CONVERSATIONS

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MUSIC, MYSTICISM, PHILOKALIA: AN INTERVIEW WITH COMPOSER ĐURO ŽIVKOVIĆ

A mid-generation composer, Đuro Živković (b. 1975, Belgrade) has been living and working in Sweden for more than 25 years now and was, until a few years ago, completely unknown to our musical public. This changed in 2014, when he received one of the world's greatest music awards, the American Grawemeyer Award, for his work *On the Guarding of the Heart* for chamber ensemble.

Živković began studying violin in Novi Sad before transferring to Belgrade. At the Faculty of Music, he also enrolled in the composition class of Prof. Vlastimir Trajković, but in

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2000 he moved to Stockholm, where he completed his training at the Royal Swedish Academy of Music. He had an opportunity to study with Peer Lundgren, Bent Sørensen, and Magnus Lindberg, leading northern Europe's composers and teachers, and also pursued further training in artistic workshops led by Essa-Pekka Salonen, James Dillon, Mario Davidovsky, and Michael Obst. Today, Živković teaches composition at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm and, as a visiting professor, at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad. Also, he is a member of several chamber ensembles dedicated to performing contemporary music.

Živković has produced a relatively rich and extensive oeuvre, mainly comprising chamber works, most of which are closely linked to the spiritual, that is, mystic-religious sphere. Also, his works have been included in the touring and concert programmes of several prominent international chamber ensembles: Klangforum Wien, the Swedish Sonanza ensemble, Canada's Trio Fibonacci, Tokyo's International Music Ensemble, Chicago's Pre-art ensemble, as well as the New European Ensemble, which is currently based in the Netherlands and led by Christian Karlsen. Works by Živković have been commissioned and premièred by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and New York Philharmonic, and performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Malmö Symphony Orchestra, and Sydney Symphony Orchestra, as well as the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Zagreb Symphony Orchestra. In addition, pieces by Živković have also been performed by the Eric Ericson Kammarkör, the Netherlands Radio Choir, Swedish Radio Choir, as well as the following renowned ensembles: Avanti! (Finland), Klangforum Wien (Austria), Ensemble Modern (Germany), the Swedish Chamber Orchestra, and the Dutch Asko ensemble. Alongside the Grawemeyer Award mentioned above, Živković also won a Swedish Grammy award in 2010, for *Le Cimetière marin* for soprano and chamber ensemble. Also, he is a laureate of our most prestigious award in the domain of musical creativity, the Stevan Mokranjac Award, which he won in 2012 for *Ascetic Discourse*. In 2015, his Cello Concerto *Unceasing Prayers* was nominated for the Prince de Monaco Prize, while the Royal Swedish Academy of Music has awarded him two of its major prizes: the Carin Malmlöf-Forssling Prize in 2018 and the Lilla Christ Johnson Prize in 2019.

Outstanding among Živković's most frequently performed works are several that have already been cited as prize-winning pieces: *On the Guarding of the Heart* (Grawemeyer Award, 2014), *Le Cimetière Marin* (Grammis, Sweden, 2008), *Ascetic Discourse* (Mokranjac Award, 2012), as well as *Citadel of*

Love (Swedish Music Publishers' Award, 2021). This group of his most popular pieces also comprises *The White Angel* for chamber orchestra (2006), *Fire Taming* for chamber ensemble (2014), *Psalm XIII* for string quartet (2014), as well as *Quintet Byzantine* for wind quintet (2016).

Also, Živković is the author of *Unceasing Prayers*, a violoncello concerto (2013), and *Mystical Sacrifice*, a cantata for baritone, choir, and large orchestra commissioned and premièred in 2017 by the Concertgebouw Orchestra along with the Netherlands Radio Choir. His more recent oeuvre includes *Bogoluchie* (2018), a liturgical drama for a female vocal soloist, men's choir, and chamber orchestra; a version of *Citadel of Love* for a large chamber ensemble (2020); the orchestral works *Agape-Superplasma* (2020–2023) and *Chandangel* (2021–2023), as well as *Concerto terrae* (2024), a concerto for violoncello, piano, and orchestra. His most recent chamber works comprise *Alleluias* for viola and piano (2021), as well as two choral works, *Venite, Lucem Accipite* and *Lyra Laudus*, both from 2021.

