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INVENTION IS MORE IMPORTANT
Interview with Milan Mihajlović



In contemporary Serbian music the compositional work of Milan Mihajlović (1945) has a reputation for being special and masterly, but it is above all else characterized by a directness of artistic expression which fascinates by its communicativeness, attracts attention by its distinctiveness, intrigues by its reflectiveness and captivates by its sincerity.

Mihajlović graduated in composition and conducting (1970) and received his master's degree in composition (with S. Rajčić in 1978) in Belgrade, even as he attended advanced studies at summer courses in Cologne and Salzburg. He taught theoretical subjects at the Faculty of Music (from 1975) and today he is a full professor of composition at this Faculty, as well as at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad.

He is one of the founders of the Ensemble for Contemporary Music and was a director of the International Review of Composers (1992-2002). He was president of the Association of Serbian Composers (1987-2002), Head of the Department of Music Theory at the Belgrade Faculty of Music and has been Dean of the Faculty since 2002. He engages in theoretical work (the study *Skrjabinov modus /Scriabin's Mode/*) and he is the author of the textbooks *Osnovi nauke o muzici (The Basics of the Study of Music)* and *Muzički oblici (Musical Forms)* (1988). He is the recipient of numerous awards for his production: the "Stevan Hristić" Award (1970), the award of the Belgrade Music Festival (1972), the October Prize of the City of Belgrade (1984), first prizes at the International Review of Composers (1992 and 1996), the "Stevan Mokranjac"

Award (1994) and the City of Belgrade Award (2003). Mihajlović's works are frequently performed both in the country and abroad and they attract the attention of first-class artists – Aleksandar Serdar, Sreten Krstić, Ksenija Janković and many others, while his work *Preludium, Aria e Finale (Prelude, Aria and Finale)* was printed in the "Edition Peters" in Leipzig.

Mihajlović began his career as composer with very successful chamber works (the song *Kiša /Rain/*, 1966; *Trio sonata /Trio Sonata/* for flute, cello and piano, 1966/67; *Varijacije za klavir /Variations for Piano/*, 1968; *Gudački kvartet /String Quartet/*, 1969), created during his studies of composition, as well as with his notable graduation work *Uvertira Fantasia (Overture Fantasia)* for orchestra (1970) for which he won the Hristić Award. The complex symphonic works *Preludio, Aria e Finale* (1972) and *Simfonijske metamorfoze (Symphonic Metamorphoses)* (1977) have a special personal stamp. They established the reputation of the young composer by their compositional-technical mastery, strong expressiveness and lucid orchestrational techniques. The domination of linear thought, the variational-symphonic work with thematic material and the sharpness of the vertical are all part of an expressionistic palette, which predominates in these works, but what is already visible here is the formal clarity and logicalness of the works' structural layout. Furthermore, comparing these two symphonic works clearly points to the evolution of language towards greater purification of thought, crystallization of expression and growing compositional-technical mastery.

Along this line of development appear the chamber compositions *Lamentoso* for clarinet, violin and piano (1977) and *Notturmi* for horn, wind and string quartets (1983). It was in these works that the author's lyric nature, so incompatible with the very topical avant-garde tendencies in Serbian music of the time, developed its bold, direct, authentic expression, strength and persuasiveness, which provided excellent communication between the works and the performers and audience. The October Prize of the City of Belgrade for *Notturmi* (1984) confirms this unequivocally, as do the numerous performances – *Lamentoso* has been performed throughout Europe and in the United States, while *Notturmi* was in fact a joint commission from the Yugoslav and Dutch radio stations, subsequently performed on several occasions in Yugoslavia and Switzerland.

