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Review of the 31st International Review of Composers in Belgrade (October 4th – October 8th, 2022)

As part of the 31st International Review of Composers, 50 compositions of diverse poetics were presented as part of eight concerts. In adherence to the long-standing tradition, accolades were also presented: the *Mokranjac* Award was given to composer Jasna Veličković for the work *Underneath*, musicologist Stefan Cvetković received the *Pavle Stefanović* Award for musical criticism and essay, and the Metamorphosis Ensemble was the recipient of the *Aleksandar Pavlović* Award, for an outstanding contribution to the promotion of Serbian music domestically and abroad, as to cellist Nemanja Stanković, for the young artist contributions. During the course of the festival the audience had the opportunity to experience works of diverse quality and divergent stylistic frameworks.

The festival was opened by the Metamorphosis Ensemble, led by Saša Mirković, which performed Ana Gnjatović's composition *Music for Missing Butterflies*. The composition is characterized

by subtle and sparse sounds, and short-sustained tones. Following this, the Ensemble presented Ana Kazimić's *Sol Invictus*, based on less profiled and developed melodic lines within a narrower ambitus. This led to a more daring and original composition by Lazar Đorđević, whose piece *D Madness* features an elaborate solo viola section with furious outbursts and excellently guided anticlimactic passages. Rooted in the theme of *La Folia*, this composition includes variant presentations while maintaining its recognizable foundation. With great attention to dramatic logic, the composer gradually builds towards the culmination through the dynamics and layering of sections. The intriguing harmonic clashes and, in general, the tempo of movement that draws us into a specific manipulation of time created a highly impressive imagery.¹

Plucked by Maja Bosnić was written for harpsichord and strings, and it re-

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¹ <https://xn--p1acc.xn--90a3ac/page/radio/sr/story/24/radio-beograd-2/4973210/.html>

quires the performers to use various techniques such as tapping, plucking, or dragging a plastic card over the strings to create a unique sound palette. Playing with sound dispersals and accumulations, while establishing an imitative relationship between the harpsichord and other ensemble instruments, the performance created a vibrant sonic atmosphere. Rhythmic games reach their peak in the final section and serve as the primary manipulative tool for the composer. Traces of *La Folia* are evident in this composition as well, primarily within the rhythmic elements. Further musical exploration of the 15th-century theme could also be heard in Dragan Jovanović's work *Metamorpholia*. By more explicitly exploiting the melodic foundation but altering it harmonically, the composer created a compact and dramatically uniform realization.

Finally, the first evening concluded with *Damar* by Darija Andovska. Skillfully coloring the sections harmonically, the composer actually retells a familiar musical story, interrupting it and dressing it in new attire. Thus, the well-known folk song *Jovano, Jovanke* becomes a key element of the piece, passing through various manipulative techniques, transitioning from one instrument to another, accompanied by, at times, an energetic rhythmic support. The Metamorphosis Ensemble performed this, as well as all other pieces in the repertoire, consistently, devotedly, and passionately, with Saša Mirković expressing his interpretative capacities in full. He strives for sound perfection, meticulously inter-

preting and energetically playing each note, which achieved a special meaning in his rendition.²

The piece *Snake Fiction* by Jug Marković was commissioned by the *Studio 6* ensemble. As stated in the program booklet, the electronic part, subtly present here, was composed on the Synthi 100, utilizing archival materials from unknown authors of the seventies who worked in the electronic studio of Radio Belgrade. This reinterpretation of existing elements aligns with the postmodern foundation of Marković's poetics, along with a communicative musical flow, tense rhythmic impulses, and an overall thoughtfully conceived dramatic thread.

Next was an interestingly conceived and excellently executed piece, *Sparkling Dark* by Vladica Mikićević, in the interpretation of Rastko Popović. Unfortunately it lacked clearer dramaturgical direction, with insufficiently impactful utilization of the electric viola medium, somewhat of a monotonous character. The same can be said for a somewhat more dynamic composition, 85 by Aleksandar Savić, within which the electronic part was not elaborated enough. Nina Perović's piece *Blur* was very delicately and tonally precisely performed by pianist Neda Hofman-Sretenović and mezzo-soprano Ana Radovanović. It is based on repeating patterns and transparent sounds.

In the second concert of the second day, the composition *Thoughts* by Andela Milić for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, piano, and electronics was performed. It

² Ibid.

also relied on repetitive patterns, the complexity and sonic enrichment of which bring dynamism to an otherwise monotonous dramatic framework. Next came the piece *This Time, Let Me Be Happy* – by Pablo Neruda for flute and double bass by Ivana Stefanović, performed by Ljubiša Jovanović and Damjan Milosavljević. This musical vignette is based on complementary sections, with an animated flute part in continuous flow and a rhythmically robust bass line.