Živković's style is vividly coloured by the Byzantine-Orthodox spiritual, mystical, and musical tradition, which means that all his pieces from this thematic and conceptual circle are written in one and the same, clearly defined and recognizable authorial handwriting, combining and blending antiquity and contemporaneity in a unique way. Some 15 years ago, he happened upon *Philokalia*, a spiritual writing by Abba Philemon, and decided to search in it for inspiration for many of his subsequent works. The term *philokalia* might be rendered in English as "love of the beautiful" and it was precisely his careful study of several different translations of this text that lent Živković a vivid sense of inspiration with the term and the meaning of Christian kindness and doing good. Živković has stated himself that he read *Philokalia* whilst composing and that the links between these two intense spiritual activities were deep and manifold. Inspiration with the early Christian spiritual world is present on multiple levels of his music. The relationship between sound and silence, fast and slow sections, mystical meditation and realistic sounds from nature shows an entirely unique, impressive, and effective internal balance of overall musical expression. His music's speech remains contemporary precisely whilst drawing to the surface some ancient or perhaps eternal laws of time, laws that underpin prayer, whether it be musicalized or spoken as though it were a song without singing.

His composition process itself is subjected to strict ascetic control, which lets into the music only the most important and effective particles of sound and works with them with an extraordinary degree of sophistication, apply-

ing a likewise carefully selected level of expert technical detail. Nevertheless, although his compositional procedure and selection of musical materials are so tightly controlled, the sonic product is music that is rich, diverse in content, at once communicating with ancient sources of spirituality from his native country as well as with the most up-to-date techniques of controlled aleatoric music, microtonality, and unusual procedures related to heterophony and imitation, as well as extraordinary, allusive, and colouristic instrumentation. To secure internal cohesion of sound, the author devised a special heptatonic mode.

The basis of your style is its organic connection with your philosophical and religious views. When and how did this strong and passionate symbiosis begin to take shape?

My philosophical formation began already during my studies in Belgrade in the late 1990s, when I was in Prof. Vlastimir Trajković's class. This was my entry into a domain where music was perceived as thought, as a quest for meaning, and not merely as a craft. Already in my first year, I wrote a 37-minute sonata for violin and piano titled *Metaphysical Poem*, because I felt then that music demanded to be more than sound. The title was deliberate; some considered it provocative as well.

The religious aspect came later, perhaps as a continuation of that initial experience. Around 2010, I began searching for true inspiration, the one that is pure in spirit. That search led me to early Christian literature, especially to the Philokalia. I realized then that what I had suspected in music had its higher language, in opposition to the established academic view that music is just "sound". The Philokalia talks about focusing your mind, the silence and pureness of the heart, and it is precisely those states that music, when it is true, seeks to attain. Since then, there's been no clear boundary for me between thought, belief, and creation.

Do you see yourself as an artist in the tradition of Byzantine Orthodox Christianity, mysticism, and music?

I wouldn't say that I see myself as an artist who technically belongs to the tradition of Byzantine music. My music doesn't follow its models, borrow its forms, or attempt to reconstruct its language.

For, if we try to conceive of time not as a series but as a whole, the thing we call "development" in art is no longer necessary. There is no single path

from one thing to another, nor does one epoch necessarily give rise to another. That logic belongs to the history but not necessarily to the truth of creativity as well. In that light, "epoch-making" becomes a timeless category: whatever was once true in music, in a way remains always available.

That is why for me there are no technical moulds that one should fill, or styles to "continue", or "traditions" to restore. But to answer your question: there is an internal call to understand creation not in terms of self-expression (which is constantly imposed upon us) but in terms of serving. In that sense, if there is a connection with Byzantine and Christian Orthodox tradition, its nature is spiritual not technical: it is about viewing art the way we view icons.

An icon does not present the world as it is, but as it is invoked to be; an icon transforms. So does music, if one understands it deeply enough: rather than explaining anything, its purpose is to raise us, to become a sort of testimony that there is a higher reality, even when this world is wounded and tired, to become what the Holy Scripture refers to as "faith, hope, love".

Your view of the world and art is significantly influenced by the teachings of several Church Fathers, confessors, philosophers and mystics. Your works from the last two decades typically deal with Christian love and Orthodox ethics. Hence one of your philosophical postulates – philokalia.

That word, philokalia, "love of the beautiful", became a sort of internal reversal for me. Above all, it removed me from what one might call the closed circle of aestheticism. Philokalia has taught me that beauty is a reflection of something deeper: truth and goodness. And that, if it is separated from them, it becomes an illusion, even a temptation. Therefore, my progress toward the spirit of philokalia meant an essential transition from the aesthetic domain of what I would call "uni-musical", the general, abstract field of music, into the domain of spiritual categories.

