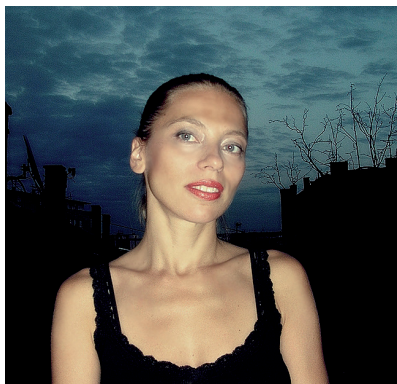

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*Ksenija Stevanović**

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VOCALISE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PROSOPOPOEIA OF ANJA ĐORĐEVIĆ



A composer who sings her own works – not unlike Barbara Strozzi at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Anja Đorđević nurtures the music *habitus* of a creator and vocal performer. Her music is a site for communicating with the works of earlier epochs, with those melodies which shaped her, which she likes, which she wants to have. It is as if Anja Đorđević is bound to the world of *melodies* which, through her as an intermediary, reach the listeners, enriched, transformed, made strange. At the same time, as a performer, Anja Đorđević is deeply connected with the

space of the stage, combining in her works the experience of “musical” abstract communicativeness and the physical experience of the stage and the body.

Anja Đorđević was born in Belgrade in 1970, and she studied composition with professors Vlastimir Trajković and Zoran Erić. In 2003 she was presented the Mokranjac Award for the opera *Narcis i Eho* [*Narcissus and Echo*], which is also the first contemporary and staged opera by a female composer in Serbian music.

* Author contact information: ksenstev@yahoo.co.uk

Besides her work as a composer, Anja Đorđević has often taken part in theatre and film projects, while her primary field of expression is music theatre. With the double bass player Vojin Drašković, she cooperated on the project *Muzičke sinteze* [Musical Syntheses] in the nineties, and then since 2000 she has performed within the ethno-fusion ensemble *Marsija*, alongside Žorž Grujić. She also participated in the band *Ravno nebo* [Flat Sky], whose members were composers Božidar Obradinović and Vladimir Pejković. Her triple career as a singer, score-writer and performer has so far resulted in authentic and critically acclaimed works, such as the already mentioned *Narcissus and Echo*, the project *Tesla songs*, composition *Otmica Evrope* [The Abduction of Europa] for symphony orchestra, the work *Bog grada* [God of the City] for mixed choir and strings, and others. The most recent, larger work by Anja Đorđević is a stage cantata *Atlas* for female voice, chamber orchestra and narrator, which had its premiere last year, on the stage of the Yugoslav Drama Theatre, and was restaged in the spring in the Atelje 212. The occasion for this interview was the experience gained while working on *Atlas*, a work of hybrid poetics, where the world of theatre is reflected in the world of music, and which is undoubtedly marked by Anja's particular artistic sensibility. And that is reduced, lyrical creative poetics, whose gesture is directed towards Classicism, without anything akin to the definition of "neo" in it, and transcends the Post-Modern distance or avant-garde self-sacrifice, being an original and well-rounded artistic voice. We can rightfully say that the musical stage is Anja Đorđević's natural habitat and that her creative personality is decisively determined by the permeation of musical and stage elements, perhaps more so than any other Serbian composer. Anja's creation, in other words, is not a consequence of experimental research or conceptual erudition (though she is very much aware of her paragons, boundaries and historic journeys), but the fruit of a precise musical intelligence, able to transfer into the "vocal medium" the content of the world's poetic experience and the materiality of "remembrance" trapped in the melodic formulas that surround us and which we use more or less, every day. Thus, Anja Đorđević's poetics are close to the notion of *music* as the art of translating the poetic-acoustic spectrum, i.e. the musicality of language, within the affective economy of social memory.

While working on this interview, I was therefore intrigued by Anja's intermittent dialogue with a text unknown to her: the essay *Le chant des muses*¹ by French philosopher Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, which actually speaks about music as an "echo" of primary musical substance – which is, in Lacoue-Labarthe's opinion, the intonation of one's native language. In a manner of speaking, Anja was duplicating those words and that is why I decided to include a counterpoint

1 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Le chant des muses: Petite conférence sur la musique*, Bayard, Paris, 2005. The book contains the transcripts of the lectures Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe held on 12th February 2005 in the Nouveau Théâtre de Montreuil, within an acclaimed cycle of lectures for children, titled *Petites conférences*. The leading French philosophers appeared within this project, speaking about some of the most difficult and most complex issues of humankind and bringing the world of ideas and concepts closer to children.

in our interview: the parts of this text, as if Lacoue-Labarthe were the third party to our conversation.

