Musicology Today

Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest

Volume 7 Issue 3 (27) July-September 2016

Title: Continuities and Discontinuities in Serbian Music, 1930-1950

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Source: Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest / Volume 7 / Issue 3 (27) / July-September 2016, pp 229-238

Link to this article: musicologytoday.ro/27/MT27studiesMilin.pdf

How to cite this article: Melita Milin, "Continuities and Discontinuities in Serbian Music, 1930-1950", *Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest,* 7/3 (27) (2016), 229-238.

Published by: Editura Universității Naționale de Muzică București

Musicology Today: Journal of the National University of Music Bucharest is indexed by EBSCO, RILM, and ERIH PLUS

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Continuities and Discontinuities in Serbian Music, 1930–1950

Keywords: socialist realism, national music, Prague group

Socialist realism, that determined the post-World War II development of Serbian/Yugoslav music in a decisive way, was not established on a completely unprepared ground. It had its pre-history in the ideas and works of Vojislav Vučković (1910–1942), one of just three or four Serbian composers active in pre-war times who put their creativity into the service of the communist ideology. His strivings can be observed in the context of the movements of so-called "Social Art" and "Social Literature" in particular, that were animated by the activities of a number of inter-war writers and painters. The wider context of his engagement was the Serbian (and also the Yugoslav) inter-war musical scene that was hastily being modernised through integration of elements of Impressionism and Expressionism, the dominant orientation however being a national one, except in Slovenia. For that reason, the appearance during the 1930s of a generation of very young composers (with Vučković as one of the major figures), who were resolutely non-nationally and also avant-garde-oriented, had an effect of a real rupture, however short-lived it was.

Although coming from a well-off family, Vučković displayed an early concern for the poor and disadvantaged. However, he did not receive a primary impulse for composing socially engaged music in Belgrade, his home town, but in Prague, where he went to study composition in Rudolf Karel's class at the Master school of the Conservatory (1929–1933), and also musicology at Charles University—not accidently, his doctoral thesis was dedicated to the problem of *Music as a Means of Propaganda* (1934). During his student years in Prague he came into contact with Marxist ideology and became interested in politics, which was made easier there than in Serbia/Yugoslavia, since the

Communist party was legal in Czechoslovakia, whereas it was forbidden in Yugoslavia throughout the inter-war period. Vučković continued secretly his communist activities after he had returned to Belgrade in 1934, which was quite dangerous, as was proven by his short incarceration in the next year.

As already stated, Vučković was almost alone among his contemporary musicians in his inclination towards the communist ideology. He was passionately dedicated to his ideology, whereas most of the others had just more or less sympathy for leftist ideas: all these positionings should be of course viewed in the context of the growing threat coming from Nazi Germany in the years preceding World War II. Writers and artists who belonged to the movement of "Social Art" thus paved the way to post-war socialist realism, that would be imposed by the new communist rulers. Since Vučković was killed by the occupational Nazi police in 1942, it could only be supposed that after the war, when the communist regime was imposed in Yugoslavia, he would have become a communist propagandist in the field of culture and more specifically music, like some of his co-fighters did.

During his studies in Prague, Vučković and several of compatriots who also studied at the Master school of the Conservatory, were all interested in most advanced and some even in quite radical trends. They came with little knowledge of harmony and composition, in their early twenties, and were received in the classes of distinguished composers such as Rudolf Karel, Josef Suk, Karel Boleslav Jirák, some students also being driven to the class of quarter-tone music led by Alois Hába. Those teachers were quite liberal towards their students, maybe even more towards those coming from other countries, such as Yugoslavia. Especially Hába acted as a propagandist of the extreme leftist approach in both political ideology and music composition. As a result of that, some—not all—Serbian students adopted atonal and athematic writing, having been inspired by the works of pre-dodecaphonic Arnold Schoenberg's works, also by those of early Paul Hindemith, and certainly those of Hába himself, particularly by his microtonal works. As is well known, according to ideological teaching of that time, musical radicalism was a natural expression of revolutionary ideas institutionalised in USSR until the mid-1930s.

