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### THE MAGIC OF NUMBER SEVEN

Ivan Brkljačić: *Kada se SEDAM puta digne zavesa...*  
(*When the Curtain Rises SEVEN Times...*)<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

The composition »When the curtain rises SEVEN times...« is dedicated to the theatre, but not as music FOR the theatre, but rather as music ABOUT theatre. The SEVEN movements of the cycle are organized according to the well-known dramaturgy of the classical drama: prologue (*Curtain*), exposition (*Light, Stage*), development (*Actor, Movement*) and denouement (*Color, Applause*). The extra-musical concept of the piece not only recalls our memory of the Theatre (our sensation of the Theatre), but is also expanded with a wide spectrum of allusions brought up by the use of number SEVEN in the title.

#### Key words

theatre, number seven, cycle, musical description, dramaturgy

Theatre music occupies a prominent position in the hitherto compositional oeuvre of Ivan Brkljačić (1977)<sup>2</sup>. There are not many biographies of contemporary Serbian authors of the younger generation which, even at a cursory glance, reveal so directly and unmistakably the composer's passionate love of the stage or "the boards of life".

The composition *Kada se SEDAM puta digne zavesa... (When the Curtain Rises SEVEN Times...)* is dedicated to the theatre, however not as music FOR the theatre, but rather as music ABOUT the theatre. It does not contain any quotations, or any allusions to referential phenomena or figures from the history of theatrical art, nor does it refer to the composer's work from this field. It does not contain any recognizable models, because it is the author's unique, intimate expression of his own fascination with the

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<sup>1</sup> The composition was written in 2002 for the symphonic orchestra with triple woodwind (accompanied by the piano, guitar, celesta, cymbals and two batteries of percussion instruments). Ivan Brkljačić received the Mokranjac Award for this composition in 2004. The work is 15 minutes long.

<sup>2</sup> He has written music for plays performed at the most popular theatres in Belgrade: BITEF Theatre, Atelier 212 Theatre, National Theatre, theatres *Duško Radović* and *Boško Buha*, Zvezdara Theatre, Belgrade Drama Theatre, as well as by the Cultural and Artistic Society *Branko Krsmanović* and *Mata Milošević* within the Department of Dramatic Arts. He is also the author of the music for plays performed in theatres in Zrenjanin, Vršac, Subotica and Banja Luka. Twice he has participated in theatre festivals of university theatres in Besançon and Paris, he has composed theatrical music for the Holdvilag stage in Budapest and he was also a member of the Yugoslav-German theatrical co-production in Erlangen in 2000. In January of 2006, he wrote the music for the play *Amadeus*, written by Peter Shaffer and directed by Alisa Stojanović at the Belgrade Drama Theatre.

Theatre. This fascination is not revealed through cheap, sentimental, or in any way pompous outpourings of enthusiasm (of which there are none whatsoever in the composition), but rather through a sophisticated, intellectual perception of theatricals “elements” and the mechanisms of their interaction.

The title of a composition is a reliable guideline for listening to a work. If music is text, as Marcel Cobussen would say, then its title is – the text about the text<sup>3</sup>. Music text is not just the composition, nor the sequence of tones, nor the score, nor the content of its pages. On the other hand, the music text does comprise all the abovementioned elements, but is not reducible to any of them. To once more paraphrase Cobussen, music text is located where the intra-musical meets the extra-musical. In the case of Brkljačić’s composition, the extra-musical not only brings back our recollections of the Theatre (that is, our experience of the Theatre), but is also expanded by a broad spectrum of allusions implied by the use of number SEVEN in the title.

Strongly emphasized by capital letters, number seven has quite an intimate symbolic meaning for the author: it is the number of theatrical stages in Belgrade (at the time the composition was created) where plays featuring his music were performed. However, even without this information, number seven still affects our perception<sup>4</sup> with its mythical weight and universal symbolic meaning: the SEVEN Wonders of the World, the SEVEN Deadly Sins, the SEVEN wise men<sup>5</sup>, Atlas’s SEVEN daughters<sup>6</sup>, Salome’s SEVEN veils, the SEVEN days of the week, Snow White and the SEVEN dwarves... How does number seven function in Brkljačić’s score?

