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A DIPTYCH ON SILENCE AND LANGUAGE

Abstracts: The text discusses the compositions *Obični razgovori* (*Ordinary Conversations*) and *Nad vodom* (*Above Water*) of the Belgrade composer Ivana Stefanović. The interpretative framework is determined by two references. On the one hand, the author herself points to the phenomenon of silence by dedicating the entire programme of the auteur concert, at which the analyzed were premiered, precisely to this phenomenon. On the other hand, verbal language, as the subject of a discourse on the compositions *Obični razgovori* and *Nad vodom*, imposes itself owing to the very title of the first composition, that is, the content of the verses from select songs of Hellenic melic poets as the poetic basis of the second composition. The paper examines the specificity of individual interrelation of these phenomena with music, as well as the field of their intersection.

The creation of two new compositions by Ivana Stefanović, *Obični razgovori* (*Ordinary Conversations*) and *Nad vodom* (*Above Water*), had not been interrelated, yet these compositions met at their first Belgrade performance, in the pure temporal-spatial sense¹ as well as on the level of numerous questions they posed and explored. Although such a group of issues is very extensive, in this paper I shall call attention to a couple of ideas that not only emerge as the joint subject of discourse of both compositions, but are also directly interrelated: silence and (verbal) language in the works *Obični razgovori* and *Nad vodom* imbue, mirror, estimate and complement each other in such a way that it seems they cannot survive independently.²

The composer herself pointed out the phenomenon of silence by devoting to it the programme of the entire concert.³ On another previous occasion she said: “The only ambience that pleases me is a quiet

¹ The composition *Nad vodom* for soprano, flute and piano was written in summer 2003. It was intended for and dedicated to the trio *Donne di Belgrado*. It was premiered at an Ivana Stefanović concert, held in the Hall of the Belgrade Philharmonic on February 12, 2004, in the rendition of the aforesaid ensemble (consisting of Aneta Ilić, Stana Krstajić and Maja Rajković-Šljivančanin). That same evening witnessed the first Belgrade performance of the work *Obični razgovori* for violin and oboe, also from 2003, interpreted by Borislav Čičovački and Miloš Petrović. Incidentally, this piece was written for the duo Borislav Čičovački and Peđa Milosavljević who premiered it at the *Crossing Border* festival in The Hague on November 16, 2003.

² The history of art and music has shown that these two phenomena, so perseveringly present in the human world, and yet always capable of eluding every defined existence, can be intricately connected with a work of art in phenomenologically, semantically, poetically and conceptually different ways. At this instance it is not my intention to theoretically analyze all those complex connective threads. My aim – given how intrigued I felt ever since the night I first heard the compositions *Obični razgovori* and *Nad vodom* and within the confines of this paper – is to offer an entirely subjective interpretation of the manifestation of their interaction in the examined works.

³ In the context of silence, Ivana Stefanović gave other titles to her works: *Živ(ot-) razgovor* (*A Li/fe-ve/Conversation*) and *Priroda – portret bez lica* (*Nature – A Portrait Without a Face*). Other titles of the examined compositions refer to their possible second, third... nth histories that equally and in coexistence build a network of identities of the music work. Through this specific intralinguistic and intercontextual translation the composer has unequivocally “opened the door” to different contextualizations of her works. Hence the interpretation we present in this text is the result of shifting the compositions *Obični razgovori* and *Nad vodom* from one context into another.

ambience... only silence is rich”.⁴ Therefore we ask ourselves: in the range from silence as an imagined ideal state of music to silence as a relevant notion of compositional theory and practice, to the pure absence and disappearance of (musical) sound, to a metaphor for diverse individual perceptions of this phenomenon, where is the silence (are more of them, perhaps?) “bespoken” by the compositions *Obični razgovori* and *Nad vodom*?

The second joint subject in the analysis of these works is verbal language. It is not only an important element of the examined pieces,⁵ but also a vital factor in the entire artistic production of Ivana Stefanović.⁶ The status and function of verbal language in the analyzed compositions differs from the character of its interrelating with music. It seems that through the specificity of such relationship’s constitution we can understand possible individual meanings of the first (wider) context pointed out by the author, that is, discover the intersectional field of the previously indicated two interdependent phenomena.