The 1980's were a very fruitful period in Mihajlović's production. He created works of diverse genre profiles: vocal-instrumental (*Pohvala svetu /Praise to the World/* for choir and orchestra, 1984; *Šta sanjam /What I Dream Of/*, three songs for soloists and female choir, 1983/84; *Ja Fransoa /I, François/*, a television score for soloists and chamber ensemble, 1985; *More /The Sea/* for choir, 1986), concertante (*Bagatele /Bagatelles/* for violin, string orchestra

and harpsichord, 1986), orchestral (*Elegija /Elegy/* for string orchestra, 1989), and piano works (*Tri prelida /Three Preludes/*, 1986-1989). The works that stand out from the rest are *Bagatele*, *Tri prelida* and *Elegija*, characterized as “the substratum of pure lyricism” (M. Kovač). In these works, some of the composer’s stylistic-linguistic constants were established: Scriabin’s mode became the basis of harmonic thought, and it was treated very inventively with a truly creative interpretation of its expressive potentials, especially with regard to the characteristic colour which is one of the primary means of expression for Mihajlović. Other important characteristics of the composer’s mature writing include laconism, reductionism of music material, free singing over pedal and ostinato layers, exposition of the material through the process of creating and forming theme.

Postmodernism, with its characteristic work with quotations, patterns and models, also left its mark on Mihajlović’s work created in the 1990’s. During that period the following works were composed: *Mala žalobna muzika (Little Funeral Music)* (1990), special homage to Mozart, *Memento* (1993) for symphonic orchestra dedicated to Vasilije Mokranjac, and *Silenzio* (1996) for female choir and chamber orchestra to the verses of Torquato Tasso. In his mature age works, the author spoke with new confidence, directly and powerfully. The critics recognized in them a dominance of ethical and philosophical-poetical meaning over compositional-technical methods which often captivated attention in previous works. It was these qualities that brought Mihajlović’s work to the very top of contemporary production.

The most recent work created to date, the composition *Povratak (Return)* for cello and symphonic orchestra (2002), occupies a special place in Mihajlović’s work because after several years of creative restraint it marked the author’s return to composing in a very specific way – returning to his own work, re-examining and sublimating the creative postulates of previous works, their poetics and compositional techniques. *Povratak* thus raises fundamental issues concerning Mihajlović’s production, and assumes the importance of a summarizing and comprehensive work in which the best characteristics of the composer’s writing may be recognized.

The biographies of Milan Mihajlović published so far begin with information dating from your studies in the class of Stanojlo Rajičić. How did you, in fact, enter the world of music and to what extent was it significant for your professional development and, generally speaking, for the forming of your attitude towards music? Could you single out certain people who had a crucial influence on you in your youth?

No one has asked me so far about the beginnings of my music education, my reasons for choosing music as a profession, about influences. If we were to begin as early as my childhood, I should say I was fortunate that my whole family was involved in music. My father had studied composition and conducting with Milenko Živković and Josip Slavenski in Belgrade and with Stjepan Šulek in Zagreb, so that he was friends with many fellow musicians, professors who taught at the Academy at the time. For example, Milenko Živković was my godfather. Later on, my father left the Academy and became involved in popular music, which I believe he never quite got over. I remember that I always admired his fantastic ear for music, talent and the way he managed to catch every possible melody or harmony “as he heard it”, transcribe it and immediately perform it, be it folk music, pop music, rock music or popular works of classical music. My mother was a singer, and my uncle studied the violin and law. However, his career was cut short because he was sent to the island of Goli Otok and together with my father he also dedicated himself to popular music. They founded an ensemble and performed together. There was always singing and playing in my house. They took every opportunity, when our relatives gathered or on any other occasion, to play all kinds of music, from popular to classical. In addition, I had the good fortune to take private lessons with such well-known professors as Arsen Triva and Ružica Miodragović (now Radenković) even before I started primary music school. I am certain that I was profoundly influenced by my first official piano teacher at the “Vojislav Vučković” Music School, Gordana Milojević, Miloje Milojević’s daughter, who was a fantastic teacher, extremely patient with us children who were not particularly hard-working and would not sit at the piano all day long. I remember the countless exercise-books, notes to parents about what should be done and how. Not to mention the fact that she was a good teacher and a good musician, so that I received very good basic training in primary music school. I was also fortunate to enrol afterwards in the “Josip Slavenski” Secondary Music School, at the time an experimental school in which you had to study in two departments, both the instrumental and the theoretical. At that time the best professors working in our country, all of whom later on went on to become professors at the Music Academy, taught at this school. Marija Koren (Bergamo) taught history of music, Radomir Petrović (later Dean of the Academy) harmony, Petar Ozgijan musical forms and Berislav Popović counterpoint. Mirjana Živković arrived in my fourth year, a new, young professor who first taught folklore, but later on concentrated on harmony. My piano professor was Darinka Simić, who later became editor-in-chief of Radio Belgrade. Those circumstances helped me to acquire a truly perfect grounding in music, with extraordinary professors, and I can tell you that I have lots of happy memories of secondary school. For me that period was a time of