The SEVEN movements of the cycle were named after the elements of contemporary theater: *Zavesa (Curtain)*, *Svetlo (Light)*, *Scena (Stage)*, *Glumac (Actor)*, *Pokret (Movement)*, *Boja (Colour)* and *Aplauz (Applause)*. What is perhaps missing

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<sup>3</sup> See web page:

[www.cobussen.com/proefschrift/100\\_outwork/120\\_music\\_is\\_a\\_text/music\\_is\\_a\\_text.htm](http://www.cobussen.com/proefschrift/100_outwork/120_music_is_a_text/music_is_a_text.htm)

<sup>4</sup> The text of cognitive psychologist George A. Miller about the magic of number SEVEN is one of the most frequently quoted texts regarding the limitations of our capacity to process information. This text specifies the number  $7\pm 2$  (seven plus minus two) as the optimal number of information a person can receive in a given context, remember and pass on with the smallest percentage of error. (George A. Miller. The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two. *The Psychological Review*, 1956, vol. 63, pp. 81-97)

<sup>5</sup> Seven ancient Greek eminent thinkers and statesmen.

<sup>6</sup> According to Hellenist mythology, Zeus turned them into stars in order to save them from Orion’s pursuit. In astronomy, this star constellation is known as the Pleiades; in Hellenistic literature this name referred to seven tragic poets in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C., as well as to seven French poets from the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

from this concept is the *Audience*, although, on the other hand, *Applause* does in fact originate from it. The audience is the omnipresent “other” the actors are always aware of during a performance. Finally, it is we who listen to Brkljačić’s work and judge it. There is always a recipient.

Following the line of the tempo, one can observe a gradual acceleration in the cycle up to the fourth and fifth movements (*Actor, Movement*), followed by a temporary calming down in the sixth movement (*Colour*) before the final, Allegro apotheosis (*Applause*). In this respect, *Curtain* is the logical introduction into the cycle, marking both the beginning and the end of the performance, anticipating the event. Symbolically, the dormant state of the curtain is supported by pedals of mainly fourth-second chords, while its ceremonious opening is represented by glissandos in the harp section and arpeggios in the harpsichord section. What dominates is the colour of chords with a mainly fourth-second structure which are sustained by string instruments, but several motives that can also be recognized in subsequent movement break through this colour: the repetition of tone (celesta, bar 1, example 1a) and the guitar figure (bar 1, example 1b), the skip of the sixth upwards (trumpet part, bar 11, example 1c), the second movement upwards (flutes, oboes and English horn, bars 20-24, example 1d)... The second movement (*Light*) symbolically illustrates the gradual turning on of spotlights and other stage lights, that moment when the lights illuminate the stage after the initial darkness (trumpets con sordino) and the spectator (listener) steps out of reality and into the fictitious world of the play. The layering of seconds in the parts of brass wind instruments and the gradual intensification of the dynamics up to the final fortissimo chord are a somewhat predictable compositional technique, which, nonetheless, produces an exciting result. The sound of *Light* (or the light of sound?) focuses on the *Stage* in its dramatic glow.

Example 1a

Пример 1а

Andante ♩ = 56

Celesta

Cen.

### Example 1b

Пример 1б

*Andante* ♩ = 56

Musical notation for Example 1b, a single staff in 4/4 time. The tempo is marked *Andante* with a quarter note equal to 56 (♩ = 56). The music begins with a whole rest, followed by a five-note sequence (F#4, G4, A4, B4, C5) marked *mp* (mezzo-piano) and a fermata over the final note.

### Example 1c

Пример 1г

*Andante* ♩ = 56

Musical notation for Example 1c, a three-staff score for Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), and Clarinet in B-flat (C. i.). The tempo is marked *Andante* with a quarter note equal to 56 (♩ = 56). The music is in 2/4 time and consists of four measures. Each instrument part features a melodic line with accents and slurs, starting with a whole rest in the first measure.

### Example 1d

Пример 1в

*Andante* ♩ = 56

Musical notation for Example 1d, a two-staff score for Trumpet (Tr.). The tempo is marked *Andante* with a quarter note equal to 56 (♩ = 56). The music is in 2/4 time and consists of four measures. Both staves feature a melodic line with accents and slurs, starting with a whole rest in the first measure.