Following the non-musical concept characteristic of schizophrenia, “characterized by a sudden interruption of thought processes and a very emotional reaction”³ Predrag Radisavljević created a composition (*Schizophrenia*) that musically transposes elements of this thematic idea. Passionate and adept performers – cellist Nemanja Stanković and accordionist Nikola Peković – approached the interpretation virtuosically, but also thoughtfully at times, abruptly initiating and similarly concluding fragmentary musical thoughts. These thoughts sonically embody the inconsistency of mental processes associated with the mental illness – from tranquility to expressive aggression.

Drawing on the poetic imagination of Fernando Pessoa, composer Miloš Zatkalik wrote a piece based on several verses of this poet. The composition *A Beleza do Alberto Caeiro* has a four movement structure, each of which presents a translation of the poem in four languages. Harmonically rich musical language, with broadly conceived melodic lines and

a clear division within the instrumental texture, transparently establishes an atmospheric foundation.

Next, *The Voice of a Nun*, based on verses by Desanka Maksimović, by Milana Stojadinović Milić. The composer has succeeded in musically enhancing the dramatic foundation, creating a theatrical character, and illustratively using the voice, which transitions from spoken word to high mezzo-soprano notes.

In the continuation of the festival, members of the Metamorphosis ensemble presented a largely eclectically conceived piece, *Wanderings* by Jovica Mutavdžić. The composition encompasses diverse musical languages, ranging from neoclassical to somewhat more dissonant harmonic movements. Following the communicative realization of the neo-classical excursion *Uncanny Pact* by Aleksandar Simić for violin and piano, with transparent harmonic frameworks and a clear division of sections into soloist, concertante, and accompaniment, comes the composition *1010011010* by Eliot Delafosa for flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano. It consisted of two contrasting sections based on homorhythm and, in the second part, polymetry, evidently exploring relationships between instruments and creating a lucid, albeit somewhat monotonous, picture. Following the already established path of his poetics based on post-minimalist frameworks, Vladimir Tošić presented *Motus* – a composition based on simplified repetitive processes, i.e. sequential repetitions of a short melodic pattern. The last piece of the evening was Jiyoun Chung’s

³ https://composers.rs/?page_id=7705

thoughtfully crafted *Freestyle Battle* for clarinet, violin, cello, and piano, which transposes the logic of movements within a breakdance into the musical medium. Following the brisk rhythm consistent throughout the composition, the composer created a virtuosic work with an interesting language and concept.

The Aratos Trio performed the composition *Hymn* for violin, clarinet, and piano by Marko Kovač. The author himself described it as a miniature “inspired by a blend of minimalism, the music of Olivier Messiaen, and *sevdalinka*”.⁴ This eclectically conceived piece actually relies on an impressive sound, a slow flow of time and sequences.

Following the excellent interpretation by Ljubiša Jovanović of *On Fever* by Jee Seo, where the performer demonstrated excellent breath control and understanding of the virtuosic score which imposes complex rhythmic demands on the performer, a neoclassical piece *Second Month of Autumn* for bassoon and piano by Božo Banović was performed by Goran Marinković and Tea Dimitrijević. The elegiac composition *Between the Moon and a Desolate Space* by Svetlana Maksimović for piano contains a high level of contemplation and emotional intensity, almost of a romantic sensibility. Similarly, the piece for solo guitar, *Ok-togon* by Damjan Jovičin, possesses a very strong dose of emotional saturation, deviating in many ways from what is the recognized poetic core of the author’s expression.

⁴ https://composers.rs/?page_id=7731

Il culto del dio Fujin by Ugo Raimondi was expertly interpreted by Ljubiša Jovanović, moving through a wide register, incorporating elements of quasi-folkloric Japanese outlines, paying attention to phrasing and dramatic orientation of melodic lines. Tea Dimitrijević rounded off this second concert on the third day of the festival with an interpretation of the ambitiously conceived, extensive, and expressive composition *Fanfare* by Stanko Simić. Clearly inspired primarily by the musical world of Vasilije Mokranjac, the author, well-acquainted with the piano medium, conceived a work with a strong rhythmic impetus, imaginative sequences, and energetic virtuosity.

On the fourth day of the International Review of Composers, pianist Neda Hofman Sretenović presented a series of compositions written for solo piano and electronics.⁵ The composition *Three Autumn Nights* by Svetlana Savić featured consistently guided dramaturgy with repeating patterns and rhythmic elements that continually propelled the piece forward. Subtle electronic sound complement and color the piano part with transient sounds or rapid ostinato. Like a musical “race against time”, the composition unfolded in constant changes, building tension, resulting in an exceptionally exciting and effective realization.

