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**TEORIJA I PRAKSA SVEOBUHVAATNOG UMETNIČKOG DELA
(GESAMTKUNSTWERK-a) U 20. VEKU
(THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF THE TOTAL WORK OF ART
/GESAMTKUNSTWERK/ IN THE 20TH CENTURY)¹**

The master thesis entitled *Teorija i praksa sveobuhvatnog umetničkog dela (Gesamtkunstwerk) u 20. veku (The Theory and Practice of the Total Work of Art (Gesamtkunstwerk) in the 20th Century)* is dedicated to the complex problem of the creation and reception of art projects aspiring to the ideal of totality. Richard Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk is analyzed as a project created in the 19th century in interaction with contemporary social-political and artistic aspirations and tendencies. Several theoretical problems were observed during the analysis of its application in the 20th century. Firstly, Wagner himself developed and modified the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk throughout the decades of his artistic career. Already in the works of artists and theoreticians from the end of the 19th century, one can perceive a plurality of approaches to Wagner's work, references to different layers of his concept and heterogeneity of evaluation criteria. There was disagreement as to whether Gesamtkunstwerk was an unattainable ideal, a project one could strive to realize or a finished artistic product. The network of theoretical and practical approaches to Wagner's heritage became even more complex in the 20th century: the concept of Gesamtkunstwerk was emancipated from Wagner's original idea and applied not only to works that formally maintained a connection with Wagner's music dramas, but also to many other single-media and multimedia art forms, philosophical systems, models of social systems, etc. The problematics was further complicated by a stylistic-terminological incompatibility in different disciplines of history and theory of art, which primarily referred to the defining of modernism, as well as of avant-garde and related terms. What posed a special problem was the fact that artists and theoreticians dealing with Gesamtkunstwerk mostly did not define, in their works, the criteria by which they identified or implicitly understood someone else's or their own production as a continuation of this tradition. Consequently, it was necessary to examine

¹ The master thesis was defended at the Department of Musicology and Ethnomusicology of the Faculty of Music in Belgrade on October 2nd, 2005, before the following committee members: Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, Ph.D. (mentor), full professor; Miodrag Šuvaković, Ph.D. (co-mentor), full professor; Sonja Marinković, Ph.D., full professor; Vesna Mikić, Ph.D., assistant professor; Karel Turza, Ph.D., assistant professor.

numerous, often very different and contradictory, theoretical and practical approaches to this problematic, make a “list” of all artistic and inartistic works linked with Gesamtkunstwerk, create the theoretical framework for possible approaches to this concept and establish clear criteria by which the said artistic projects could (not) be considered to be Gesamtkunstwerk.

We chose to interpret Gesamtkunstwerk from the perspective of romanticism and modernism, as well as from the viewpoint of avant-garde theories in art and music avant-garde in particular. The first position was determined by the fact that the moment when Gesamtkunstwerk departed from the romantic stylistic continuum (without ever completely losing touch with it) and made a key contribution to the establishing of a new paradigm, modernism, proved to be particularly interesting and significant. In avant-garde theories Gesamtkunstwerk was not interpreted as a phenomenon that explicitly bore the characteristics of avant-garde work, but rather as a concept that, from its very inception, suggested a certain avant-garde charge, which was manifested differently in terms of form.

We attempted to determine: the causes that led to the tendency of 19th-century artists towards grandiose, utopian projects of a synthesis of arts; the way in which Wagner conceived and realized his concept, along with the consequences of that concept; and finally, the ways in which Gesamtkunstwerk was further developed, understood and interpreted. Based on this, we established the criteria for defining Gesamtkunstwerk in the 20th century and we illustrated this theoretical construct by analyzing works of selected artists.

