

Article received on December 12, 2004
UDC 792.54 (497.11)

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THE LATEST SERBIAN OPERA

An Essay on Phantasms of Tradition, Gender Identities And Representation in the Musical Theatre

Examining the ways in which social systems, texts and contexts influenced the world of opera, we came across the following example from the history of opera in Serbia, embodied in the words of Oskar Danon, a long-time director of the Belgrade Opera. In one of his writings he manifestly instructs how opera should respond to the great regulating social metatext of the 1950's: "Are we to perform before this new audience of ours Kženek's opera *Skok preko senke* (*A Leap Over the Shadow*) with its choir of sexual psychopaths or Brando's opera *Mašinovodja Hopkins* (*Engineer Hopkins*) with murderers and erotomaniacs or Hindemith's *Saint Suzanne*...? No! We shall take care of this new audience of ours. We shall educate it; we shall raise it on a genuine work of art. Our new reality, the enormous élan and enthusiasm of our peoples who are laying the foundations of socialism, efforts of the youth, new railroads, factories and work sites, all this is waiting to become the content of a work of art, cantata, opera and symphony".¹ The ideological context of today's post-socialist Serbia is different, yet the need for the opera to reflect the dominant ideological metatext of society can still be read from opera works.²

Although it would be wrong to say that operatic art took up an important position in Serbian culture (as confirmed by the fact that this art to date has not been institutionalized, not even architecturally), the past four years nonetheless witnessed the performing of three opera works by domestic authors – *DreamOpera* (2001, Piran, Slovenia) by Jasna Veličković (1974), *Narcis i Eho* [*Narcissus and Echo*] (2002, Belgrade) by Anja Djordjević (1970) and *Zora D.* (2002, Amsterdam) by Isidora Žebeljan (1967).³ Despite the fact that none had been premiered on the opera stage, these works formed the scene of contemporary opera in our country and thus created a significant "platform" for its longed-for institutionalization. Bearing in mind the successful performances of *DreamOpera* and *Zora D.* abroad, we still believe that, like the opera *Narcis i Eho*, they are primarily important for the world of contemporary opera in Serbia, where their role is fundamental.⁴

¹ Oskar Danon, *Uloga savremene muzike u društvu*, Muzika, 1, 1948. Cited from: Gorica Pilipović, *Tematika srpskih opera*, Teatron, nos. 124-125, Belgrade, autumn-winter 2003.

² I wrote more thoroughly about the scene of contemporary Serbian opera and its role and function in society in the text "Ekonomija operске traume", Teatron, nos. 124-125, Belgrade, autumn-winter 2003.

³ Dates and place names in brackets refer to world premieres of the works.

⁴ Having advertised itself as a successful commission by the *Genesis Foundation* of London and a co-production with *Opera Studio Nederland* for its Amsterdam premiere on June 15, 2003 and its Vienna performances with

Although the plot of the one-act chamber opera *Zora D.* is set in the Belgrade of the 1930's, the subject of Isidora Žebeljan's work are not the dominant ideologies in Serbia at the time. The context of the Serbian musical and theatrical scene with which this opera "networked" concerns Serbian post-socialist society in transition, at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century, in which culture was to a great extent subordinated to the favoured phantasm of tradition. That phantasm is most explicitly projected to those institutions of society that support it the strongest – the church and the army. However, political shifts towards the ideals of traditional and national values led to a forming of artistic production that may, in terms of many of its features, be regarded in analogy with the thriving of romanticism and ideals that were defended by it in the 19th century. Often composers turn to the musically national in a manner resembling the fascination of Romantic composers of national schools with folkloric heritage. Still, making open references, or the desire to make references to the social context in works, like Danon's mentioned example, is not common in Serbian music. Usually the works allow for readings of the meanings that had been unintentionally impressed in them.

