

Ivana Stamatović

**THE 14<sup>TH</sup> INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF COMPOSERS  
(Belgrade, October 27<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, 2005)**

The Fourteenth International Review of Composers was shaped by two almost equally represented programme levels: the main course of the event comprised five concert evenings, while the four accompanying programmes were dedicated to meetings with artists and the promotion of new editions of sheet music. This year's Review featured performances of 31 compositions chosen by the Selector Boris Despot, Ph.D., and, unlike the previous two Reviews, two thirds of the works were pieces by domestic authors. The segment of the Review conceived as a review of domestic production created in the previous three years included, firstly, works created during graduate (Ana Gnjatović, Teodora Stepančić) or postgraduate (Ivan Brkljačić) studies of our youngest authors. There were also performances of compositions (... *u treptaju oka...* /... *in the blink of an eye...*/ by Ivan Brkljačić, *Pesma putnika u noći* /*Song of a Traveller in the Night*/ by Isidora Žebeljan, *Music box/selbstoportrait mit Ligeti und Strawinsky* /*und Messiaen ism auch dabe*/ by Marko Nikodijević, *Re-verzije* /*Re-versions*/ by Svetlana Savić, *Hadedas – izlaganje i tri razvoja* /*Hadedas – Presentation and Three Developments*/ by Srđan Hofman) which had already been performed on previous occasions at concerts and/or at professional reviews in the country or abroad. Naturally, this fact was not an obstacle for them to be included in the programme of the Review. On the contrary! It is precisely the abovementioned compositions that belong to the group of works which stood out from the rest of the programme by their personal authorial writing. Finally, we also heard the works of authors from the diaspora (Miloš Raičković, Ivan Marković, Aleksandar Damnjanović, Katarina Miljković) which have lately become increasingly present on our concert stages.

The group of compositions created by authors primarily oriented towards our country, written in the context of the here and now, consisted of only six new works. Thus the following works were put on the map of our latest music: the unpretentious and delicate miniature *Letnja noć* (*Summer Night*) for accordion by Mirjana Živković; the politically coloured choral piece *All right* by Aleksandar Perunović; the completely neoclassical cycles by Zlatan Vauda (*Sonata* for piano and *Eseji* /*Essays*/ for wind trio); the instrumental *Rukoveti* (*Song Wreaths*) by Rajko Maksimović written on the basis of the best (naturally, vocal) tradition of this genre; the thematically and sonically reduced, expressively distant and introverted vocal-instrumental composition entitled *Song of a Dead One* by Miloš Zatkalik; *Scallywag* by Božidar Obradinović

for instrumental ensemble, conceived through a synthesis of the language of high and popular art – characteristic of Obradinović's work – yet this time imbued with an energy tension that is somewhat surprising for Obradinović; and the work *Csip csip* by Szilárd Mezei, based on the fusion of a quasi-folkloric variant arrangement of the thematic material with an aleatoric-improvisational compositional technique and an extraordinarily virtuosic instrumental technique.

Despite the mentioned number of works by domestic authors, it seems that the production of most of those whose work is primarily oriented towards our country is at a low ebb. There is no doubt that such a situation is influenced by completely understandable external factors such as the low financial profitability of compositional work, rare opportunities for performing or inadequate performances. Refusing to search for the reasons behind the – for some authors partial, for others complete – withdrawal from the contemporary music scene in our country 'only' in those external factors, we wonder: what is the minimal incentive for creative work for a composer in Serbia today? How can we create conditions that would make composing what we believe it has always been: an act motivated by strong internal personal motives and needs? Has the time come – despite the indisputable dedication and creative efforts of all those who founded the Review, inherited it with all its positive and negative heritage and developed it up to the present – to rethink the festival itself in accordance with the said facts? For it seems that otherwise the work of the Selector and Director of the Review (Sonja Marinković, Ph.D.) and the President of the Composers' Association of Serbia (Marija Kovač) becomes even more difficult and thankless than it would be in better creative and financial conditions.

Just like at last year's Review, most of the selected foreign compositions were created by authors (Nurdit Karion Jugend, Michael Matthews, Slavko Šuklar, Vladimir Scolnic) whose work the Belgrade audience had already had the opportunity to hear at previous Reviews. In addition to authors whose works were represented on the stylistically homogenous programme of the Italian ensemble *Sentieri Selvaggi*, owing to the choice of the selector, the audience had the chance to hear the work of Canadian composer Michael Pepa for the first time. Therefore, we wonder whether this group of works by foreign authors represents an adequate frame of reference for the fulfillment of the festival programme modality of the Review.

With the exception of three solo works, the selected compositions were all written for chamber ensembles. On the one hand, this fact testifies to the prevalent media of compositional expression nowadays. On the other hand, compared to the previous history of the Review, it appears as a break with the long-standing practice of a ceremonious symphonic opening, previously made only within the 12<sup>th</sup> International Review of Composers.zip. The performing of the selected works was entrusted to diverse chamber ensembles, engaged according to the tried

and tested 'formula': from those with a long tradition – such as the Italian ensemble *Sentieri Selvaggi* (October 27<sup>th</sup>) and the Ensemble for New Music of the Faculty of Music (October 31<sup>st</sup>) – to recently established performing ensembles – such as *Vitruvius Quartet* (October 29<sup>th</sup>) and *Camerata Velanensis* from Velenje (October 31<sup>st</sup>) – to the temporary collaborations of numerous domestic musicians that are customary for the Review. The curiosity of this Review was the one-off engaging of foreign musicians: as part of her tour of the Balkans, Canadian violinist Lyn Kuo performed *Fantasia Bohemien* by her fellow countryman Michael Pepa, while the mentioned eight-member ensemble from Velenje came exclusively to present *Triptihon (Triptychon)* by their fellow citizen Slavko Šuklar.

