

Ana Kotevska

**ISIDORA ŽEBELJAN: THE TRANSCENDENTAL VOYAGE TOWARDS AND FROM
BELGRADE FANTASIA¹**



At the moment, you are the most performed Serbian composer abroad. Moreover, something not always the case with artists with international careers, you are equally active in the music life of Belgrade. How do you see your place in the European and local context and how do you experience the palpable differences between 'here' and 'there'?

I am pleased that in recent years there were several significant events in Western Europe linked with my music. I don't really think about my place in the European and local context as I believe I could not view it impartially. The need to define my own place in any space at all would detract from the urge to explore within myself. I am happy to have the opportunity to exchange thoughts, ideas and music itself with the people I meet in different milieus, who are interested in music for vital reasons. The experiences I have gained in recent years while traveling to my concerts are for me of invaluable significance, as they impelled me to free myself to a large extent from prejudices, as this dependence of predetermined and ideologically biased attitudes would be the core difference between living a life for art and every other life being lived 'here' or 'there'. Our milieu is "stifling", which is understandable having in mind that it is "aired" rarely and with effort, due to many objective circumstances. It has become cramped and overly constricted, encumbered with a "second-hand simulacrum" offered by the media and frequently by dubious experts, who present their scanty familiarity with other environments as the only and exclusive truth. It is probably the case that the area is still not ready for changes, as this demands a transformation which can proceed from idealism and love and one's own geopolitics, which again also requires a psychologically and emotionally nourishing environment. My experiences with other areas testify to the fact that in the countries where music takes up a place of importance, there is an accent on the exclusive significance of quality, and not ideology, and that superior results, above all for music itself, and then for each particular musician, are achieved by

¹ Considering that the composer responded via email to the questions sent in advance, an interactive dimension is lacking in this interview.

the joint performing of the entire music establishment. Of course, there are not many wrong premises there, there is not much falsehood, as the competition is enormous, and the audience cannot be fooled, primarily due to the fact that many generations were raised on the best musical works and the best performances. It is a matter of fact that an audience firstly exists, and then, it exists in various forms, and there is an audience for any kind of music. An essentially relevant thing, which I spoke about in the beginning, is that there, prejudices are reduced to a minimum; actually, there is space for many things. My meeting, as a composer and conductor, with the ensemble *Academy of St. Martin in the Fields* speaks of this emphatically. Considering this is an ensemble comprised of top performers, one would think that musicians such as those would have the right to feel and behave as if they were superior. At the beginning of the first rehearsal, they were reserved, as they didn't know what to expect. However, already after ten minutes, I understood that the atmosphere had changed completely. There took pleasure in the music, as well as with my performing it. What I wish to say is that very quickly it became irrelevant where I was from, the fact that we don't know each other and that most of the musicians have had a number of unpleasant experiences with contemporary composers and their music. This cooperation is one my best experiences thus far. Also, during the rehearsing of the opera *Zora D.* in Amsterdam, I was exalted by cooperating with the marvelous artists who lived for this opera, who found great joy in working on it. This kind of cooperation was the pinnacle of composing and music, as it shows that joy in music is not only possible, but is really the only thing that gives it sense.

In your closest, original circle of composers, in which there are both foreign and Serbian composers, Ljubica Marić has always taken up an important place. In the case of Ljubica, as with every authentic artist, identity and identification can be tested on various levels. What is your relationship with this author based on? A spiritual relationship, points of contact on the music level, female creativity, a music myth...?

I respect Ljubica Marić as our most original composer, and her ingenuity, even by world standards, can be recognized as exceptional. As a person, she was the kind of uncompromising, courageous artist who dedicated her life to art, who listened and experienced the world behind the line of the visible. She was a composer who believed in the effect of music, she had extraordinary intuition and the essential elements of her originality arose from a profound immersion into a spiritual dimension and from an authentic inner music experience deriving from another space and time. To my delight, our understanding was mutual.