During the 1930s the cultural climate in Prague was such, that even avant-garde works could find their way (not always easily though) to the concert halls and be performed and later have critical echoes in the press. So, for instance, the performance of the first work composed by Ljubica Marić (1909–2003) in Suk's class—the String Quartet—inspired a critic to write that it was a piece of "powerful creative potency and independence that

gives evidence of a musical temperament and mature intelligence."[1] Another early work of Marić's, the Wind Quintet, was likewise praised for its "marked maturity of expression, coupled by an inventive concentration supported by harmonic logic in thinking and clear idea of sound."[2] The former work of Marić has been lost, but the latter is an atonal and athematic work, requiring novel ways of listening and appreciation. Ljubica Marić also experimented with quarter-tone music and she was not alone in this, as some of her compatriots did the same—Dragutin Čolić and Milan Ristić, among others. As regards 12-tone music, it proved to be less attractive, so that only Čolić and Ristić investigated that method in a small number of their works.

There were also, of course, students who were by nature less inclined towards experiments (Vukdragović, Logar, Milošević, Rajičić) and who made certain compromises between traditional and avant-garde methods. They displayed a basic anti-romantic position but never went too far in breaking links with the past.

Besides members of the above so-called "Prague group," there were also certain composers who were very much inclined to new musical tendencies, although mainly to the less radical ones. Rikard Švarc (1897–1942) who had studied in Joseph Marx' and afterwards in Alban Berg's class at the Vienna Conservatory, wished to make the works of his teacher and his teacher's teacher Arnold Schoenberg, more known and appreciated by the Serbian public. His own works were however much less modernist. Milenko Živković (1901–1964) should be also mentioned here, but we shall go back to him after a short inspection of Vučković's ideas regarding the role of music in society, and connected with that, the ideological functionalisation of music in the wished direction.

It is logical that, having in mind Vučković's pleading for politically engaged music, he should have been against the idea of absolute music and the views of his contemporaries who were oriented towards constructivism and neoclassicism and who maintained that music did not have a purpose beyond itself. In his opinion, only the technically most advanced means could be used for reaching the goal of making a right impact on the audiences, whereas the genres he regarded as most appropriate for this goal were chamber opera, *Zeitstück-Revue* and cartoon (he himself never composed any work of those

[1] *Narodní osvobozeni* [National Liberation], Prague, 3.7.1931 (no other data about the article are available).
[2] Karel Hába, "Z pražske koncertni síné: Koncert Spolku pro moderni hudbu" [From Prague Concert Halls: The Concert of the Society for Modern Music] (IV), *Ceskoslovenska republika* [Czechoslovak Republic], 13.5.1932.

genres). By holding the view that ultra-modernism in music combined with an accessible medium like *Zeitstück-Revue* could produce works that would serve the cause of communist ideals, Vučković departed from the views dominant in Marxist millieux of his times, such as were those of Anatoly Lunacharsky and Georg Lukács. It should be added that he did not accept jazz music, a genre typical for *Zeitstück-Revues*, regarding it as "stereotypical"; in fact, he aspired to some quite new music based on 12-tone music and athematism.

It was only several years later, from 1939 on, that Vučković finally changed his opinion on that point and began to write theoretical essays and compose music according to the principles of socialist realism, as had been propagated since 1934 in and from the Soviet Union. In accordance with that, he also changed radically his style of composing, beginning to apply the "advices" coming from the Soviet cultural officials. So his writings started to focus on issues concerning the need to abandon "decadent formalism," and contribute instead to a "new musical realism," within "Soviet musical style." The results of those creative efforts made by Vučković were works of simplified conceptions, typical of socialist realism, such as the ballet *The Man Who Stole the Sun* (*Čovek koji je ukrao Sunce*, 1940, on the breakdown of the old world, after a short story by the Czech socially engaged poet Jiří Wolker), two symphonic poems: *The Sunlit Road* (*Ozareni put*, 1940) for string orchestra, and *The Herald of the Storm* (*Vesnik bure*, 1941); also, his *Heroic Oratorio* (1942), left in sketches.