happiness, of joy, regardless of the great amount of work you had to put in, because I was also attending the First Belgrade High School. Everything went extremely smoothly, with joy.

Professor Stanojlo Rajičić, in whose class you graduated and obtained your master's degree, was considered very strict, demanded discipline and insisted the students should meet "school norms" which some students found inflexible and even rigid. However, it was from this "strict school" that very strong and very diverse composers emerged – Vasilije Mokranjac, Petar Bergamo, Srdjan Hofman, Zoran Erić and many others. What was your attitude towards this school at the time of your studies and how do you perceive those years today?

It is true that Professor Rajičić was a strict man, but he was not so strict as he was a man who stuck to his opinion and I think that, if he had a firm attitude, it was impossible to convince him otherwise. Some people saw this as rigidity, others supported him in his position. However, I remember that he had a very serious, good attitude on many issues regarding both the Academy and his students, and other people as well. I remember, for instance, when the Academy approved a motion to vote publicly for a teacher instead of by secret ballot, as before. Rajičić was against it and he simply stopped voting. He always stuck to his opinion and he was very consistent. At the beginning of my studies, especially during the first year, we would all enter the room where he would sit in an armchair, terrified of how he would react to what we had written. He always spoke his mind. Very often he would point out the faults in our work and he was so very, very rarely completely satisfied with what we did that I almost cannot remember such an occasion. Of course, whether such an approach is good is open to question. However, the very fact that so many composers who were later quite distinctive individuals and wrote differently, graduated from his class testifies to the fact that he succeeded, in a way, in instilling into these people a sense of responsibility for their own work. I, for one, certainly feel that strongly in my work and I think I am always very rigorous with regard to what I do and very often dissatisfied with my work. On the other hand, Rajičić was also a very intelligent man who knew how to choose excellent collaborators. His assistant lecturers were the best possible composers and theoreticians of the time – Peričić, Mokranjac, Bergamo and Hofman. In higher grades, the third, fourth and fifth, they took over much greater responsibility for tuition, especially arrangement and orchestration. Petar Bergamo was assistant lecturer during my studies and I will never forget those excellent classes in which I really learnt a great deal, much more than in any other subject at the Academy, especially since I was also studying conducting.

Do you think that the position of a composer is different today compared to some of the previous periods? By this I do not mean the social status of a composer's work, however significant it may be, but the attitude towards production, creativity?

The approach to and treatment of our production used to be more serious in the past, both on radio and on television. In the 1960's it was viewed as a cultural priority. I believe that was in fact the only period when a cultural policy was carried out in our country. For whose benefit, is a question which could be discussed at great length. Nowadays there is no government plan for the development of culture, nor has there been one for a long time, and interest in it is waning. The last few governments and those in charge of this sphere have shown least interest. There have been different periods in terms of the way in which a composer managed to get a work performed and recorded. In my time, we did not have any problems with having a composition either performed or recorded. I had my student compositions, starting from *Trio sonata*, recorded and performed by the best performers, Academy professors, even on the very exam. *Gudački kvartet* was performed and recorded by the *Serbian String Quartet* (in those days in its best make-up, led by Branko Pajević) and that was their first recording for Radio Belgrade. Likewise, the *Belgrade Philharmonic* led by Skovran performed and recorded my graduation work. And I also remember that when I wanted to have my postgraduate compositions recorded, I even managed to get paid for it, which is hard to imagine nowadays. Things are different today. I believe that the situation is improving somewhat with regard to the Radio and Television Serbia (RTS) Orchestra. They are once again taking an interest in the compositions of young authors and have begun recording the works of our undergraduates and graduates. However, there has been a considerable void for, perhaps, twenty years even, when it was fairly difficult to get a work recorded. Composers who had already achieved some success managed to get this done, but it was very difficult for the young ones. If you were to compare the status of a composer in our country in general with some European countries, such as Germany or Austria, France or Scandinavia, I think you would find it beyond comparison. A composer is much more successful and is better received by society if he is a composer of folk or popular music, whereas contemporary production passes unnoticed by the wider audience, as witness poor concert attendance. I remember Bergamo told me that when he went to Vienna, he did not even dare mention that he was a composer, because they would immediately all but bow before him like royalty. There it is obviously considered important.