Do you find you belong, and to what extent, to a gender-induced, female creativity, the female narrative?

If we consider leading artistic achievements, I don't believe in the existing of a female narrative, as all forms of authentic spirituality originate from a unity, from One. And that One, the spirit of God or God's light, does not have duality for its primary shape. All the lower forms of the spiritual or those forms which do not belong to it, as well as those restricted by matter or intellectual small-mindedness, can have various traits in common with subspecies, as well as gender traits.

What place in your vocation is occupied by the "craft of music" and how do you define it to yourself and your students?

The craft of music is an ability, a skill (*umeće* in Serbian), and the word art in Serbian derives from the word meaning to be able to (*umeti*). To be able to make something in the sense of composition means to have the ability to convey an ideal musical idea from the sphere of the conceptual to a concrete auditive form. This process implies having power, which can in part be acquired by training, through learning and by listening to extraordinary compositions, as well as from theoretical texts, but is best acquired by one's own realized practice, as well as through the dogged exercising of one's inner musical ear. This can secure the ability of passing on the most minute energy and tension details of a music idea into an appropriate audial form, which is the only possible way to attain a musical effect. Of course, the basis of mastering the craft is the ability to find the solution to the riddle, this being the recognizing of an authentic, alive music idea, which is possible for those composers who with love seek precisely what they feel they will find.

In regards to your oeuvres, but also of the opuses of composers well-known to you, you appear in the role of conductor, and you often interpret your own piano compositions or perform a piano score in chamber music. Does the performing aspect serve as some kind of corrective feedback in composing?

My performing stems from the love of music and the need to constantly appraise and experience it from various angles. The seeking of your own music is a totally different process than performing other people's music. The latter is directed towards elaborating tension arches, finding the sense of music phrases, their logical successions, discovering the contexts of lateral lines, expounding the dynamics in the vertical line and numerous other sublime musical details, large segments and their correlations. This is work which is very fun to do, especially when it

involves music which is very effective, as it implies an effort in devising an interesting musical story. Regarding the performing of my own music, there is no feeling of a discovery process, considering that I know in advance how something should sound. In that process, the most interesting thing for me is to pass on my energy to the other performers I play with, as well as to depict to them the sort of musical event involved by playing and conducting.

To what extent can a composer “supervise” the life of his or her scores?

When dealing with first performances and permanent recordings, I consider it necessary for a composer to fully participate in the performing (either as an interpreter, or as a listener – counselor). This is especially relevant for the music oeuvres with a specific expression, as the method of playing and the feeling with which every accent and every staccato is carried out is important for the expression, as well as where the prevalent tones are *legato* etc. There are many elements which cannot be denoted in a recording, especially those which embody the specificity of the expression. It happens often that, due to a lack of an adequate idea, musicians resort to the most analogous established musical idea, and there can be a great misunderstanding there. This is why I make an effort, when I can, to present to musicians the exact representation of my music in any available way. One of the last instances like this is my cooperation with the Brodsky quartet and the clarinet player Joan Enric Lluna, who performed the *Song of a traveler at night*. As I could not participate in the first performance, I sent them the demo-recording of my piano interpretation of this quintet. Then a number of performances ensued in Spain and England, some of which I found out about only later. Thus, for me it was important to give this music a precise preliminary performing impulse, and everything after that was the independent life of music.

I noticed that one of the original contributions in your musical expression could be ascribed to models of the Balkan performing tradition? One would say that you have a lot of trust in the vitality of the traditional instrumentarium, traditional recordings, music tradition in general, in their adequacy to express your current experiencing of everything regardless of the technological revolution. How substantial is their vitality today, and how much do composers and performer contribute and are able to contribute to their revitalization?