Although Vučković's elder contemporary Milenko Živković (1901–1964) was also left oriented, the two of them came into ideological conflict around 1933–1934, at the time Vučković and some other members of the "Prague group" were finishing their studies and returning to Belgrade. Živković himself had come back from his studies several years earlier and when the younger group arrived, certain ideological divergences between them proved to be sufficient for a quite harsh polemic on the pages of the journal *Zvuk* [The Sound]. The difference between their views on modern music and the aim of contemporary composing was so small, that one is naturally led to think that a certain creative rivalry between them was also on the scene.

Milenko Živković had acquired a very good musical education, first in Leipzig in the class of Hermann Grabner (1925–1929), then in Paris, in Schola cantorum (1930–31). He returned to Belgrade full of good intentions to improve the musical life in his hometown and contribute to its music production. In those early 1930s several other young composers of his age (Mihovil Logar, Predrag Milošević, Mihailo Vukdragović) were also back from their studies abroad (Prague), whereas the youngest group (Vojislav Vučković, Stanojlo Rajičić, Dragutin Čolić, Ljubica Marić) were still studying abroad at

the time. Feeling obliged to bring some fresh air of international modernist developments into the Belgrade musical life, he organised a meeting of a group of Belgrade composers on 5 June 1935. It is not clear which composers made that group whose goal was to promote modern music.[3] In his speech he expressed his view that contemporary artists could not be disinterested in the social and economic spheres of life.[4] The problem was that, probably because of too much work as professor and director of music schools, as well as secretary general of the South-Slav Choral federation, and editor of music journals, he was not able to devote enough time to composition. In the years following his return to Belgrade, i.e. in the early 1930s, he composed objectivistic works, densely polyphonic, polytonal and with irregular rhythms, such as *Symphonic Prologue* for orchestra (1932). Contrary to Vučković and the other composers of the "Prague group," he was inclined to creating a modern national music by using folk music in his works, but together they shared a concern for social and political conditions of the deprived.

Živković vehemently pleaded "against l'art-pour-l'artisme, individualism and dilettantism" and for directing all the energies to "creating a new musical language that would enable masses of people to come closer to the arts and enable them to understand highest artistic values."[5] Živković obviously wished to attain two goals: not only to modernise Serbian music, but also to make it more popular and closer to ordinary listeners. His texts did not (and could not) call openly on social and political radicalism, but he was obviously seriously inclined towards leftist measures in the sphere of culture. So, planning the founding of a new musical journal in the mid-1930s, he wrote a text of programmatic character in which he exposed his readiness "for decisive actions on a revolutionary basis . . . for new forms and authentic art of the soil, ethics and spiritual weft of social environment . . . ."[6]

In 1933 Živković cautiously welcomed avant-gardistic strivings of his younger colleagues, whom he designated—not entirely correctly—as being inspired by the works of Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók and Paul Hindemith, the "leading composers in the West,"[7] as he called them, but he also commented on the "strangeness and opacity" of certain new methods of composing they were using, which were easier to understand in the context of their existence

[3] Enriko Josif, *Milenko Živković*, (Belgrade: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti, 2009), 132.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 143.
[6] Ibid, 145.
[7] Ibid, 142.

in European metropoles because they were "on a higher cultural level," than when exposed in Belgrade.

An interesting and rather sharp polemic followed (in 1933) on the pages of the musical journal *Zvuk*, after a Manifesto signed by Vojislav Vučković and Ljubica Marić was published there; afterwards a review by Vučković and another by Marić alone were published in the same journal. The Manifesto had been read at the final session of the *Musikalisch-dramatische Arbeitstagung* dedicated to modern music, organised by Hermann Scherchen in Strasbourg in July–August 1933. According to the testimonies of Vučković and Marić (who were 23 and 24 years old at the time), when they finished reading their Manifesto, in which they expressed their critical judgment on contemporary music, which they found mainly "formalistic" and "inadequate to general class-based strivings of the masses," there was much excitement and heated debates in the hall after which they left the place. It should be added that in the last lines of the Manifesto there stood an insinuation on the "fascist character" of the Strasbourg festival because "very private ideas and through them ideas of different national groups were promoted."[8]