The composer's intentions regarding the opera *Zora D.* can be read from a text published in the programme booklet.⁵ The way in which Isidora Žebeljan discusses possible techniques of composing opera today identifies the coordinates of her opera poetics, although this text can also be interpreted as a representation of the concept of masterpiece, inaugurated in the 19th century.⁶ The autopoietic theoretical text is incorporated in a series of positivistic views, formed "as a result of identifying an irrational artistic gesture",⁷ stated almost in the form of a manifesto and, it seems, with the aim to call attention to the "authentic" opera work. In a didactic, impulsive tone, typical of the manifesto, Isidora Žebeljan analyzes the poetics of music and opera classics exclusive almost to the first half of the 20th century⁸ and assumes a critical attitude to some of them: "It is clear that Berg, and particularly Schoenberg, took music in the direction of the long surpassed conservative stereotypes because this music was, even in its absolute form, backward and old-fashioned, seeing as its poetics had always been based on obsolete Romantic poetics of the eternally Suffering, regardless of the free-

the Vienna Chamber Opera (premiered on October 15, 2003), *Zora D.*, an opera with a prologue and seven scenes, rightfully enjoyed the strong support of the biggest and most important domestic festival of classical music – BEMUS. This support was confirmed by presenting Isidora Žebeljan the Mokranjac Award of the Serbian Composers' Association in 2003 for her opera *Zora D.*. The outstanding production that opened the 36th BEMUS, in terms of interpretation by instrumentalists and soloists and the director's concept, has set new standards of professionalism for the domestic opera.

⁵ Isidora Žebeljan, *O mogućem načinu komponovanja opere danas*, from the programme booklet for the opera *Zora D.*, BEMUS, 2004.

⁶ The imperative of a masterpiece is that it should be perfect, that it should be a standard for its genre. It promotes universal values, axioms that are not supposed to be questioned.

⁷ Isidora Žebeljan, op. cit.

⁸ The composer mentions Michael Nyman and Philip Glass in her text, but does not express a closer view on their opera poetics.

tonal, atonal, i.e. dodecaphonic or serial attire. This also applies to their opera music.”⁹ Unlike her attitudes towards Berg’s and Schoenberg’s music, the composer finds positive role models in the music of Prokofiev, Stravinsky and de Falla and especially Leos Janacek: “Her genius is expressed through superior musicality of the sung and perhaps even more so the instrumental parts, it bridges numerous obstacles placed by the dramatic material itself”. In her text the author concludes that “the greatest and rarest gift of the art of composing is melodic invention (...)” and that “(...) melodic invention is the most important element in opera production”¹⁰. Contrary to our expectations, we were denied the author’s view on the current, contemporary opera music and production, and we realize that, except in directing, the author does not intentionally enter into controversial argument with works of postmodernist opera in this piece.

The libretto for the opera *Zora D.* was written by Isidora and Milica Žebeljan and Borislav Čičovački.¹¹ The plot is set in Belgrade in the present and in the 1930’s. The title character of the opera, the heroine, is a mysterious fictional poetess Zora Dulijan who lived in Belgrade at the beginning of the last century. One of the main reasons for her mysteriousness is the fact that her songs were burnt after being read once in public. Only the legend/myth and a poem that remained after her mysterious disappearance can thus substantiate her poetic existence. The poem is actually a paraphrase of Jovan Dučić’s *Jablanovi (Poplars)*. The identities are fictional, they are constructs. If this perspective is our starting point for analyzing the libretto of the opera *Zora D.*, what almost imposes itself as a theoretical tool is the theory of gender. How is the female and how is the male identity constructed/performed in culture through the libretto of the opera *Zora D.*? Having had an affair with Jovan, the fiancé of her best friend Vida (an infidelity cliché of the middle class), Zora disappears and Jovan commits suicide. The female subject, creatively identified with the identity of a man, is the one who suffers from the inability to attain (love) and who thereafter artistically vanishes altogether. It is provocative to speculate on the mechanisms of construction of the gender identity of a poetess who produces “masculine writing”. How did the fictional author, according to the librettists, “inscribe” her gender identity in her poetry, when the only poem we think is hers is actually Dučić’s? Is what we have here perhaps a criticism by the librettists of the concept of *feminine writing* and their emphasizing its (im)possibilities? Or a demonstration of the mechanisms on which the dominant patriarchal culture in Serbia then operated and still operates?