You graduated in conducting, but you hardly ever actually conduct. Why is that?

I began to study conducting primarily because I wanted to obtain as broad a music education as I could. I was not sure whether I would actually conduct. I think that studying conducting has also helped me in my work as composer. Namely, when you study conducting you make contact with a work by perceiving it in its entirety, by perceiving its form. I believe this contributed to the fact that in all my compositions form is extremely good and the borderlines are never noticeable between the sections, instead everything links up logically with the next, at least according to my colleagues and the critics. I believe that conducting has helped me with that to some extent. Secondly, I acquired a certain manual technique which was fairly good and I could indeed continue to conduct, which was useful to me, for instance, when I was in the army. There I conducted the *Subotica Philharmonic* and I was given leave to go out every afternoon. Production has always been far more important and interesting to me than performing. I felt that this was the right profession for me.

I conducted orchestras and chamber ensembles on several occasions, especially when the programme featured contemporary music, the music of my colleagues, including even my own compositions. There is a recording of *Nokturna (Nocturnes)* performed by the *Serbian String Quartet* and the *Belgrade String Quintet* under my direction. It is an exceptionally good recording, beautifully interpreted, thanks primarily to the outstanding performers, of course. I have to say without false modesty, some of my colleagues told me that out of the seven performances of *Memento* with six different conductors, the best performance was at the opening of the Mokranjac Days in Negotin, when I myself conducted the work. Why didn't I engage in it to a greater degree? That is a question which is perhaps related to something deep inside me, some personal preoccupations, reflections, maybe even my temperament. I am not a person who likes commotion, noise, crowds. Such things often make me feel uncomfortable. I am especially not the kind of person who likes to impose his own opinion hastily. I have always had slight reservations about that kind of work. I think there are no problems regarding the profession itself, but I personally did have a problem – with making direct contact with people in the best possible way, and in a relatively short period of time. In other contacts with people as well, I always need more time to make friends and to open up, so that is what probably influenced me to neglect the profession of conductor and not engage in it. Primarily, however, I believe that creative work is much more interesting and important. And I am better suited to it.

You began your teaching career at the Department of Theory. To what extent is the connection between compositional education and theoretical work natural, and to what extent is it mainly an expression of the personal inclination of an individual? Your theoretical works on Scriabin's mode came after you analyzed him as a composer. To what extent did theoretical work affect your compositional techniques?

I believe that talent and education are equally important for our artistic work – you cannot do without either. Work on theory is extremely important because it enables a young person to discover many fields that they previously did not fully understand. Every school subject, even the most specialised one, opens up many fields of thought. However, later on, a theoretical education must become “second nature”, something a person simply does not think about much, rather lets invention guide them. No doubt that knowledge will help a person deal with certain problems easily, but without invention, without talent, without imagination, pure theoretical knowledge is useless. It is true that I made certain theoretical discoveries through practical work. And that those discoveries then helped me: the theoretical aspect helped me solve various compositional problems more quickly. Thanks to theoretical knowledge a person can sometimes do certain things quickly, if necessary. But I have noticed that certain sections, or entire compositions, were more interesting and attracted much more attention when I let imagination guide me more, when I simply tried to forget my theoretical grounding.

In your works theme is often significantly determined by Scriabin's mode – both in the harmonic and melodic aspects. Would it be true to say that there has been an evolution in your perception of the mode?

