
VIEWS

Article received on October 7th 2016
Article accepted on November 28th 2016
UDC: 78.091.4

Ivan Brkljačić*

University of Arts in Belgrade
Faculty of Music, Department of Music Theory

A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE: *INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF COMPOSERS*

In the spirit of Federico Fellini's film *Amarcord*, which is Romagna for "I remember", during final preparations for the beginning of the jubilee 25th International Review of Composers, I am putting together this personal overview of this major, in fact, only festival of contemporary art music in Serbia, with which I have been affiliated, implicitly or explicitly, for just under a quarter of a century.

The International Review of Composers demonstrates its significance on the basis of several quite important phenomena. In the first place, by virtue of being a natural continuation of former Yugoslavia's broadly conceived *Forum of Musical Creativity*, which was held every year, starting from the early 1960s, in Opatija (in what is now Croatia), the Review stands on quite firm foundations. Moreover, greater significance still lies in the inexhaustible power of contemporary Serbian composers, whose rich oeuvres, most of which were indeed first tested at the Review, put them on a par with any major contemporary composer in the world. Finally, the Review's significance also lies in the fact that the

* Author contact information: dbrkljadic@sbb.rs

Review, as a filter, facilitates an easier, more effective, and more far-reaching dissemination of Serbian contemporary art music abroad, to new audiences, to new soloists, ensembles, and orchestras, to whom it would otherwise remain unknown. Attesting to that is the fact that over the past seven, eight, or nine years, the Review's calls for scores have reached farther and farther, all the way to Australia, New Zealand, East Asia, South America, etc., resulting in new scores of contemporary art music coming to Belgrade from these remote parts of the world.

Putting together this personal overview with a desire to present the Review through a number of autobiographical episodes, with an inevitable dose of the subjective and the emotional, I will try to offer a view of this festival in a way it deserves. With openness, warmth, and authenticity.

I was first introduced to the music event called the *International Review of Composers* in spring 1993, when, as a secondary school student at the Dr Vojislav Vučković School of Music, I seriously began to contemplate studying composition and pursuing a future in contemporary art music. I remember that my harmony teacher at the time, Zorica Makevič, a musicologist, suggested that I should find the time to go to at least one Review concert to be held in Sremski Karlovci and Novi Sad. At the time, that seemed rather complicated to me, so I decided not to take her suggestion. It was only two years later that I got acquainted with the Review, as a first-year student of music composition. I remember that by that time, the Review had already moved to Belgrade's Sava Centre. Also, I remember that I did not miss a single concert, a single performance of music by my elder colleagues and professors, and that it was very important for me to persevere in that. It was not always easy, in every concert, but I did it. Among other things, it was then that I first heard of Vladan Radovanović, a multimedia artist and excellent composer, who later won an honorary doctorate from Ohio State University and the Stevan Mokranjac Award. That year, Radovanović was programme selector and left a rather strong mark in that role. I also remember that back then you could see ads about the Review on big white sheets hung up at Zeleni Venac and around the New Belgrade Town Hall. From today's perspective, that probably seems surreal and practically impossible.

I had to wait for an opportunity to hear my own music performed at the Review for a long time. Already at the end of my third year at the university a piece of mine was selected – my Variations on Gershwin's *Summertime* for string orchestra, but in the end, due to insufficient funding, it did not happen. Over the next three years, it was similar with the première of my wind quintet titled *Flobclhoffy*, which was selected all three times, but then, first, in 1998, again due to insufficient funding, it was not included in any of the concerts; then, in 1999,

it was thwarted by NATO bombs; and, finally, in 2000, I had to withdraw the score myself, because the performers did not deign to properly read the score, not even for the dress rehearsal. During those final years of the 20th century, the Review was held in the old part of Belgrade, for the most part in the old building of the Belgrade Philharmonic.

But let me return to my personal chronology. In the opening years of the 21st century, my personal misfortunes with the Review continued. A real shock came when my piano concerto *IT!* was included in the selection of the 2002 Review, but then, at the last moment, the Finnish conductor invited to lead the gala opening of the festival at the Great Hall of the Kolarac Endowment decided to perform not all of the six selected pieces, but only five. This led the five-member selection committee to conclude that Brkljačić should, again, wait a bit longer for his first appearance at the Review. Quite displeased with the sequence of events, which was only escalating, I gradually began to distance myself from such a hostile environment and unsavoury atmosphere, which would not allow me to communicate my own artistic expression. The following year, in 2003, when I was expecting yet another surprise, my first appearance at the Review nonetheless finally occurred. In its shortest edition to date, the so-called “zip”. Review took place in mid May 2003 in the span of a single day, at Belgrade’s Students’ Cultural Centre. It was a sort of marathon Review, with several concerts running back to back, beset by, in my opinion, too many compromises. Those compromises concerned concert times, the venue itself, performers, the quality of the works featured, the audience, and, finally, the festival itself. My piece for solo guitar, titled *BIS*, was performed by Vera Ogrizović. Despite this modest breakthrough, I was still dissatisfied, unhappy, even hurt.