In *Obični razgovori* the language is at once essentially present and fundamentally absent. The title of the composition refers to language as a means of human communication. Thus, being a part of the title, it also becomes “a part of the meaning of the work... a key to understanding it and, in a sense, a position from which to approach the work”.⁷ However, verbal language itself is not present in the media tissue of *Obični razgovori*. The *Conversations* were written for an instrumental duet (violin and oboe) – “two voices that are similar and different, that look for, find/do not find, touch each other, diverge, converge, reach and call to one another” in such a way that one might almost “write words and syllables (meaningful/meaningless) in place of the notes”.⁸

The two mentioned voices imitate the semantic function of language in two ways. Firstly, every conversation, no matter how “ordinary”, means that the speaker understands the meaning of whatever his interlocutor is saying, while the connotative function makes all that has been said understandable through certain special meanings that depend on the personal history of the interlocutors. Hence the very dialogue rests upon an irreducible difference (*différend*) of the conversing subjects, so their mutual understanding can never be perfect. That is what makes every conversation, regardless of the medium in which it takes place, dynamic, interesting and unpredictable. That also is what opens the door to a continual process of designating and re-designating by language and in language, what directs the game of placing and displacing language elements within one context or from one context to another... nth context.

The violin and the oboe, as participants in “ordinary conversations” and instruments of entirely different acoustic characteristics, directly point to the described kind of “inequality” of the interlocutors.

⁴ Cf. Ana Kara-Pešić, “Samo je tišina bogata. Razgovor sa Ivanom Stefanović”, *Novi zvuk*, no. 14, Belgrade, 1999, p. 6.

⁵ The Ivana Stefanović concert featured the first Belgrade performance of *Instrumentalna pesma (Instrumental Song)* as well. Though written for voice and piano, this work does not treat of verbal language.

⁶ “As far as other media are concerned, I find the word closest to me”. Cf. Ana Kara-Pešić, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁷ Cf. Ana Kara-Pešić, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁸ This and other notes by Ivana Stefanović concerning the compositions *Obični razgovori* and *Nad vodom* are quoted according to the author's comments provided in the programme commentary.

These instruments, as quoted by the composer, are not “naturally close” in terms of their features, but they can become closer in terms of sound and expression by “careful coordination”. However, the procedures to which the thematic material, entrusted to the two parts, is subjected testify to the game of differences between the subjects of this seemingly “ordinary” instrumental conversation. This relationship is established in each of the four movements of the composition. It manifests itself first in the adjacent ensuing imitative (essentially free) interrelation of the motives of the second movement and in the somewhat stricter imitative counterpoint of the first part of the third movement. Furthermore, it is also present in the relationships, at a distance, within one movement, for example in the rhythmically almost identical, but in terms of interval (by means of relative alterations), instrumentation and texture, altered recapitulation in the first movement. Finally, we recognize it in the relationships between movements as well, for example in the considerably transformed aspect of the thematic material of the first part of the first movement (bars 7-16) and in the last movement of the cycle (bars 155-162).

Secondly, through each use of language the subject “turns” not only to the another, but also to itself. It “inscribes itself” in the body of another, and in its own body as well: by speaking to another, it speaks itself, constantly “copying itself” through its body. The processes of thematic development that are present within individual parts of *Obični razgovori* can be interpreted from that perspective: within one movement (for example, bars 7-11, 11–14 and 14-16 of the first movement) or between movements (for example, the correspondence between the middle part of the first /bars 17-37/ and second part of the third movement /bars 122-134/).

Through the effect that language has on the body it is not only the limits of the language that are re-examined, but also the limits of a psychologically, sociologically and historically defined body: language becomes a means of transferring a certain meaning of the being from “inside” the body to the plane of that which is speakable. Such incomplete designation and free re-interpretation by language and in language give rise to vast landscapes of the unspoken and unheard⁹ and to the birth of the subject’s political nature and that of the spoken act itself, that is, the fundamental cause of making even the most ordinary conversations unusual. Apparently, this is the silence “bespoken” by *Obični razgovori*.

Verbal language in the composition *Obični razgovori* is present in the very media structure of the work. Although the vocal part initially had not been composed to a poetic text, Ivana Stefanović subsequently appended it to the tones of the melodic line.¹⁰ Hence six excerpts from content-wise very cognate poems of Hellenic lyric poets Sappho, Alcman and Alcaeus became the basis of six “songs”¹¹ for voice, flute and piano. Between certain poetic excerpts (the first and second, and the second and third)

⁹ Naturally, not in the acoustic sense, but at the level of the meaning of a linguistic statement.