The author insists on a libretto technique pivoting on the continual “promiscuity” of the characters interpreted by vocal soloists – Antiquarian, Foreigner, Professor Kostić and Jovan are all played by the same vocalist; Mina, Zora and the Woman with a silver-coloured shawl are played by

⁹ Isidora Žebeljan, op. cit.

¹⁰ Isidora Žebeljan, op. cit.

the same vocalist, while Old and Young Vida are played by different vocal soloists. They are soprano, baritone and two mezzo-sopranos, dramatic and lyrical.¹² The action takes place in the past and present alike, and Vida's memories and nightmares are actually a constant impetus for the action. In the present the young Mina searches for her own identity, trying to discover the contexts within which the actors of the drama that had taken place between Zora, Vida and Jovan moved. The very fact that constant changes of identity of the performers/roles take place on the stage means that identity is considered as a construct.

Another "sore spot" of the world of opera can be analyzed from the perspective of the work *Zora D.*, namely representing the woman or the figure of a woman as a victim. The critical approach to this problem was ironically elaborated by Peter Greenaway and Louis Andriessen in the opera *Rosa, The Death of a Composer*: "It is about criticism, we are very critical of the figure of the woman victim, which is, for example, characteristic of *Madame Butterfly*, *Carmen* and so on. We have deliberately stressed this in *Rosa*, our intention being to deeply humiliate the woman in order to show that the same thing has been happening in operas for hundreds of years now."¹³ In the opera *Zora D.* all female characters are portrayed as victims – Zora is a victim of unfulfilled love both as an individual and an artist; her love of creating poetry did not prevail over her emotional breakdown. Vida, Zora's best friend, will also be a victim of her fiancé's infidelity for the rest of her life. She allowed this to turn her life into a nightmare. Mina, who is actually one of the modalities of the character of Zora, is a victim of insecurity about her own identity... Finally, Jovan is likewise a victim of emotional indecisiveness, but it seems that his character was used more as an impulse of the suffering and sacrificing of female characters than of his own breakdown, which was little insisted on in the libretto.

The play on identities also inspired the team of directors, David Pountney and Nicola Raab, who offered an autoreflexive staging of this opera. The scenography is minimal, yet skilfully layered. A series of curtains on which David Haneke's video works are projected screen one another and as the opera progresses, parts of the stage gradually become uncovered by the performers as the projections continue on the revealed, "delayed" projection spots. The key moment is when the last curtain appears on the stage, after which part of the curtain also falls down creating a voyeuristic crack through which on the stage there emerge the orchestra and the director. It is precisely this technique which points to Pountney's autoreflexive conception of the opera 'machine'.

¹¹ The libretto was based on a TV screenplay by Dušan Ristić. It includes texts by Miloš Crnjanski, Jovan Dučić and Milena Pavlović Barili. For the performances in Belgrade, the opera was translated into German, and in that same language it was performed in Amsterdam and Vienna.

¹² The intention of the author has not been to re-examine the status of conventional operatic voices in this work.

¹³ Jelena Novak, *Postkejdžijanska fascinacija operom*, Interview with Peter Greenaway, Belgrade, Teorija koja hoda no. 8 (to be published).