The master thesis is divided into two parts. The first part contains introductory analyses, a survey of the inception and development of Gesamtkunstwerk, from the first intimations of this concept to its theoretical formulation and practical demonstration. We examined the philosophical, political and artistic sources, the status of art and the artist at the moment of its inception, the controversies about the im/possibility of its realization, etc. Gesamtkunstwerk emerged in the context of romanticism, the first (and last) great style within the megaculture of modernism, established at the end of the 18th century, whose conception was determined by: the crisis of Christianity, the appearance of the concept of the subject, the institutionalization of bourgeois society and the growing faith in scientific and artistic progress, in reason and morality, as a kind of substitute for undermined Christian values. Nonetheless, even though it has many romantic characteristics, Wagner’s project is also an expression of turmoil within romanticism and therefore represents a starting point and a point of reference for numerous modern and avant-garde artistic trends and movements.

Richard Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk is analyzed as the first project in modern art in which the creator’s activity is equally theoretical and practical. Composing grows into an

undertaking by which the creator, with each following work, tests and/or establishes an explicitly stated autopoietic position; in parallel with solving technical problems, he founds a new world of art and links his efforts with different inartistic discursive systems (ideological, political, religious, etc.). Wagner poses the question of the status, social role and range of his art and assigns his works the function of mediators of social progress and transformation.

In the introductory chapter of the second part of the work, *Evolucije pojma – Volja za moć kao umetnost (Evolutions of the Notion – The Will to Power as Art)*, we analyze the different levels of the evolution of Gesamtkunstwerk, as well as the different theoretical approaches to this evolution. Following the examination of terminological controversies, the discussion focuses on two dominant trends in the evolution of Gesamtkunstwerk, the first of which links up with the formal aspect, that is, the project of uniting heterogeneous means of artistic expression, while the second develops its ideological/utopian background, that is, the understanding of Gesamtkunstwerk as a means of social and spiritual transformation, as a kind of combination of the aesthetic and the existential, a search for the Totality which, however, does not have to be realized through a synthesis of arts, but is instead transferred to a conceptual level. By analyzing the way in which the media lines interrelate within a stage work, we come to the conclusion that 20th-century artists mostly strove towards a *polyphonic* relationship between the media, in which the media would be treated as contrapuntal lines. We analyze the theoretical approaches of the following authors: Michael Kennedy, Carl Dahlhaus, Edward Gordon Craig, Wassily Kandinsky, Miško Šuvaković, Dubravka Oraić Tolić, Harald Szeemann, Aleksandar Flaker, Boris Groys, Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, Dieter Borchmeyer, David Michael Hertz, Adrian Henri, Carl E. Schorske and Andreas Huyssen. Afterwards, we define the four criteria by which concrete works from the 20th century can be characterized as Gesamtkunstwerk.

In the continuation of the second part of the work, we analyze the theories and practices of three European composers who meet our criteria to the greatest degree and who are sufficiently different from one another to enable us to refine the variety of approaches to Wagner's heritage. We analyze the following authors and works: Alexander Scriabin (*Mystery* and *Preliminary Action*, unfinished projects), Arnold Schönberg (single act music drama *The Lucky Hand* from 1910-13) and Karlheinz Stockhausen (*Light*, a cycle of seven full-length operas, 1977-2004). We can recognize a clear connection with Wagner's original concept in the poetics of these authors, yet each of them transformed it differently. The analytical examination also includes the example of an author from our country, Vladan Radovanović, and his *synthetic art*, primarily with the aim of establishing the extent to which the project of Gesamtkunstwerk is (in)compatible with the context of a small peripheral European culture.

The chapters dedicated to individual poetics are shaped identically. The introductory bibliographical notes are followed by the analysis of their theoretical writings and other authorial texts, the theoretical position of an author's ideas as well as the actual practice, and particularly the relationship between theory and practice. This analysis resulted in four very different chapters/essays about four very different composers who, independently, linked up to Wagner's project and created their own artistic products conceived as total works of art. The variety of their approaches and corresponding works (despite the similarity of their philosophical, religious and mystical starting points) is influenced by the individuality of their artistic personalities, but also by the fact that they live and create in different social-political circumstances, which they reflect and interpret in their work.

We believe this work to be one of the possible constructions/interpretations of the history and evolution of the notion of the total work of art and we expect it to provoke further theoretical consideration of modernist and avant-garde utopian projects and their far-reaching, artistic and extra-artistic, consequences.

Translated by Jelena Nikezić