An old and valid adage says: the more localized the work is, the more universal its message becomes. My music is partly situated in the Balkans, largely in Serbian landscapes and idiom (and that, one must not forget, also entails the Balkan urban milieu), so it is natural that through the details of Balkan traditional or, better said, pagan music motifs, it touches upon profound unconscious emotional and psychological echoes of human existence from the days of yore. This is an authentic way to describe the universal images of the human condition (as,

conversely, we are condemned to stereotypes by generalizing). The vitality of traditional music is inextinguishable as it incorporates within it levels of entrenched and abundant emotional and psychological layers of the human being, an intuitive experience of the world, those thought wave functions which spread throughout space into infinity. Historical continuance has always created new traditions, but distinctive for all of them is a vivid, albeit ostensibly lapidary, experiencing of the world, regardless whether in question are the imaginary music of the Pelasgians or punk music. However, this kind of motif is only one element of my music, there are many more and the attempt to break them up feels affected, as the entire meaning of music disappears the moment it is cut into fragments. My music is not composed of known existing parts, as in some chemical compound, so as to be able to determine by the process of feedback which basic elements they are made up of. It seems to me that foremost in my music is a specific melodiousness, and I consider that element the most important attribute of every music, the feature making up the unique physiognomy of a musical expression which endeavors to seek a way to display its specific nature (for example Ligeti's, Xenakis' or Messiaen's) regardless of the technological revolution. Yet if we now look at the majority of science-fiction films from the 80s and 90s, in which there is a conspicuous use of the most up-to-date special effects of the time, many of them will seem to us ludicrously sad in their technological obsolescence. Technology in itself cannot create new, contemporary, or what is most important, qualitative and effective contents, it must be only a means to an idea. The need to use technology at any cost and, for example, for trendy reasons, is outlandish to me, as trend implies unoriginality, mediocrity, emulation and provincialism, and it always has been and remains a rule that truly modern is that which is not trendy. I always orient myself only by the demands of the actual music idea. If the music idea requests the use of some technological means, there is no doubt that I will use it. I am exalted when I reach the interspaces of unexpressed emotions and the intimation of secrets, as well as when I can admire the extraordinariness of existing.

What are your experiences with the reception of your music? What, in your opinion, prevails while first listening to the compositions of Isidora Žebeljan: national identity, a contemporary individual authorial manuscript or...?

Never previously, and especially not while I was abroad, have I heard that my musical world is perceived as being national. Such a description should imply the existing of a musical idiom characteristic for Serbian artistic music in general, in the sense of a national sound, of course, and such characteristics have, in the area of art music, vanished for some time, with the disappearing of national schools at the beginning of the 20th century. This is why this question is

not entirely clear to me, and I must wonder where it comes from. If national identity in music implies the presence of elements of traditional music, then my music could have the national marker of the Albanian and Romanian and Georgian, and in a wider context American, African, even the Japanese cultures. Thus, we could also consider Giacinto Scelsi as an Indian, and Karlheinz Stockhausen an American Indian. The other possible basis for thinking about this issue would be the idea of the existing of a joint stylistic qualifier of a group of Serbian composers who would thus, eventually, make up some sort of national school. I think that in Serbian music there are no composers who were involved with researching the worlds which interest me, except for, to a small extent, Dušan Radić, during his early period. If the qualifier of the national implies a certain geopolitics of the area where we come from, then it certainly does exist in my music. That is first of all the poetics which can also be described as Belgrade fantasia. This poetics involves, in my opinion, the kind of lucidity and fantasy which connects unlinkable elements, without using irony, but through independent realization which within it incorporates (often in segments an incorrect, but singular) the Serbian version of the link of Austro-Hungarian darkness, Turkish rudimentariness, Orthodox mysticism, pagan obsessiveness, Mediterranean yearning and beauty and that certain special attribute, the Belgrade quality, which encompasses all the described, and also touches upon the newest London and New York landscapes.

Your latest compositions increasingly point towards compressed, clear, even simple forms and a very complex inner work, primarily on the plane of harmony where the joy of being infused by details, micro-changes, can often be heard. Does that contrast between the external and the internal contribute to the fact that your oeuvre leaves neither the general nor the specialized audience indifferent? Does it contribute to the specific emotional tension without resolution, which lingers after the performing of your oeuvre?