Pountney's direction successfully corresponds to the representational potentials of the score. Isidora Žebeljan's music is recognizable in terms of the two techniques she consistently employs: representation of extra-musical situations by musical means in keeping with the codes of representing film and theatre music, and representation of the signifier of the musically national of the Balkans. The composer aptly handles the representational codes relative to film and theatre music. Accordingly, Isidora Žebeljan's music language in the opera *Zora D.* abounds in codified situations that represent the extra-musical, especially emotions, by musical means. What the composer considers as particularly important is the "(...) ability to tell a story as a series of music-poetic situations", and that ability, she believes, cannot possibly be inherent in authors of atonal music. Therefore Žebeljan moves within tonal frameworks enriched by elements of a folkloric undertone. The dramaturgy of the libretto is very compatible with the music dramaturgy and the swift responding to developments in the libretto is facilitated by the fact that, with one exception, there are no rounded-off arias in music that could stop the music flow. The complex rhythmic component, "reinforced" by percussion, the changeable metrics and expressive orchestration¹⁴ allow for the music codes to be deftly adjusted to what takes place on the stage and in the libretto. The moments about the music of this opera that particularly attract theoretical attention are those in the fourth and sixth scenes when Vida turns on an old radio on which, as part of the opera illusion, we hear a recording of a fragment of the opera *Zora D.* (Jovan's voice and Zora's last song which torment Vida), which also makes for the autoreflexive networking of the work.

Writing about the music of this opera, again we come across imperatives of the phantasms of tradition in the environment in which this opera was created. First of all, what is noticeable from the very beginning of the score is that Isidora Žebeljan is playing with folklorisms¹⁵ and their signifiers. The use of different modal scales that oppose the major-minor system, chords of seconds, ostinatos, the specific use of ornaments, augmented seconds, ending the melody on the second degree, as well as mixed rhythms, are means often used in the music of this opera. Folklore has always been an analogue of the ancient, traditional in music and the use of folklorisms and their signifiers is certainly proof of the desire to reinvigorate, in this case, the music tradition of the Balkans. Isidora Žebeljan does not resort to using quotations, but rather to a successful simulation of different techniques inherent in a broadly defined Balkan folkloric tradition. Hence the music of her opera can also be understood as a

¹⁴ The make-up of the chamber ensemble for which this opera was written includes the following instruments: flute (piccolo and alto flute), clarinet (and bass clarinet), soprano and alto saxophone, bassoon, horn, trumpet, harp, piano, percussives, two violins, viola, violoncello and double bass.

¹⁵ By the term musical folklore we mean the traditional, orally/aurally transmitted, unwritten music culture of one people, entailing a subjective manner of performing that can be heard only once in its unchanged form. Music folklore is based on a model that is always transmitted in a slightly altered form. If written down, it actually ceases to exist because that way it has been deprived of one of its key features, changeability. The recording of folklore is a folklorism which has, being a derivative of folklore, greatly facilitated access to and work with folkloric elements.

collage of metafolkloric elements which, compared to Western contemporary music, nowadays holds a somewhat exotic position.¹⁶

In conclusion, we shall draw a parallel between Zora Dulijan's fictional creative dramas and Isidora Žebeljan's compositional work. Zora Dulijan performed her poems only once after which she would burn them. One of the problems of the contemporary music scene in general, and in our country in particular, where it is undergoing a major crisis, is that very often compositions of contemporary artists are performed only once after being commissioned. The works of Isidora Žebeljan boast a different position. Compared to the performing potentials of the opera *Narcis i Eho* or deconstructionist procedures applied in *DreamOpera*, the work *Zora D.*, drawing on the tradition of Serbian music, has an entirely different status and function, as well as position on the scene of contemporary Serbian opera which is in the process of forming. We are certain that fostering diversity will prompt consideration of the opera world in our country and create the impulses for its further development.

Translated by Dušan Zabrdac

¹⁶ "Any folklore music of local or regional origin... that was transferred to the urban bourgeois milieu where fantasies about national style are born will not, when removed from evocative theatrical or literary contexts... essentially be less exotic than an orientalism, which relates to it, but is known more widely because it has been adjusted to key schemes and instrumental colours of European artistic music". Cf. Carl Dahlhaus, "Nationalism and Music", in *Between Romanticism and Modernism, Four Studies in the Music of the Later Nineteenth Century*, trans. by Mary Whittal, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1980, pp. 79-101.