However, starting from the following year, 2004, my bad streak with the Review finally ended. That brick wall, which had been too thick to break through, was apparently breached by my initial appearance and from then on, I could only move forward. Five Review performances of newly written pieces in the following three years. First, there was the collaboration with the Slavko Osterc Trio from Slovenia, who performed my piece *Cutting Edge* (incidentally, the piece features a dedication inspired by my previous experiences with Belgrade festivals) and the première of my orchestral piece *When the Curtain Rises SEVEN Times*, with conductor Biljana Radovanović and the Symphony Orchestra of the Serbian Broadcasting Corporation. That year, mortar was falling off from the ceiling of the great hall. Although enough orchestral rehearsals were scheduled, they took place in totally unbearable conditions, with rather angry musicians. At one point, we agreed to cancel the concert, but Marija Kovač, who was president of the Composers’ Association of Serbia at the time, used her authority to prevent that and the concert went ahead. Both premières gave me much joy. Fol-

lowing the Belgrade première, the Slovenians performed the piece throughout Europe, even as far afield as Rio de Janeiro, where they performed it on two occasions. The following year, the orchestral piece brought me my biggest award yet, the Stevan Mokranjac Award. Then, 2005 saw performances of *Jinx*, a work for chamber ensemble, with the New Music Ensemble from Serbia, and ...*in the blink of an eye*... for violoncello and piano, with the Hofman-Sretenović Duo. Finally, in 2006, there was the première of *Fliza* for flute and chamber string orchestra, with Liza Havlina-Prešiček and the Belgrade Strings. My improving fortunes during those three years were quite disproportionate to the state of the Review itself. Following the 2003 zip.Review, vanity among artists from all sides proliferated and grew. In a short span of time, soloists, then ensembles, the audience, and then composers themselves, one by one, gave up on the Review, not counting on it at all anymore, and leaving it on its deathbed. Practically everyone or almost everyone had accepted that the next year, the Review would not happen. Everyone just shrugged, under the pressure of impotence, inexplicably resigned to the hopeless situation wherein we all found ourselves together. Still, owing to the enthusiasm of a handful of people who were extending the Review its last lifeline, organising it in the cinema hall of Belgrade's Cultural Centre, in totally impossible conditions, the Review reached its 15th edition in November 2006 (it was then that the Review had to be moved from May to November) and it seemed as if after that, the festival would live no more. It seemed as if it was all over.

Then, in early 2007, I had a call from composer Ivana Stefanović, at the time the president of the Composers' Association of Serbia, who said to me the following key words: "Let's save the Review!". As soon as I got off the phone, I realised that if we allowed the Review to expire, establishing a new review would cost us much more and would be much more difficult than preserving the existing Review, whatever its condition at the time. From experience, as well as from literature, I knew that destroying something in an instant was always a possibility, whereas building entailed willpower, time, good organisation, and, inevitably, money. I realised that someone had to step up for the common good, because if we could generate an atmosphere that would be beneficial for everybody, this would automatically enable personal progress as well. I decided to take on collective responsibility myself and agreed to act from then on as the Review's artistic programme selector. I immediately sketched out the next Review, to be held six months from that moment, as a retrospective, with the desire to re-assemble the best works from the previous 15 years. I also "recruited" whatever forces were available in Belgrade's artistic milieu at the time: the Belgrade Philharmonic, the Orchestra and Choir of the Serbian Broadcasting Corporation, the St. George Strings, Dušan Skovran Chamber String Orchestra, Rubicon String

Quartet, the conductors Bojan Sudić, Premil Petrović, Biljana Radovanović, and Milan Nedeljković, our finest solo instrumentalists, and I initiated the revival of the New Music Ensemble. From that moment on, over the next nine years that I spent affiliated with the Review as its programme selector, I can proudly say that, crucially, composers have returned to a festival that naturally belongs to them. In my opinion, it is only normal and expected that at least once a year, every Serbian composer should appear in the Review selection with new pieces. In addition to composers, performing musicians and ensembles have also returned to the Review. During the past nine years, the number of soloists has exceeded 100, so I will only mention some of the ensembles and orchestras we featured: the Ensemble Alternance from Paris, the Sonanza Ensemble from Stockholm, LEN from Vilnius, Klangforum Wien, Forbidden City Chamber Orchestra from Beijing, the Cantus Ensemble from Zagreb, etc.; from Serbia, I should mention the following: the Construction Site New Music Ensemble, TAJJ, the Accordion Orchestra Kragujevac, St. George Strings, Dušan Skovran Chamber String Orchestra, the choirs Obilić, Liceum, Collegium musicum, etc. Most importantly, the Review has regained its old audience and keeps forming new audiences. Today, in our city, with its ample cultural offer, there are many who look forward to that part of the year when our festival takes place. Thankfully, no one has to worry anymore that it could be otherwise.

Over the past 25 years, numerous works by some of the most renowned authors could be heard at the Review. They include Louis Andriessen, George Crumb, György Ligeti, Giacinto Scelsi, Salvatore Sciarrino... Similarly, this year's festival featured works by Pierre Boulez, Leo Brouwer, Luciano Berio, etc.

And yet, in spring 2014, the then Committee for Allocating Funds to Cultural Events of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia made a decision without precedent. They decided to allocate no funding to the Review whatsoever, leaving it to fend for itself to the best of its abilities. The decision provoked a strong reaction from those who were running the Review, including myself. We decided to respond with our strongest suit: all the pieces that had won the Stevan Mokranjac Award over the previous 20 years. Although deprived of funding, that year, by presenting works by all of the awarded composers, the Review survived and shone in all its glory.

With its new selector, the composer and musicologist Branka Popović, the festival certainly has a bright future. Above all, her huge knowledge in the domain of contemporary art music, unwavering dedication, and inborn concern for every selected piece entirely attest to that.

I would conclude this overview with lines by our Nobel Prize laureate Ivo Andrić, borrowed from his masterpiece *Signs by the Roadside*, which, in my

opinion, might be taken to refer to the very essence of the International Review of Composers:

I used to know a man who could find a mean word or two for whatever he did not possess or could not understand.

Between apprehension that something might happen and the hope that it will not there is more space than one thinks. In that narrow, hard, barren, and dark space many of us spend their entire lifetime.

P.S.: Let me paraphrase the line with which I concluded my *Word from the Programme Selector*, which was published in the Festival's Programme Booklets every year from 2007 to 2015: "As before, looking forward to a brighter future, I say to the Review: good luck!"

September 2016