I am curious as to what it feels like to sing “one’s own” and to perform one’s own work personally, yet with other people at the same time?

Unbearable. It is a difficult, multitasking affair. I must make decisions while being constantly split apart. This is how it goes: up to a point I listen to the orchestra, then I listen to myself, then again I have to drive back all those other parts and listen to myself again. If the ensemble should happen to play something I did not write, I lose concentration, make a 360-degree pirouette, like a figure skater, and go back to the performance. All those lines, all the parts have come from me, and, at any given moment, I sing only one of them.

In spite of all the effort and trouble, I experience joy, participating in what I have created. Thus, I am not alienated from my own work and I communicate to other people what I have created. I am close to it and the closeness makes me feel good. If I were only a listener, it would be a different kind of experience. In a certain way, I am offering the reconstruction of a compositional event, by recreating it here and now for others.

Admittedly, I have to say that, when I step out before the audience, I make music which is no longer entirely my own – it is also someone else’s music, their music. That is the source of the joy, but it also requires courage to face the unexpected. Because during the performance one must relinquish control and immerse oneself completely in the moment. Only then can one really enjoy it.

How did you come to singing your own works?

I did not start from there. When I began composing, my music was performed by other people – first and foremost, by trained singers. Although I did choose them personally, I was not satisfied. I am deeply convinced that the way of singing changes the physiognomy of the music. Therefore, I think it was a necessity for me: either to find a “congenial” performer, or to perform my own music. Since I have already been transposing my own experiences into music, I decided on the latter. At a certain point in my life, it seemed like a good solution. But I would also like it if I had the other alternative.

As precisely as possible, a composer must impose and establish the aesthetics he or she strives for, so that the others have a clear idea about what the creator wants or likes. By singing I convey to others, to the best of my ability, the idea about my works. It is not impossible that some day someone will sing my compositions as well as I do, or even better, but that will be different. Anyway, in order

to present my music as precisely as possible, I started from myself. That is the necessity I mentioned earlier.

I am thinking aloud: Do female singers need to move while they are singing? Do they need gestures or is it enough if they “stand still”? In what way is a relationship created between the body, the voice and the stage?

I remember my grandfather saying that whoever waves their hands and gesticulates a lot is a bad speaker. Today, it is as if the music alone is not enough from the performers’ perspective. Something always has to be happening. Then again, there is no harm when the gestures are moderate, when the movement is subdued, possibly even imperceptible. Then the listener and the spectator are both more focused on the music, on the music expression, which becomes more demanding and complex because it is in the service of conveying pure music, pure voice.

If I look back on my latest experience, with the stage cantata *Atlas*, movement is an intricate, delicate thing. It is difficult for me to predict what I will do with my body while I am singing. Often, I don’t help the music, by moving my body in the way the choreographer explained to me. Eventually I realized I should not do that. In a way, I misinform the listener.

When I watch old opera stagings, with all those, now rather funny-looking choreographies or *mise-en-scènes*, I realize that that sort of body narration is alien to me. With the help of the director or the choreographer, I would like to explore movements which would not hinder the music but would be an inseparable part of the performance. I still fail to see that a “radical” choreography is right from the aspect of aesthetics and performance. Should a singer reach his or her movement? Little attention is paid to researching exactly what bodily movement is created while singing.

It seems you relatively seldom write purely instrumental works?

When I look back and remember my first compositions, I realize that I have always perceived music through voice. And yet, I had waited for so long to muster the courage and sing my own music. I think my music vocally. Even my instrumental works had been thought vocally. What is most natural, most creative and most liberating for me is vocal music. Sometimes I give myself an assignment: to write purely instrumentally, to see if I can do it. I like to compete with myself.

However, in the vocal works I pay a great deal of attention to the lines of instrumental counterpoint – I do not compose homophonically, although I am not a great exponent of counterpoint either. I like to insert ornaments; those are short

counterpoint lines – instrumental gestures which show my inclination toward Baroque expression.