Another text by Vučković alone that appeared in one of the later issues of the same journal, was his review of the eleventh festival of modern music, held in Amsterdam in 1933. In it he attacked the organiser of the festival—the International Society of Contemporary Music—mainly because when selecting works to be performed it did not discriminate between "positive and negative directions, progressive and reactionary ones."[9] In the review he only praised the opera *Halewijn* of the Dutch composer Willem Pijper and the Wind Quintet of his friend Ljubica Marić, stating that "the Yugoslav and the Prague quarter-tone music group have come to the head of the Avant-garde musical movement of Europe."[10]

In the review of the *Musikalisch-dramatische Arbeitstagung*, published in the same issue of *Zvuk*, Ljubica Marić expressed similar views on contemporary music. She claimed that Schoenberg's Serenade op. 27 displayed a "senseless l'art-pour-l'artisme," and that Brecht–Hindemith's *Lehrstück* was composed "at the time when Brecht had not yet become class and ideologically oriented."[11]

[8] Ibid.
[9] Vučković, "XI festival moderne muzike u Amsterdamu" [The 11th Festival of Modern Music in Amsterdam], *Zvuk*, 12, 1933, 418.
[10] Ibid, 417.
[11] Ljubica Marić, "'Musikalisch-dramatische Arbeitstagung' u Strassburgu" ["Music-Dramatic Seminar" in Strasbourg], *Zvuk*, 12, 1933, 420–22.

These three articles induced Milenko Živković to send a trenchant text to the journal *Zvuk*, in which he designated Vučković and Marić (without naming them) as

> young reactionaries . . . whose theoretical and practical work do not correspond: while on the one hand they support the ideology of "social" art, on the other hand they write music in the spirit of an ultra-orthodox individualism and l'art-pour-l'art in a new clothing.[12]

Živković could not know at the time (1933–1934) that socialist realism would soon be proclaimed as official doctrine in the Soviet Union, but was obviously attempting to think logically. For him, introducing folk music into new works and keeping links with traditional musical thinking could guarantee impact on the broader public that did not understand avant-garde strivings.

In another article of the same time (1934), Živković makes comments on

> some of our musical scatterbrains, who have recently returned from their studies or are still there, who have broken links with their social and cultural environment and so deracinated fly around Schoenberg trying to sow seeds on the putrid soil of his art.[13]

It was quite easy to guess that that vitriolic text referred to Vučković and his colleagues from the Prague group.

Živković's attack irritated Vučković so much, that he responded in an article under the title "Musical fascism and its exponents among us."[14] He maintained there that his generation had broken all its ties with absolute music and that it was obvious that Živković was not acquainted with their work [i.e. the work of the Prague group members] on "Zeit-revue" and "voice bands." He also accused his opponent of demagogy because he had exposed his view that it was necessary that the peasant class, "being the most numerous, spiritually most productive and ethically most powerful one," becomes the leader of social changes. Being versed into Marxism, Vučković protested of course against such an idea, adding that the music of Stevan Mokranjac (1856–1914), "the father of Serbian national music," who had

[12] Milenko Živković, "Vraćanje osnovama" [A Retourn to the Foundations], *Zvuk*, 3, 1933, 102–09.
[13] Ibid.
[14] In *Zvuk*, 4, 1934, 131–35.

used folk music in almost all of his works, could not serve as a basis for a new realist music for the masses. In the following years Vučković, drawn by his political engagement, made a radical shift of position. Among other works, he composed a *Garland* (type of choral folk suite), 1941, genre inaugurated by Mokranjac, which was certainly a paradoxical turn of events.

The polemic continued,[15] but we shall leave it there, as the main points of the opponents have been presented.