In recent years, I have especially been intrigued by monody and two-voice pieces, as this is a musical syllable in which a melodic component comes to the fore the most. This approach to music is especially interesting as it opens the door to a different observation of the musical-spatial than the usual micropolyphonic, spectral, or some other similar way of dwelling in the “inter- or delayed-audial” spaces. It is with the focusing on the details in the ornamentation of the tone bearers of primary melodiousness, through the resonance of the interspaces of these “intertones” that the possibility of transcending a melody into color is uncovered, just as if incessantly intersecting from a figurative drawing into an abstract coloristic vision and back. As far as the form of my music is concerned, it can be compared to the film technique of sequencing images, but in the one possible, correct order, which attains its meaning in the mutual interchanging and

suffusing of music tensions and images. They, each in themselves, reflect autonomous musical events, and all together they represent small images of events which, like in some novel or *road movie*, make up one unique happening, which can be compared to a voyage.

During two decades of creating, you have touched upon all the most important symphonic, chamber and music-scenic genres. Do you accept theatricalization, specificity, as your trademark?

I don't experience my music as scenic (except for the opera and applied music). My impulse in composing is always exclusively aural, and all the extra-aural elements, as for example the title or the explication, come at the end. They are always a consequence, a need for description, and not the cause. I think that the music of Messiaen, in itself, would never be appreciated as spiritual if there were no title, explanation and biographical elements. It is, then again, an old and well-known fact that music by itself expresses nothing but itself. However, as I have already said, there is a specific narrative in my music (this is a different narrative as it never works with motifs), which transcends into the poetic in the way of fairy tales, fantasies, magic realism or science fiction, not using any means of comparison with poetry or visual art, but exclusively the process of a musical event.

Among your oeuvre, the opera Zora D holds a special place, and you are also one of the libretto authors. The simultaneous events on the scene, leaps through time and space, the thrilling interchanging of the real and the surreal acquire in your opera a suggestiveness and a fantasy close to the cinematographic experiences of a Greenaway, let's say. Please clue us into your visual, film and art identification.

I cannot speak about identifications, but I can recognize similar artistic impulses in some films by Lars von Trier, Akira Kurosawa, Stanley Kubrick, Alfred Hitchcock, Ingmar Bergman, Saša Petrović, Guillermo del Toro, Kim Ki-duk, David Lynch, in the theatrical shows by Richard Jones, Bob Wilson, in the visual stories by Hieronymus Bosch and Peter Bruegel, but also Giorgio de Chirico, Mihail Petrov, Bill Viola...

The heroine of your opera sets her work on fire. Which references guided you during the stressing of this libretto detail?

The idea of burning the poems comes from the TV screenplay by Dušan Ristić, which the libretto was based on. The function of this idea in the story is to describe in a simple way the capriciousness and specificity of the imaginary heroine, as well as to enable the story-telling of the mystery of *Zora D* in present times.

In your interviews, you often and in different contexts mention a pendulum. I have the impression that in your instrumental compositions, from The Scenes from Picars and others, I can hear the ticking of the pendulum, often deregulated, inclined to break off but inexorable. A metaphor for the passing of time, the flowing of blood, the demented, internal, present, past time?

Usually I mentioned the pendulum in the context of historical-culturological-sociological changes in Serbia. However, as my music is particularly marked by a specific rhythm, I suppose that this gamboling pulsating of music can sometimes be associated with the movements of a pendulum.

