritual and theatricality. These tools enable them to circumvent the religious lack of freedom and social realism, but also to quietly allude to national identity. With regards to Lebič's composition *Queensland Music*, Pompe poses the question to what extent is the composer's wish for modernism to continue utopian or nostalgic, and his answer is dialectical: it is both. In contrast to Lebič, Globokar does not search for all the potential of musical material but asks instead what is music at all. He discovers this by crossing the established boundaries and demonstrates that music can be assembled from non-musical elements, whereas their link can reach and even surpass music itself, since, remarkably, it also carries socially engaged messages. The last chapter is the most contemporary in all regards, as it discusses the state of the youngest genre or Slovenian electroacoustic music, drawing on a survey to reveal more about it during the past few years. An important finding is that younger musicians, in contrast to previous generations, engage in this type of music because they would like to capture the *zeitgeist* of our time.

The book is intended for all those who are interested in Slovenian art music, and especially in the reasons for its idiosyncrasies. Development in Slovenia was often different than elsewhere, and certain conclusions could seem surprising without considering the cultural-historic background; yet an exhaustive explanation shows otherwise. The monograph is also an interesting supplement to *The History of Music in Slovenia IV* by the same author, as certain topics are discussed in a different manner in the *Sketches*, more extensively and analytically, directed towards narrowly defined questions and not as a part of the broader picture. The copious collection of analyses, supported by tables and musical notations, will doubtless be helpful for further research. Analyses always serve to explain the defined problems, but even readers with no prior musical knowledge will be able to satisfy their curiosity. It is clear from the bibliography, which is spread across various sources, but also from the text itself, that the author has combed through all the available texts and critically assessed them. A lot of pioneering work was done as literature on recent Slovenian music is scarce, especially the analytically thorough kind. Despite methodological versatility, which the author explains already in the introduction, the topics are treated systematically and are only occasionally disturbed by the odd proofreading slip. It also seems that the conclusion of the book was written for a version that included an additional chapter on Lebič.

At the presentation of his last book, Pompe said that every historical work itself becomes an object of history upon publication and that he therefore looks forward to the next steps of other researchers on this path. The *Sketches* are certainly an important, although not the final, link in the chain of research on Slovenian music, past and present.

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