For one cannot truly create without transforming themselves. And here we arrive at what is most important, which is that philokalia, in its deepest sense, is always about working on oneself. Not in psychological or intellectual but in ascetic terms: purifying one's mind, calming one's heart, contemplation. Music emerges as the fruit of an internal state. It becomes, if I may say so, a sort of extension of prayer, or an offering.

If one does indeed begin to encounter the philokalian tradition, then they discover that love is not an emotion but a mode of being; that sacrifice is not a loss but a transformation; that an artist is called upon to look for another's image in creativity.

And if I had to put it briefly, I would say this: philokalia taught me that art is not a matter of style but one's state of being.

Your music sounds prayerful in its own right, whether with words or without them. The rhythm in which it combines fast and slow sections, drama and stasis, sound and silence, rhythmic patterns, ostinatos and parlando-rubato... those are the laws of prayer spoken by music. Your music is above all a prayer?

I believe that my music represents an internal flow, as a testimony of the current condition of the soul. And indeed, those states are very dynamic, as you noted as well. For spiritual life, in the Christian experience, is about moving: struggling, rising, and falling. In that sense, it is closer to the liturgical experience than to some kind of abstract silence. Just as the Liturgy itself is exceedingly dramatic as well.

That is also where I see a key difference regarding many eastern teachings, which often pursue an absolute calm, positing silence as their goal. In Christianity, calmness is a virtue, but not the ultimate goal, because the ultimate goal is the knowledge of God. And the path to it almost always involves drama, while that path in this world is endless. That is also what makes me suspicious of all "spiritual, Christian music" that is slow in tempo and soft in dynamics – as a cliché.

How do you accomplish that "fantastic narrativity", that charisma of sound, the power to draw the listener in and maintain their spirit in a mystical experience? That moment of "sonic contemplation"? Is your ascetic control of experience and controlled selection of materials and compositional-technological procedures one of the ways you accomplish that?

What you call "sonic contemplation" is indeed a state that is gradually summoned. One of the key aspects is time control. But not time in physical terms, in terms of seconds, but something I would call musical time. Musical time is elastic. The composer determines the very density of that time's flow. In that sense, I always felt close to Tarkovsky's notion of "sculpting in time". Music, if it is to acquire that internal strength, must become a continuous sonic flux, but one that is focused, concentrated, almost like the mind in prayer. If that concentration is disturbed, if it falls apart and reverts to physical time, then what is lost is precisely that ability to "draw" the listener in.

Another important aspect is what I would call the unity of language, in terms of internal consistency. If you take Bach, for instance, there is an im-

pressive degree of uniformity there. Nothing is random, there is nothing outside of that organism. My impression is that one of the main problems of contemporary music is precisely this: its lack of self-knowledge of pure musical mechanics. There is often a multitude of procedures, techniques, ideas, but without internal cohesion to connect them into a single entity. Whereas contemplation entails wholeness, just as prayer demands concentration.

In that context, too, the ascetics you referred to is inevitable. Controlling time and renouncing everything superfluous as forms of internal discipline, so that music might become a concrete dwelling space. Without the listener "following" it from their time but having the listener enter the music's own time field.

Have you thought about your music in terms of phrases, gestures, effects, and operational models? How do antiquity and contemporaneity so naturally and authentically flow together? Microtonality and melody, aleatoric and diatonic music, solid structures and improvisation?

I have certainly thought about music in those terms, but as visible consequences of something that precedes them, because those parameters are not autonomous, determined as they are by extra-musical values, the ones we've already discussed before.

That is why every procedure, even if it is technically most extreme, remains justified for me only if it is in "spiritual harmony". Again, this is very difficult to describe with words.

In my notes, when I'm composing, I often use expressions such as "Anything", "Anything's possible", or even "Impossible music", which is an attempt at returning music to an ur-image, a metaphysical source where anything might spring forth, if it is in spiritual harmony. And here again we arrive at a perhaps paradoxical truth: that true freedom in music is attained not when "everything is allowed", but when "everything is harmonized". When even the most divergent elements belong to the same internal, spiritual order.

Regarding the question of how "antiquity and contemporaneity" naturally merge, I'd rather say that they already occupy one and the same space. As I mentioned before, if we observe time as a concentrated whole, then what we call "ancient" and "contemporary" cease to be opposites.