What is fascinating about Messiaen's second mode or Scriabin's mode (as I referred to it in my habilitation thesis, because this term explains more broadly the concept and application of the entire scale) is that this scale is extremely adaptable to all possible styles, starting from Romanticism, although it appears earlier on as well. It is incredible how you can find it with Stravinsky and with Prokofiev and with Gershwin, and with our Vasilije Mokranjac. It is simply a river which flows, which is elusive and which has immense, immense possibilities. That is why its application in my compositions changes with each work, so there are different compositions that have Scriabin's mode as their base, because it can be combined with itself. Its three positions can either be placed polymodally or combined with other scale structures or atonal music. The very structure of that scale allows an incredible number of completely different chordal structures, which can resemble a kind of tonal centre and can also go completely into atonality, or

they can resemble some other kind of compositional technique, or even style. That is why I used this scale most frequently, because it allowed those wide ranges and paths that a person himself could choose. That is why you might to some extent speak of an evolution in the perception of the mode. In a certain sense it stops being a mode in the old meaning of the word, because it can be oriented towards tonality, or you could go to complete atonality, to some other compositional techniques.

It seems that the tonal aspect of the mode is more and more often accented in your compositions?

Well, it depends on the composition and on the section. However, it is true that in certain places, if I want to avoid any kind of tonal association, I avoid using Scriabin's mode. Because it truly does contain, whether you like or not, those certain four tonal centres whose base is a small mediant circle. However, the vertical placing of Scriabin's mode, depending on the way his intervals are used, can change its nature: it can indeed seem expressive, like a part of some expressionistic music, or it can seem like a part of impressionistic music. It can be completely tonal or completely atonal. It all depends on how it is viewed vertically and consequently horizontally, as well. Whether I viewed it more often tonally in some of my compositions depended on my state of mind at the time. For instance, in *Lamentoso* tonality is least felt perhaps, because I used unusual intervallic methods (ones that are not usual for tonality) and I used the mode polymodally, whereas in *Bagatele* you can truly speak of a mode that sounds very tonal. However, in that case I used it in a kind of interaction with other old modes. *Silencio*, on the other hand, can be viewed in two ways. The introductory section, that sharp chord, sounds completely atonal and actually seems like an attack on your eardrums, only to calm down and enter a hidden tonality. All in all, it is an incredibly adaptable mode for all kinds of work.

How much importance do you attach to relationship with the performers of your works? Do you have a specific artist in mind when you are creating?

Relationship with the performers is undoubtedly very important to me. I have mentioned that I had had the good fortune to have my works performed by excellent performers, even back in my student days. And this continued later on as well. I have never had problems with performers. Whenever I wrote, I had specific performers, their abilities, their character, range, etc, in mind. I do believe this to be extremely important, and it is no wonder that it used to happen very often in music history. Composers wrote their works to be performed, not left in a drawer. So, whomever they had as a performer was the person they wrote for. In the 20th century there are

even associations, groups and ensembles being formed in which composers and performers work together on new composition projects. The fact that I have been truly fortunate to be in contact with the best of our performers, both before and now, is a different matter. The older I get, the better performers I have, so that quite many of them are interested – Aleksandar Serdar, Sreten Krstić, Bojan Sudjić, Ksenija Janković. All of my colleagues are very eager to play my compositions. I really do not have any problems with that. I believe that it is quite important for the composer to focus not only on the type of instrument he is writing for, but also to have in mind the people who will perform the work. The first interpretations are particularly important. And the first recordings, too. Because, later on, other performers very often rely on what they heard previously. It is always useful information for subsequent performances. It rarely happened to me that the performers failed to understand my composition. I remember it did happen once, with a London-based ensemble. It turned out the ensemble was quite chaotic and had dedicated itself to music modernism, thinking it could perform such compositions much more easily. When they were given specific metro-rhythmic, melodic and harmonic demands, major problems occurred in the performance.

Share with us the experience of listening to about fifty interpretations of your piano preludes at the recently held piano contest of the Musical Youth (Belgrade, 2004) when Tri prelida was listed as a mandatory rendition composition. Would you single out any of the interpretations of this work in particular?

