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**SUBVERSION OF REVERSIBILITY/REVERSIBILITY OF SUBVERSION
SVETLANA SAVIĆ: *RE-VERZIJE 1-6 ZA KAMERNI ANSAMBL*
(*RE-VERSIO 1-6 FOR CHAMBER ENSEMBLE*)**

Abstract: Paper examines the most recent piece by Belgrade composer Svetlana Savić, performed at the 36th BEMUS festival. The piece is studied through three “analytical essays” that raise the questions concerning the various ways of discussing the piece of music in general. Cultural analytical discourse is stressed, as well as possibility to read this piece as a specific product of subversion.

Commissioned by the 36th BEMUS, Svetlana Savić’s latest work, *Re-verzije 1-6 (Re-versio 1-6)* was premiered at our largest musical festival in October 2004.¹ In terms of genre, it also keeps up the preference of the Festival’s Art Committee continually to enlarge domestic literature for chamber ensembles through commissions, probably assuming that this type of music “travels” the world with least difficulty, and can therefore promote contemporary Serbian music production. However, it is neither my intention nor task here to examine the programme policy or decisions of the BEMUS Art Committee or to analyze the last festival, but rather to attempt to present, convey, “interpret” Svetlana Savić’s work. The composer, for her part, made sure that the task was rather unusual and difficult, as it is at least for anyone who must meet the requirements of the commission in such a specific way. For, how is one supposed to write about this work, which certainly appeals by its unpretentiousness and conciseness, but at the same time *diverges* from the well “practiced” theoretical-analytical techniques and once more raises questions thought to have been answered, when really they were (un)intentionally disregarded? Or was it perhaps the context in which the work was created that imposed and rendered those “ghosts from the past” topical again? Did it render topical such questions as: what is “pure music”, what is the meaning or relationship between “craft” and “art” (once, long ago, synonyms), what is “emotion in music, can music express something, what are the characteristics of “feminine writing” in music etc?

But do not expect me to answer these questions. I will not do it for at least three reasons. Firstly, because that is not my “task” here; secondly, because such issues generally do not concern me; and finally

¹ The work was premiered on October 7, 2004 within a concert entitled *A Marathon of Chamber Music* in the Great Hall of the Kolarac Foundation. It was performed by members of the Fujita Trio, Ljubomir Milanović (viola) and members of the Balkan Chamber Academy.

and most importantly, because the author herself is not trying to answer them either. On the contrary, by her work she rejects them forever, as it were, as relevant, valid, ominous, crucial...

So, how does one present/represent/translate/interpret *Re-verzije 1-6*? We can choose from different approaches – ranging from analytical-descriptive to postmodernist-deconstructionist, to culturological-contextual. Each of them individually and all of them in various combinations are a legitimate choice for a discourse on *Re-verzije 1-6*. Still, there always remains the question of the deficit or surplus they raise when departing from the hypothesis that they represent that which the work “tells” us (or does not).

It seems that I have “waded deeply” into a postmodernist-deconstructionist approach to things from the very beginning, so what should naturally follow, in keeping with it, is an individual analysis of the six re-versions in the six musicological sketches meant to accompany Svetlana Savić’s composition in spirit and form, while in essence they would continue to bespeak mostly, or perhaps only of their author, her current concerns and intentions. If I were to opt for such an approach, it would be appropriate for me to take into account not only the title, but also the commentary of the composition², in order to get further “instructions” for elaborating my review. That procedure would open up several (im)possibilities of “reading” *Re-verzije*. The first could lead to establishing an analogy between a certain musicological, philosophical, or some other term and the tone *re*, which is obviously the pre-tone of this work. For example, the text could “reflect” the notion of reversion in the musical-technical sense, as well as in relation to possible analogies in the history of music. The first author who comes to mind, solely because of the analogy of titles and chosen tones, is Honegger and his *Symphony Di Tre Re*, and this is where any further analogy ends. There is Berg, too, with his six-movement *Lyrical Suite* and its dramaturgy of tempo. Then there is Webern, concerned with the miniature of form, as well as Satie and minimalists in terms of the type of material, its placement and treatment. What would certainly also be taken into account is, for instance, the reversion of words in the

² In rhetoric, “reversion” (Latin: reversion, revolving; returning) is the repetition of words in a reverse or different meaning. It is related to anastrophe and hyperbaton, where words change position in a sentence and thus, stressed differently, change the meaning of the entire sentence.

Reversion can also be

- a) reversion of gender
- b) reversion of the magnetic field
- c) Baudrillard’s reversion of history etc.

“Re-versions” are six versions of revolving, i.e. returning to the note “re”. In the first, fourth and sixth re-versions the same music unfolds, only at different paces (fast, slow and furious) and at different heights (midi notes d4, d2 and d3). These re-versions are written in the same florid counterpoint. The second, third and fifth re-versions are transitions; the second and the fifth are auto-reversible, the third and the fifth are composed from the same chords.

Occurrence and non-occurrence, repeating and varying, gradation *versus* stagnation, abstract *versus* banal, they all come face to face in re-versions.

The sequence of re-versions is irreversible.