Using electronic sound as a sonic complement to the piano, with the auditory relationship between the generated and pianistic sounds often obscured,

⁵ <https://m.rts.rs/page/radio/sr/story/24/radio-beograd-2/4975171.html>

Draško Adžić, following his already shaped poetic credo, created a somewhat elusive sonic image with numerous nuances and layers in composition *Baba pusta, Study No 6*. Considering the often imperceptible influence of electronic manipulation, the listener may remain uncertain about the category of sound actually heard. In this sense, it may seem that the pianist's performance transcended into the impossible, which is indeed a successfully executed illusion that functions until the very end of the composition. Neda Hofman Sretenović's excellent, dedicated, and inspired interpretation, navigating skillfully through often opaque but certainly not easy scores of compositions like *TaleSpin* by Russell Pinkston, *In Tempore* by Joao Pedro Oliveira, *Los murmullos* by Per Bloland, *El alma al cuerpo* by Patricia Elizabeth Martinez, *Interaction* by Mei-Fang Lin, and by Ivana Ognjanović, enhanced their artistic value.

During the second concert of the same evening the Belgrade Trio presented an interpretation of *Phase Two* by Vladimir Korać. As Korać notes in the program remarks: "The initial point in the process of creating the piece was recording various samples of ensemble instruments, which, through spectral analyses, would provide the basic building element for creating the acoustic layer of the composition. Simultaneously, it would serve as material for building electronic instruments and/or fixed media segments."⁶ The result is a remarkable sonic image with heightened intensity,

possessing multidimensionality and radiating divergent acoustic sensations in a confined space.

As part of this second concert, we also had the opportunity to hear *Dreams of a Little Dwarf* by Milana Milošević, *Idioma* by Tomislav Oliver, *Insects* by Sofia Jen Ouyang, *Interruptive Clatters* by Ivan Elezović, and *Black Holes Are Not So Black* for violin, cello, and piano by Branka Popović. Branka Popović's composition possesses a dramaturgy of sudden changes, with the piano maintaining rhythmic stability through chord strikes and string instruments ranging from potent energetic outbursts to receding into the background, featuring dense musical movements in subtle dynamics. The piece actually resembles a well-executed musical essay with a clearly formulated idea, a transparent and precisely crafted form, and causally guided dramatic threads. The restrained language and, at times, very transparent texture carry a sense of emotional detachment from the events, akin to observing certain inevitable processes unfolding in the initiated musical turbulence, which then extinguishes itself as it began.

The final concert of the Review of Composers featured performances by the LP Duo and the St. George Strings ensemble. Following the simple, lyrical, tonal, and texturally highly simplified composition *Summertid* by Andreja Andrić, LP Duo presented Miloš Raičković's post-minimalist play *Lovely Permutations*. Moving within the characteristic expression, with repeating patterns that are gradually manipulated, changing in-

⁶ https://composers.rs/?page_id=7780

dividual elements that vary the primary pattern, Raičković wrote a slowly unfolding piece, distinctly nostalgic in character. The excellent LP Duo, playing in four hands, expertly maintained tension, naturally guiding the flow, breathing in harmony with Raičković's musical thoughts, and following the dynamics of their movement.

Following this was an exceptionally interesting piece by Sonja Mutić *Resound II*, performed by the St. George Strings under the direction of Ivan Josip Skender. Exploring the voicing of harmonics, with long sustained tones and subtly layered harmonies, Sonja Mutić created a delicate work with an almost meditative quality. We could hear all the nuances within the revealed harmonics, with the careful use of instruments, crafting a rich tonal landscape. Achieving a subtle dynamics, the ensemble sounded compact and highly concentrated, sustaining tones and creating an inspirational atmosphere.

After the skillful use of contrapuntal devices and intellectually engaging composition *Reading Dante* by Predrag Repanić, the compositions *Hep 32 C-o* by Szilard Mezei were performed, followed by the work *Devana* by Smiljana Vlajić, *Devana* for flute and string orchestra, inspired by folklore, presented in perhaps insufficiently polished craftsmanship. However, undoubtedly, the highlight of the evening was the performance of *Three Songs About Us* by Tatjana Milošević Mijanović.

Three Songs About Us is a work that carries an exceptional intensity and genuine emotion, breaking through each often

cold tone, devoid of romanticized pathos. Melancholic themes, expressionistic contours, possess the power of expression that permeates all three parts of this composition. The climax, yet simultaneously an anticlimax, comes in the third segment, with a transparent texture and a simple structure that implies a descending arpeggio movement. It begins in the piano, and then other instruments join in, creating a sense of sonic *decay*, fading into the darkness of silence. *Three Songs* carries the subtext of the death of a loved one, so in that sense, the melodic movement possesses depth, symbolic, connotative meaning. The excellent performance by Ana Radovanović, purposefully singing *dry*, without vibrato, with a certain coldness, objectivity, effectively conveyed the essence of the emotion, fatigue, and suffering with which the work is imbued.

The 31st Review of Composers has continued to cultivate a specific *format* directed towards a composer's perspective. Without significant stylistic leveling, which would be necessary if it were a festival of contemporary expression, the Review persists in its mission to promote contemporary creativity in all its facets. Despite limited resources and within its established concept, it manages to remain a relevant platform that provides composers with a space to present their work. It stays open to often distant poetic contours, aiming to familiarize an engaged audience with a wide range of musical languages that legitimately coexist in the current musical landscape, both on a local and global scale.