Naturally, a contest is pleasant on the one hand, but on the other, it was also unpleasant to listen to your own composition so many times. Such a vast number of performances made me feel uncomfortable at times. It is a very interesting experience. I found the first contest especially interesting and characteristic, because at the second one many contestants had already heard the composition and they performed it in a very similar manner. However, at the first contest there were completely different interpretations, completely different tempos, different stressing of certain motives, accents in the work. Therefore, it was an absolute revelation for me that a single composition could be performed in ten different ways. If well performed, *Prelidi* survived in completely different interpretations. And that was what rather intrigued me. And when they asked me if I could single out one interpretation or say which is better, although they were completely opposed, I replied that I liked them both. The situation is similar with Serdar's interpretation, which is supposed to come out on compact disc soon. At first I argued with him over *Tri prelida* because I wanted to get my own way, and he was very persistent in wanting to bring his own

interpretation which differed considerably in certain things from my demands. In the end, I let him do it the way he wanted to and that was a good thing because he did certain things very consciously, very professionally, he placed accents in certain places where I perhaps would not have, but with a very developed idea of what it should be like and it came out very well.

You never named any of your works as concerto, but the concertante principle is an important element of your compositions. The significant presence of concertante principles in contemporary production is today often interpreted as an expression of the need to achieve the communicativeness of a work. How true is that?

I have never given any thought to this question. Whether a work will be interesting if I use the concertante approach in composing is simply something that has never occurred to me. I think you can see that in my compositions. Because in some chamber compositions, where you would not expect it, certain entrances of instruments seem as if they were done on the basis of the concert principle. And the other way around, where the solo instrument is accompanied by the ensemble, certain sections are done as if it were not a solo instrument in question, but an integral part of the orchestra or ensemble instead. I do not think it was that important, but there is no doubt that at those moments when the expressiveness of the composition itself requires it, when it is required by a moment in the work, when a certain culmination or tension occurs, maybe the concertante principle does come to the foreground. But it serves more to intensify the expressiveness of the work than to attract attention of some kind. I never wrote a composition in order to attract the attention of a particular part of the audience or my colleagues. I wrote as I felt at that particular moment. Naturally, bearing in mind the potential performer. We are still a country where contemporary music does not have that many good performers and for that reason, as I often advise my students, I think they have to bear in mind what the performers are capable of doing. What happens to our students is that they write a composition which cannot be performed well because, unfortunately, the scope of our performers in contemporary music is not good enough for them to be able to express fully what the composer wanted to say, that is, to achieve what is directly written in the score. It seems to me that there are performing problems which are related to the performing of contemporary music. The performers are not knowledgeable enough, they have not worked enough on either specific rhythmic-metric issues or different sound production, etc. I hope such times will soon be behind us. We have been discussing the possibility of devoting a year to 20th-century music as part of the subject of chamber music at the Faculty.

Your knowledge of the potential of the medium in which you express yourself is fascinating. Especially the way in which you use the orchestra, discovering always new expressive potential in it. Do you rely only on knowledge or are you also guided by intuition?

First of all, thank you for the compliment. People have told me, though, several times when listening to *Nokturna* or *Memento*, for instance, that I make extremely good use of that performing apparatus. I wouldn't know about knowledge, but I think intuition is more important in this case, even concerning such concrete issues as being familiar with a medium and making use of its potential. I am not so sure that I do have extensive knowledge and I wonder very often, when I am teaching a class, what should be done at a particular moment. Then I often think about it at home so that I can refer the student to the right answers, or if not to direct answers, then at least to places where they can look for them. I think the situation is similar when I am working and intuition is truly very useful to me then. Especially when I am directly absorbed in what I am doing, when I forget everything else that surrounds me. I believe that is a very important moment in creating. In any case, the work that I do demands my entire person, at the moment when I am doing it. Whenever I had to do something in haste, it did fill me with enthusiasm and I managed to do everything on time, but I always felt either some kind of incompleteness or insufficient sincerity in what I was doing. And when I devoted myself to it completely, when I was surrounded only by it, I above all enjoyed working incredibly and experienced some amazing feelings. When I succeeded in completely devoting myself, then those sections or those compositions were the most successful.

Your works were often commissioned. Does that mean that your work is predominantly guided by external incentives or are those just opportunities for you to express and materialise the music you carry inside?