In your scores (more often in your early works), the instrumental ensembles they specify are traditional (but they're always used in non-traditional ways!),

while in your later works they are increasingly defamiliarized with non-traditional combinations, and sometimes they feature some "forgotten" instruments: the psalterium, Theremin, piccolo trumpet, piccolo flute, accordion, waterphone… singing bowls… and the performers-instrumentalists and/or singers are often required to sing as well as play, whistle, perform on small percussion instruments or bells… Timbre and virtuosic orchestration are highly important in your music?

Like most composers, I'm often faced with a predetermined medium: a string quartet, *à cappella* choir, an orchestra of a certain size. Those are, so to speak, historically "given boundaries". But what arises in me as sound very often exceeds those boundaries, as though it wouldn't quite acquiesce to them, as if it were searching for space where it might flow out in a metaphysical sense, as an attempt at opening sound to those "worlds of the ineffable".

Because the standard orchestra is actually a product of the Viennese classical era and is works well with precise thematicism and pure forms. That is why I feel the need to expand it, in terms of opening up to other horizons of sound. New music entails new expression in orchestration. Therefore, the orchestration must likewise be new, incredible, impossible.

In order to achieve that unity of material and procedure in your music, you have created, using the "harmony of difference tones", a scale comprising nine notes – your "ancient scale"?

I'd rather say that this unity wasn't formed through the scale itself, as such, but through something I called the "ancient mode".

For a scale is always a sort of surface. Whereas what I was interested in was the "modus operandi", the internal mechanics guiding the movement of the music. In that sense, the ancient mode is indeed a system, but not a cerebral one, like serialism. The word "mode" signifies here the mode of operations. There are four main modes of operations within that system, which guide the formation, motion, and transformation of sound. The ancient mode is a sort of musical ontology, the way in which sound is born and moves.

In that context, the so-called "nine-degree scale" you mentioned is one of the possible outcomes of that way of thinking. On the other hand, the ancient mode may encompass different scalar frameworks and adapt to different composers' languages. I described that in detail in my book "The Ancient Mode". The intent was to restore to the composer the possibility of find-

ing order in sound and to have that order stem from the very flow of the music. The ancient mode is an attempt at transcending the divide between "freedom" and "system"; it represents the "third dimension", beyond the dualism of modality and atonality.

The titles of your pieces are unusual, often poetic or compound, or idiomatic. They form an important part of your philosophy and poetics?

Of course, the title is extremely important for me. I've always found it hard to imagine a work without a title, so much so that I can't compose without first knowing the title of the piece. The title is a window into the interior of the work. Also, I've always felt a certain degree of anxiety regarding "universal" titles. After all, such indifference is unknown in literature, too: no one will title their work simply a "novel". Nevertheless, my titles are not templates for programme music, which doesn't interest me as such. Rather, my titles are a "key" for unlocking everything that is encrypted in the score.

Often, my titles are a reflection of what was spiritually on my mind at the time. Sometimes I feel the need to compress everything in a single word, which is how compounds such as *Chandangel* and *Bogoluchie* come to be. They are attempts at naming something that eludes language and yet demands a name. Lately, my need for poetic titles has even spread to my tempo indications, replacing, for instance, "Allegro" with "The Eternity is Commandment of Love", quoting Alexander Schmemann.

The art of music is, according to your aesthetic, a fundamental philosophical essence that can change the world, a key for setting our destiny in motion toward something better and toward good. Is this Aristotle's ideal of kalokagathia, combined with the Christian Orthodox dogma of love?

I would try to express this in somewhat different words, which stem more from the very experience of creation. I believe that art, and especially music, is not just an expression or form, but the way that truth exists in sound. And if it is true, it has the power to convert people from dark to light. And that conversion is invariably necessary to all. Therefore, it really carries in itself something that is deeply philosophical and, at the same time, active.

Aristotle's ideal of kalokagathia resembles the Christian experience, wherein beauty and good are not only connected, but ultimately find fulfilment in love. That is why for me, music should be like icons. An icon is alive, metaphysical, integral, true. And precisely that view underpins my belief that

we are on the threshold of a new epoch in art. An epoch I've conditionally dubbed "iconism". After all the experiences of modernism, one feels a renewed hunger for sense, grace, and truth.

In that sense, I would say: yes, art is indeed called upon to lead us toward good, not as an ideology and aesthetic, however, but as light.