Isidora Žebeljan (1967)

Ms Žebeljan completed her graduate and postgraduate studies of composition at the Department for composition and orchestration at the Faculty of Music Art in Belgrade, in the class of Professor Vlastimir Trajković. During her studies, she was a member of a group of young composers, “The Seven Majestic Ones”, who in an innovative and unconventional way presented their music. From 1993 she worked as an assistant professor at the Department for composition and orchestration of the FMU in Belgrade, and from 2002, she is a docent at the same department. Isidora Žebeljan has until now written 25 compositions for different instrumental, vocal-instrumental, and vocal ensembles: from compositions for a solo instrument, to chamber and symphonic music, to an opera. Her music has been performed at concerts and festivals in Serbia, the ex-Yugoslavia, as well as in Great Britain (the Barbican Center, Sadler's Wells Theatre, National Gallery, Wigmore Hall, the Royal College of Music – London), Italy (Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea - Rome, Teatro dell'Elfo – Milano, Teatro piccolo Arsenale – Venice, Auditorium RAI Torino), Holland (the Music Center De Ijsbreker, the Frascati Theater – Amsterdam), Austria (Wiener Kammeroper), the USA (Center for New Music, University of Iowa), and France. The music of Isidora Žebeljan has been performed by renowned world ensembles such as *The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields* from London, the RAI orchestra from Torino, *London Brass*, *Brodsky Quartet*, *Nieuw Ensemble* from Amsterdam. She has cooperated with world-renowned artists, such as opera director David Pountney, violinist and conductor Cristoph Poppen, conductor Lorraine Vaillancourt and video-artist Bill Viola.

Zora D is the first Serbian opera to have its world premiere in another country (Amsterdam, June 2003) and the first Serbian opera performed overseas since 1935, when the opera *Koštana* by Konjović was performed in Prague. *Zora D* was commissioned by the Genesis Foundation from London. The composition *Song of a traveler at night* is the first musical oeuvre of a Serbian composer to be commissioned by and written for the ensemble *The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields* from London. This composition is on the permanent repertoire of this world-renowned ensemble, written for the Genesis foundation on the occasion of opening the exhibition *The Passions* of one of the greatest video-artists of the time, Bill Viola. As a commission by the art director of the Venetian Biennale, Isidora Žebeljan composed the work *The horses of St. Marco, an illumination for a symphonic orchestra*, which premiered at the Venetian Biennale on October 22, 2004 and was performed by the symphonic orchestra *Friuli di Venezia Giulia*, conducted by Cristoph Poppen from Germany. The ensemble *London Brass* commissioned the composition *Ghost from a pumpkin, an incantation for a brass quintet*, which premiered on March 1, 2006 in the Royal College of Music concert hall in London.

Isidora Žebeljan is also one of the most prominent contemporary Serbian composers of theater and film music. Until now, she has composed music for over 30 theatrical performances in the production of leading theaters in Serbia and Montenegro. She became a corresponding member of the Serbian Academy of

Sciences and Arts at an elective assembly on November 2, 2006. The exclusive publisher of Isidora Žebeljan's music is BMG Ricordi Music Publishing.

Awards: the award of the International Tribune of Composers in 1993, the award "Vasilije Mokranjac" in 2001, the 2004 "Stevan Mokranjac" award, as well as three Sterija awards for the best theater music and four YUSTAT Biennale awards for the best original theater music.

The most significant compositions: *Selište*, an elegy for a string orchestra (BMG Ricordi); *Pep It Up*, a fantasy for soprano, piano, drums and string quintet; *Na Dunavu šajka*, a scene for soprano, piano, drums, and string quintet; *The scenes from Picars – sinfonia in tre movimenti* for symphony orchestra; *Rukoveti*, five songs for soprano and orchestra; *Zora D*, an opera in one act; *Song of a traveler at night*, for clarinet and string quartet (BMG Ricordi); *The horses of St. Marco, an illumination for a symphony orchestra* (BMG Ricordi); *Skomraška igra*, for chamber orchestra (BMG Ricordi); *Ghost from a pumpkin, an incantation for a brass quintet* (BMG Ricordi); *Nove Ladine pesme*, for female voice and string orchestra (BMG Ricordi).

(Source: sr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isidora_Žebeljan)

Translated by Elizabeta Holt