Even though it is similar to previous movements in terms of its tempo (*Lento*) and its mood of suppressed tension, *Stage* is a setting for minor events and different actors. Several very short motives, equally participating in the music flow and which become harmonized in different ways in the course of repetition, almost allude to the abundance of actors “on the other side” of the stage (technicians, prompters, dressers, make-up artists...), invisible to the audience and yet equally important for the success of a play. It is also possible to recognize modified motives from the first and second movements (figurations in the guitar section, glissandos of the harp, skip of the sixth in the section

of the violins...), which is justified by the very fact that both the curtain and the light (that is, the *Curtain* and *Light*) are part of the set design (that is, the *Stage*).

Acting is older than the theater as an institution and, therefore, it is logical that the great magician of theatrical magic – the *Actor* – becomes the centre of Brkljačić's cycle. The actor is unique, his aura is inimitable, he rules the stage. That is why the movement is dominated by a new, theatrical motive (example no. 2), the rhythm is fast, the metre is changeable, the dynamic changes are frequent and sudden and the agogic acceleration is permanent almost to the very end. The attained level of tension in the cycle is also sustained in the following movement (*Movement*): the motive of the actor is depersonalized into a figuration by inversion, while everything else is left to the rhythm. Unlike the previous movement, in which the metre changes from bar to bar, here there are practically no metrical changes at all. At this level, on which music development has gathered momentum (around the area of the golden partition in the score!) one can no longer control one's need to recognize the symbolic meaning of number seven. It lurks from nearly each, randomly selected detail of the score (which is just our projection, and by no means the composer's intention!), so that you can no longer read the final chord D flat-G flat-A flat-D flat as ordinary superimposed perfect fourths, but instead in that gesture you recognize the symmetrical division of the scale, which, as we know, has SEVEN different tones.

The penultimate movement (*Colour*) represents a temporary decline of the tension curve in the cycle (tempo *Andante*), before the finale in full swing. The movement has its own ascending dramatic line, realized through the development of a very striking melody played in unison by flutes, oboes, clarinet, horns, trumpets and violins (from bar 35). Before this melodic takeoff, the listener once again recognizes the motives from previous movements; admittedly, nothing in the cycle is repeated literally and yet it is modified insofar as it does not jeopardize familiarity.

*Applause* – that spiritual nourishment for an actor, the reward for effort and creativity, the culmination of a theatrical event, the sound on the basis of which every person of the theatre estimates his or her performance of the evening – can be nothing but an apotheosis of Theatre in Brkljačić's oeuvre. The solemn major chord and the uniform semiquaver motion from the beginning of the movement (example no. 3), as a spontaneous harmonized reaction of the audience, are disrupted by the change of

rhythm and metre, then reestablished, with the applause constantly changing intensity and subsiding towards the end of the movement. The motive of the celesta and the skip of the sixth in the trumpets, as the final reminiscence of the *Curtain* and *Stage*, symbolically point to the existing of the play in the consciousness of the audience even after it ends.

This is not about traditional music description. How can you begin to evoke the Theater (or anything else, for that matter) by music? If it were not for the title of the composition and the titles of movements as reliable guides for our perception (and our projection!), perhaps this could also be a cycle about the Seven Wonders of the World! After all, is description a sin? Is not the very idea of theatre, its primordial form, based on imitation, that is, mimicry? This is more likely a successful meeting of the intra-musical and the extra-musical.

The cycle is organized in such a way as to have the recognizable dramaturgy of a classical drama: prologue (*Curtain*), exposition (*Light, Stage*), peripeteia (*Actor, Movement*) and denouement (*Colour, Applause*). The subtle circular motion of certain motives throughout the movements of the cycle functions as the primary, or at least the most striking cohesive force. The meticulous realization of tension arches at the level of individual movements and the entire cycle, and the economical use, for this very purpose, of the potential of the expanded orchestral apparatus bear witness to the author's compositional-technical maturity in organizing music time. The additional force of the composition comes from the skillfully formulated "bait" in the title of the work which inevitably draws the listener (or analyst) into at least one of the two concepts present: the concept of the Theatre or the concept of number SEVEN. And, furthermore, they are both hard to resist.

Translated by Jelena Nikezić