The first years after World War II brought communist rule and with it, socialist realism as a doctrine to be implemented in all areas of art activities. As has already been said, Vučković was murdered by the Gestapo police in 1942. Other composers and music writers who had been communists or had sympathies for their ideas before the war, became prominent figures voicing the official propaganda: Mihailo Vukdragović, Oskar Danon, Stana Đuric-Klajn, and some others. Generally speaking, they did not abuse too much their new political power, restricting their ideological activities mostly to giving directions as to the "right way" of composing for the wider auditorium and suggesting "appropriate" genres, styles and themes. As we have seen earlier, Vučković had already announced the new direction before the war, and after 1944 additional "instructions" came from the USSR. All composers of the Prague group simplified their idiom, beginning to compose tonally and thematically, whereas the older generations were not much affected as their styles were on the average late romantic, with the exception of Josip Slavenski, whose language was more advanced, but who also felt the need to simplify it. The two other major figures, Petar Konjović and Stevan Hristić, both born in the 1880s, did not even try to adapt to the new regulations, because their styles were not in opposition with the requirements of the cultural politicians. It is true that they did not compose revolutionary mass songs or cantatas, that having had no harmful consequences on their careers.

Impatiently awaiting the new socialist music, the authorities were not satisfied with the first contributions, so that they repeatedly observed that in the then current production there still existed the remains of "modernism," "decadence," "experimentalism," etc. and such designations, naturally, also carried their political weight. Newspapers and periodicals published warnings against "estrangement from one's own people." Their objective was to prevent from

[15] See for instance Melita Milin, "Napisi o avangardi u beogradskim muzickim casopisima izmedju dva svetska rata" [Writings About the Avant-Garde in Belgrade Music Journals Between the Two World Wars], in *Srpska avangarda u periodici* [Serbian Avant-Garde in Periodicals], edited by Vidosava Golubović and Staniša Tutnjević (Belgrade: Institut za književnost i umetnost), 1996, 479–92.

turning to current artistic tendencies in the West. Faced with mainly academic, impersonal and bloodless new works, official music critics did not put blame on the essentially wrong assumptions of the dogma they had been imposing, but on the insufficient commitment of composers in implementing them.

Luckily, the first, most revolutionary socialist realist phase lasted shorter than expected, due to the break between Tito and Stalin in 1948. In the following decade or so contradictory developments were evident on the musical, as well as the wider cultural scene, resulting from the shifting of Yugoslav foreign political orientation: while trying to adopt certain more democratic Western standards, Yugoslav leaders wished at the same time to maintain the communist character of their rule. In those turbulent times it was probably the youngest generation of composers, born in the inter-war times, that was the biggest victim of the lack of normal communication with the outer world. It could be therefore understood why the premiere of a piece inspired by Stravinskian neoclassicism in 1954 provoked quite a scandal because of its austere anti-romanticism. The piece, the chamber work *The List* (1954), was composed by Dušan Radić, still a student in Milenko Živković's class at the time.

In conclusion, it could be stated that socialist realist music proved to be a bridge between the pre-war and post-war period in Serbian/Yugoslav music, however different its status in both of them was. Before the war such a trend was an anomaly in the conventionally conceived historical development of musical thinking, as it was defined by an extra-musical, basically political program. At any rate, it was tolerated in the pre-war democratic Serbia/Yugoslavia, especially as it did not have a potential for making a real revolutionary impact on a wider public, the more so since the public of art music was quite restricted. The imposition of socialist realism after the war by the new communist rulers had a detrimental effect on Serbian art music because the free choice of creative thinking in music was prevented, such a situation being especially harmful for a young musical culture as was the Serbian. The relative shortness of the period—around four–five years, followed by several years of its gradually diminishing importance after the political U-turn of 1948–1949—was to blame for the great majority of the composers being unprepared for the creative reception of the post-war avant-garde musical currents, at the time, around 1960, when it became acceptable to join the then contemporary Western trends. So, it could be concluded that although socialist realism bridged indeed the pre- and post-war Serbian music, it also proved to be a serious cause of discontinuity in the development of the national music, the effects of which took more than two decades (until around 1965) to be overcome.

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