¹⁰ “It seemed to me... that I might decide to treat the voice instrumentally, and then... all of a sudden, as if the songs... themselves were ‘jumping into’ melodic sketches, even without the need to increase the number of syllables or change the metre.”

¹¹ The quotation marks point to two elements. The term song does not refer to the song in the traditional sense, but in the most general sense, to the vocal-instrumental segments of the composition *Nad vodom*. Likewise the formal structure of this work is not equivalent to the structure of the poetic source. Detailed explanations concerning form may be found further in the text.

there are two large instrumental interludes and a shorter one (between the fifth and sixth),¹² which on the whole creates a dense texture of poetic and sonic images which this work raised to the level of a genuine vocal-instrumental song.

In selected verses everything is, as quoted by the composer herself, “only nature, description, genre scene, scenery, ‘an occurrence’ between the Moon and the Pleiades, between apple tree branches and a wind rose. There is no sign of a man/woman, there are no feelings, right up to the end, to the penultimate scene where the wind ‘now blusters sideways, and we’ (the people) ‘are in the midst of it all’, and then the last scene, when a FACE finally appears. ‘I speak to myself’, says Sappho at the end.” Indeed, without announcement, quite surprisingly, into a depiction of nature the final verse introduces a subject of, perhaps not accidentally, the female sex. The said verse calls our attention not only to *her* vigilant face, but also to the monologue by which *she* expresses herself in “natural” surroundings. That way we realize that nature is not “only” and merely nature, but that it is as *her* eye beholds it. It turns out that the poetic language in this work has not only the nature of nature, but also its own stance, and that it looks for a status and function of language *beyond* the language itself.

In that sense the language in which she starts speaking becomes a differential point between the structures Julia Kristeva terms semiotic and symbolic, between the “raw material of designation” and its “imposed order”, between the unspeakable and non-presentable space (or phase) of the feminine as distinct from structured space and the Law of the Father.¹³ Given the fact that since Jacques Lacan we have known that the subject does not exist independently of the language, that the person him/herself as well as the human world is constituted through language, so *she* simultaneously becomes both a mediator in the previously described turn and the one mediated by it.¹⁴

The sonic substance of the work *Nad vodom* symbolizes the role of language in that turn. Namely, right up until the very end, it develops through a distinct “organicity” of its constitutive segments. It pulsates with each part of its body, and the fluctuating rhythm of its “moves” is transferred to the horizontal and vertical planes of the composition, to the vivacity and diversity of treatment of individual parts and their correlation alike. However, from the discreet repeated appearance of melodic intonations of the first “song” in the final bars of the third poetic excerpt (b. 251) to clear reminiscences

¹² While the first interlude has the meaning of rounding off the first vocal-instrumental segment and the third has the function of a brief transition, the second interlude – due to the marked developmental type of presenting thematic material – acquires the meaning of an independent segment.

¹³ Cf. “Cixous, Igaray, Kristeva: French feminist theories”, in: Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-structuralism and Postmodernism*, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, pp. 124-126.

¹⁴ We may even say that the very border between the two “worlds” becomes *her* permanent living space. I found Rada Iveković’s text *Transborder Translating*, presented at the postgraduate course *Feminist Critical Analyses: Boundaries, Borders and Borderlands* (Inter-univerzitetski centar, Dubrovnik, May 24-29, 2004) invaluable for understanding borders as the spaces of the feminine. On the trail of this idea, one might, on another occasion, also explore the nature of the explicitly “feminine union” in the chain woman composer – Donne di Belgrado – *she* that ‘speaks to herself’.

of the second instrumental interlude at the end of the penultimate and in the last “song”, it is possible to follow a gradual establishing of “order” within the diversified, through-composed music flow; or, in other words, the appearance of a “face” and his/her language in the tissue of music.

Thereafter the composition *Nad vodom* wanes progressively. *Al niente*, wrote the composer in the score... Through an ostinato of triplets on a single tone the music sound slowly disappears and another “unstructured” creative silence is born, another “crude” sonic space. All that remains is for us to await the appearance of the next big bang.

Translated by Dušan Zabrdac