I believe it has to do with what we have already talked about, that I like to know for whom I am writing. When an ensemble or a musician or an institution or a festival commissioned me to write a work, and the performer was already known, then it was easier for me to work, I had an external motive. That is probably why I wrote commissioned works so frequently. And perhaps I was fortunate to have had so many commissions. However, that which a person carries inside, he can indeed carry for a long time without realizing it, without writing it down. The moment he starts to work, perhaps it has accumulated to such an extent that it then simply pours out on its own. Although I must admit that the beginning of a composition is always the most difficult part. Facing that blank piece of paper, a person wonders what he should say next that

might be interesting, and yet different both from that which surrounds him, that which others do, and even that which he himself does. And that can be quite frightening sometimes. I know that it takes quite an effort for me to overcome those initial days until the composition begins to progress... I will not say... on its own. It never begins to progress on its own, that's the worst of it, not in my case anyway. I know that I always need to put in an awful lot of work for any idea to come out and remain on paper. At those times my family often experiences unpleasant moments.

The International Review of Composers, of which you are founder and long-time director, is going through a serious crisis after ten years. How important is this institution for contemporary Serbian music and how do you comment the reasons for its “slide”?

I must admit that I regard the Review as something quite personal, because I have worked on it so hard, at first together with my colleagues, and later on mostly on my own, sometimes feeling a bit lonely, when people had other things to do and would not become involved in it. Therefore this festival is extremely close and important to me. But I think its importance is far greater, primarily for our music, for our music production and the culture of our country. Many European countries have several festivals of contemporary music, with their governments directly backing that kind of activity, and ensembles that perform it, and music information centres. They do not do this without good cause; they work on it so that the music culture and production of their country would spread beyond their borders. The Review started off relatively modestly, but I immediately felt it was a chance for our music to be heard outside the borders of our country as well. Therefore, it was not only an opportunity for the works we had written to be performed, but also, with the arrival of foreign ensembles, for them to spread beyond our borders. It really did happen in several cases, where truly exceptional foreign ensembles, such as the *Kreutzer Quartet* from London, *Alternance* from Paris and *Acroche Note*, performed the works of our composers. They performed them later on as well, and even recorded compact discs in their own countries. The Review simply tried to remedy part of our cultural policy's shortfall, to promote the compositions of our authors both in its own region and abroad. That is why I think this is extremely important, just as it is important for young authors who are coming into their own to have a place where their compositions can be performed, where they can come face to face with live sound, with their compositions in a real performance, and not only with an electronic sound imitation. I think we are partly to blame for the crisis, because we are too preoccupied with the struggle to survive to deal with things that are of universal benefit. So it happened that at a time when the team of people leading the Review changed, it really did experience a crisis. However, I

believe a great deal of responsibility lies with political factors that do not understand these things at all. They did not understand them before much either, but it somehow became a routine maintained by itself. But I remember how much effort I had to put in to convince people, politicians, that it was important for us. Even when I could not persuade them, I was such a nuisance that people ended up doing what I wanted just to “shake me off”. It seems that when a person holds the position of organizer of such a festival, he has to be persistent, insolent and tiresome in order to achieve what he wants. We fought Milošević’s rule for a long time. We believed that with the arrival of democracy, culture would flourish. Unfortunately, I must say that we are faced with the fact that the situation is much worse that it used to be. And that is also part of the festival’s crisis. Perhaps it is even the crucial part.

In Serbian culture there was never appropriate concern for music production, but it seems, nonetheless, that modern history has never seen such dramatically pronounced indifference of state agencies and institutions and total marginalization of this domain as today. You were the recipient of a distinguished award of the City of Belgrade for production in 2003. In 2004 no compositions were nominated for this award. How unsettling is that? Is it a sign that light and popular music have absolutely triumphed?