Svetlana Savić’s comment in the programme booklet for the concert.

clause “Composer Svetlana Savić wrote the composition *Re-verzije 1-6* for chamber ensemble in 2004”, allowing for different readings of the “meaning” of the work itself (for example, in different “directions”: from the author to the contemporary context of Serbian music and music in general, to interpreting various aspects of the work and finally, to the select ensemble). However, an interrelating of the comment with the work itself would provide a solution that does not support the variant of a six-fold reading of the composition. Moreover, it (a comparison) also requires formal-contextual “repetitions” that might seem either redundant or banal. Does that mean the composition “is defending itself” from that kind of musicological comment? Namely, despite the fact that there are six attacca-linked pieces treating the same problem in their respective way, it seems as if they “forbid” musicological development, the reversibility of musicological discourse, by their conciseness, deliberate inhibition of the material and by deliberately leaving its potential developments unrealized, by other words, by their definitiveness, explicitness, transparency and, to some extent, set sequence. The author actually exposes all that she wants to already in the first piece. Everything else that she “says” in the next ten minutes is “the same thing only a bit different”, persistent, clear, almost intrusive and at once strangely distant, curt and “dry”.

If I opted for the analytical-descriptive approach I have already touched, I would then proceed with it in the following way:

We have before us six short pieces of unequal length (the longest, fifth, is a little over two minutes long), obviously not contrasting each other by content, as mentioned before, but by tempo (particularly, as the author stresses, in the case of the first, fourth and sixth re-version: the same material/different tempo), by texture (the second, third and fifth compared to the other three), by the different ranges of using the chamber ensemble (the fifth does not include wind instruments and double bass at all), by the different roles of the instruments or groups of instruments in certain pieces (in the “florid re-versions” all instruments are equally present, although the piano with its function of the pedal tone is present all along, while the wind and string ensembles have specific duplications of the pedal tone or they enunciate the characteristic chromatic motive which first appears in the first bar of the first re-version in the cello and is to become the “leitmotif” of the work. Given the dramaturgy of the tempo, that motive will carry different meanings, ranging from incidentally ornamental material in different parts of the first re-version to basic structural material for the “counterpoint” of the fourth re-version to the “boring”, multiplied, all-permeating motive which someone who likes nature might identify with the buzz of a mosquito, but which, particularly in the midi realization of the sound recording, resembles mostly the annoying ring tone of a mobile phone. In “transitions” the author provides a systematic, almost textbook classification of instrumental groups. If a certain instrument is at some point given a more significant role, like, for example, the piano in the second re-version, the composer

immediately pushes the wind and string instruments to the foreground in the third re-version. And since wind instruments figure a bit more prominently in the third re-version, they will be “punished” by not appearing in the fifth). Within the piece, contrasts between agogics and dynamics are more striking than those between meter (which is changeable, but regular), texture and material (which, once established, apply to the entire piece), raising the performing demands that seem simple at first sight to a more intriguing level.

Still, does a mere statement of facts concerning this work, which obviously can but need not include “minute” analyzing tonal structures of the principal motives (the said chromatic motive “revolving” around the tone *re*, broken chords in different rhythmical figures depending on the tempo of the reversion), the chord vertical (for example, the second-fourth chord on the *C-sharp1* tone, hence around the tone *re* at the beginning of the second re-version), or those points of form that can be designated as specific culminations or high points (the 5th and 6th re-versions, for example), or a more elaborate interpretation of the treatment of instruments within the ensemble – so, to sum up, does that analytical-descriptive variant of the discourse on the work reveal all we need to know? Or perhaps it points more to that which is hidden than to that which we could if not (get to) know then at least assume. If I have already said everything about the work, what have I not said but might figure in *Re-verzije 1-6*?

If I try to perceive the composition in the context of the composer’s fairly small production, then it is quite certain that this work stands out by the absence of a poetic model or extra-musical inspiration which is otherwise characteristic of Svetlana Savić (for example, *Quincunx* /1992/ for strings, inspired by Lawrence Durrell’s *The Avignon Quintet*, premiered in 1996, or *Pesme o zvezdama* /Songs About Stars/ for female choir and chamber ensemble to the verses of B. Milidragović, 2001). And once again, the composer devises a *gateway* from the problematic circle of possible meanings of her work. In the context of the contemporary moment in Serbian music (read: music created in Serbia), we have before us a work conceived to be everything that our music is not at the moment, or to be nothing of what our music is. And because of its unpretentiousness, brevity, simplicity (albeit only superficially), the work promotes its intention in the manner of a statement, almost as a manifest. It is evidently an experiment in a-programmatic, a-quotable, a-complex, a-national, a-thematic, atonal, “autistic”, “a-sensitive”, “a-feminine” music, imbued by an explicit *aversion* towards anything adversative. In view of the strength of her discourse, the author could quite legitimately have shifted its basic tone a fifth higher, designating it with alphabetical notation, and perhaps she would have gotten a more precise name for the work. Still, I can only imagine the kinds of theoretical versions, reversions, diversions and other “perversions” that would then ensue in (my) writing.

I believe that it would be more precise, in the context of everything that has been mentioned about and surrounding the composition, to interpret this work as *subversion* which, in all its multiple and

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Svetlana Savić: *Re-Verzije 1-6* za kamerni ansambl (*Re-Versio 1-6* for Chamber Ensemble)

abovementioned manifest forms, appeared to Svetlana Savić to be the (then) only possible response to all the questions the institution of commission entails.

Translated by Dušan Zabrdac