The achievements of music performing varied greatly at this year's Review. Thus, despite the fact that the cinema auditorium of the Belgrade Cultural Centre was too small for the sound force of the ensemble *Sentieri Selvaggi*, it was a pleasure to attend their performance. A postmodernist combination of repetitive technique and diverse music practices of official and underground Western-European and New York music scenes was realized in most of the compositions they interpreted (*Hume!* by Paolo Coggiola, *acdc* by Michael Gordon, *L'uomo armato* by Filippo Del Corno, *Architectonics VI* by Herrki Sven Tüür, *Zilver* by Louis Andriessen and *Bad Blood* by Carlo Boccadoro). Such a stylistic technique of the said works gave the Italian musicians the opportunity to achieve a characteristic combination of an undoubtedly 'serious' realization of the performing itself and a somewhat informal, humourous – at times even truly simplified – manner of addressing the audience with the aim of "approximating" contemporary sound to the listeners. The heightened tone of the performed compositions and their specific dynamic aggressiveness corresponded with the accumulation of a quasi-clubbing energy of alternative music scenes – like a specific sound transposition of the ensemble's name ("Wild Paths") – which culminated at the end of the concert, drawing an ovation from the audience.

It was also an absolute delight to listen to the *Vitruvius Quartet*, which was extremely professional, very well-rehearsed and precise in all aspects of performing technique. At this concert, the question of the possibility of writing for the string quartet in the modern age was made topical from the perspective of compositional practice in terms of different types of organization of the material and diverse treatments of quartet sound: from using avant-garde techniques and pointillistically defined thematics as a basis (*Conversations* by Nurdit Karion Jugend) to postminimalist techniques of working with the material (*B-A-G-D-A-D* by Miloš Raičković); from sharp quartet writing (String Quartet number 2 by Michael Matthews) to the

more traditional treatment of the ensemble (*Quartetto Lirico* by Ivan Marković and *Quatuour Lyrique* by Aleksandar Damnjanović).

Compared to the level of previous performances of the members of the Ensemble for New Music, we witnessed an unexpected casualness of their performances at the last concert of the Review. Paradoxically, the founding and rise of this ensemble were closely related with the founding and development of the International Review of Composers itself. Therefore, once again pointing out the previously mentioned ‘external’ factors of the unfavourable position of compositional activity in our country, we wonder how it is possible to create optimal conditions for both an adequate and a professional presentation of new music production.

The accompanying programme of the 14<sup>th</sup> International Review of Composers included four events. The portrait of the composer Vladan Radovanović (October 28<sup>th</sup>) was hosted and organized by Sonja Marinković and the promotion of the Anthology of Serbian Piano Music (October 29<sup>th</sup>) – by Dragana Jeremić-Molnar. The portrait of Ivan Brkljačić (October 31<sup>st</sup>), winner of the “Mokranjac” Award for 2004 for the composition *Kad se sedam puta digne zavesa* (*When the Curtain Rises Seven Times*), performed precisely at the opening of last year’s Review, and the meetings with authors Michael Pepa and Slavko Šuklar (October 30<sup>th</sup>) were hosted and organized by Ivana Stamatović. Despite the interestingly conceived accompanying programme of the Review, our audience showed surprisingly little interest in these events right up to the last evening of the Review. For instance, less than ten visitors – including, apart from the author of this text, the Director of the Review and the President of the Composers’ Association of Serbia, only one musicologist and one composer – attended the promotion of the Anthology of Serbian Piano Music. A few more visitors were interested to hear and see, in the jubilean, seventieth year of Vladan Radovanović’s life, the portrait of this artist characterized by such a specific individuality, authenticity and unique creativeness in our music culture.

Based on all that has been said, we can conclude that, factually speaking, this year’s International Review of Composers is not very different from its several previous editions. This could be interpreted as a sign of continuity with the ways of presenting contemporary sound in our very recent music past. However, this is exactly where we perceive one of the greatest crisis points of this festival. Namely, analyzing the period from its foundation until today – as a source of conceptual and value, local and primarily European contextual frameworks for examining current trends on the scene of contemporary art music – we are faced with the fact that this renowned festival, so necessary in our music world, has a hard time surviving in the web of numerous difficulties that surround it. The exacerbated financial and organizational circumstances of its existence are inevitably also reflected on the qualitative factors of its status

and reputation not only in the wider national culture, but also in the narrower circle of the music profession, leaving it very little possibility for 'maneuver'. Consequently, the International Review of Composers turned out to be, not for the first time, a result of a strange interplay of numerous artistic, professional, organizational and institutional circumstances. For the sake of the imperative of continuity and the regular annual organization of the event, the causes and effects of the current – not only this year's – state of the Review became interwoven in many ways in this web and have mutated to a degree where they can no longer be differentiated. The very fact that this year it was held for the first time in the acoustically inadequately insulated cinema auditorium of the Belgrade Cultural Centre – which was clearly a compromise made for financial reasons – with a regular countersubject consisting of the clamour of the audience and on a stage that was often too small to accommodate all the musicians, which undoubtedly had a negative effect on their performing achievements, is a symbolic testimony to the difficulties, interruptions, noises and inadequacies on the very scene of contemporary art music in our country. Therefore, our numerous previous questions are an attempt to point to some of these focal points of the Review with the aim of overcoming them so that they can contribute to the quality of the festival itself, to the joy of all those who participate, either actively or passively, in this important factor of our music culture.

Translated by Jelena Nikezić