It is possible that a lack of compositions is also caused by this crisis. You can compare it to the situation where, if you do not have an ensemble, then you do not write for it. When you think about it, have any serious composers written for a string quartet lately? We have two or three, maybe four string quartets in Belgrade, but the quality of their playing is so poor that people simply do not even dream of writing for them. As long as the Serbian String Quartet existed, especially with its original members, composers wrote. Not to mention music for the strings. There is no doubt that, in this domain, a vast number of compositions were created thanks to the “Dušan Skovran” ensemble, because they were written expressly for them. They performed them, and performed them well, they promoted the works wherever they could, and the composers were interested in writing. It is the same with the existence and non-existence of this festival. If it does not exist, people start to lose motivation for working, writing, because, unfortunately, it was almost the only place where you could promote our production. And that is one of the segments that make this festival important for our culture.

As for light and popular music, they have always triumphed, which is normal, because the majority of people are more willing to indulge in entertainment than to make an effort at something completely new, which intrigues in a totally different way and is frequently

incomprehensible to them. I believe it is both our duty and the duty of the state not to allow entertainment to dominate everything, but to educate our people as well.

You have been the Head of the Faculty for two years. Are you satisfied with the results you have achieved? When it comes to music education, how do you see our place in European integration processes?

I should start by saying that I was very reluctant to accept the position of Head of the Faculty, because, by discontinuing my activities in the Association and at the Festival, I wanted to create more space for composing. However, I realized that it would not be good for the Faculty if I did not take on the position and that I had to help in some way. Whether I have helped or not is for others to decide. But I personally am satisfied with what we have done in the past two years. First of all, it was precisely in our contacts with other countries that we have managed to establish relations with many institutions and music academies, to make direct contacts, to bring people here, to our Faculty, to see the conditions we work in and the things we do. Many were shocked by the conditions this Academy works in and, on the other hand, impressed by the very good results we achieve here and by the number of extremely talented and trained students. This prompted them to help us, cooperate with us, come here to give lectures, conduct master classes, even help us directly with financial assistance for such things as piano repairs, the acquisition of certain equipment, etc. I believe there were never this many people who came to the Faculty, including our best artists working abroad, since this Academy came into existence. Now there is something taking place practically every week, and it sometimes happens that courses of different kinds or even totally identical ones clash, as last week when there were two piano duets at the same time. I think this is a very good thing, for us personally and especially for our students, who I can tell are very interested, who benefit greatly from hearing good experts, from hearing different opinions, becoming familiar with a different way of working. Because it is certain that these experiences we get from outside can be very valuable.

I am satisfied with that aspect. I am not satisfied with certain other things. I think this dissatisfaction has two aspects. One is internal and the other external. The internal aspect, as I see it, is that, for a long time, owing to the previously denounced Higher Education Act but perhaps not only that, there have been many people at the Academy occupying certain positions which I think they do not deserve. I fear that kind of influence, a slight overall monotony that had become established at our Academy for a while. I think certain things are gradually changing. I think people took seriously the change in the Statute, which refers to re-election and election by secret

ballot. I hear that Kolarac University and Jugokonzert have never been so flooded with requests and wishes for concerts to be held, and I believe we have contributed to this. On the other hand, our excellent performers, who live and work abroad, are beginning to voice their desire to return, which will reinforce the makeup of our staff. All this shows great promise, but naturally in the long run. No doubt that which has been lagging for years cannot be remedied all at once, we must show patience and gradually elevate this Academy to a higher level, which it certainly deserves.

The second aspect of my dissatisfaction is directed at politicians who are not sensitive to our work and who waste incredible amounts of money, public, i.e., taxpayer funds, on all kinds of nonsense and simply refuse to grant us the funds for items that represent the essence of our work. The new government has even cut our budget for material costs by a whole 70%, which is incredibly unintelligent, to put it mildly. They seem to have realized what they had done, and are now changing certain things. They saw that certain faculties can get by on that. These are primarily the large faculties which have their own vast sources of earnings, their own incomes. But they also realized that art faculties and certain natural science faculties simply cannot survive. Now they are amending their decisions and I hope the situation will improve. But if you cannot pay electricity, rent and the basics, not to mention paying contract fees or instrument repairs, and especially purchasing new instruments or paying the building costs for the Faculty which can no longer breathe in the space it has, then it is absurd to speak of serious work of any kind.

Translated by Jelena Nikezić