FLL: Le premier des instruments, c'est le corps : les mains pour battre le rythme, par exemple, mais surtout la voix – donc tout ce qui dans le corps (l'appareil respiratoire : poumons, gorge, bouche) permet d'émettre des sons et de les moduler, permet de chanter. De « produire » le chant. On ne chante pas comme on parle. On ne chante même pas, ou très peu, quand on chantonne. Pour chanter vraiment, il faut un exercice particulier, qui s'apprend ; et pour chanter de manière vraiment artistique, il faut un apprentissage encore plus difficile, quel que soit le type de chant : opéra, blues, « variétés ». Dans le chant, on exige de la voix quelque chose d'autre que ce qu'elle fait spontanément, on exige peut-être qu'elle retrouve un peu de la musique d'avant (la naissance).²

In your vocal opus, you pay special attention to the language – first and foremost, to your mother tongue. It is known that you choose your collaborators, our younger poets, and create the textual models for your compositions together with them. What attracts you to a language you add sound to?

My “first musics” were written for voice on a neutral syllable. When I look back, through animal sounds I searched for melodies. Perfect poetry often excludes music, because it is already music by itself, so it is important how a poetic text sounds. In the Serbian language, I only liked the music that came from pop culture, and rarely have I heard a piece of serious music which would suit me vocally. In my compositions, I try to make the language sound as naturally as possible. Now I talk rationally about it, but when I did it for the first time – on a text by Marija Stojanović (my first textual muse) – it simply came out of me. Something started singing from within me. I think this is my gift – to find melodies and “dress” the text in the music.

FLL: Mais tout ce passe comme si, avant de venir au monde et de se trouver dans le monde – à « l'air libre » –, parmi les choses et les êtres qu'on apprend à voir, à toucher, à goûter, entre lesquels on apprend à se mouvoir, qu'on apprend à aimer ou à craindre ; avant même

2 The first instrument is the body: hands which keep the beat, for example, but above all the voice – therefore everything that is inside our body (the respiratory apparatus: lungs, throat, mouth) enables us to make sounds, to change them, enables us to sing: to “produce” singing. Human beings do not sing in the same way as they talk. Humming is not singing, either, or it is to a very small extent. Real singing requires a special technique, which is learnt; and artistic singing requires special training, which is even more demanding, depending on the type of singing: opera, blues, pop. While singing, we challenge our voice to do something different from what it does spontaneously: we require it to find a small piece of that earlier music (from before we were born) which I already mentioned.

*d'avoir du plaisir ou de la douleur ; avant, encore, de remplir pour la première fois ses poumons et de pousser son premier cri, on avait déjà, dans une mémoire très profonde – si profonde qu'elle est oubliée – l'écoute de quelques choses du langage : sa « musique ».*³

And what about writing in some other language?

I have been writing in other languages for the theatre. English does not agree with me, Russian and Spanish are interesting. Currently, I am intrigued by Italian. Most of all, I am happy because I have found the acoustics of my native language, but now I could try and find some other. Every language is already a music and all sorts of things change when you change the language.

*FLL: C'est si vrai qu'à chaque langue, à chaque type de langue, correspond un style de musique. Prenons l'exemple de la musique orchestrale européenne, depuis la Renaissance mettons. Vous écoutez un morceau, un mouvement de symphonie ; vous n'êtes pas obligés de reconnaître l'œuvre ou le compositeur, cela dépend de votre culture, mais avec un tout petit peu d'habitude vous pouvez presque immédiatement reconnaître l'origine de la musique en question et vous dire : « ça, c'est de la musique russe, ça, de la musique italienne, etc. ». Pourquoi ? Il n'y a pas des paroles, mais c'est que, simplement, la mélodie et la prosodie, le rythme, la forme entière de cette musique sont calquées sur la forme de la langue de départ. Le russe ne « chante » pas de la même façon que l'italien.*⁴

What is it that stage allows you to do?

The music I love, and also the music I create, is scenic, it has a lot of smaller or larger grimaces, tics, all of that which is in the nature of stage. When I step aside and look at it as objectively as I can, the nature of my music is scenic.

3 It all happens as if – before he appeared in the world, in the fresh air, among the things and creatures he would learn to watch, to touch and taste, among which he would learn to move, which he would learn to love or to fear, that is, before he would realize what delight or pain is, before he would fill his lungs with air for the first time or before he would utter his first cry – man had already been listening to something which belonged to language, and what he then stored in his memory, so deep that he almost forgot it: his “music”.

4 It is true that every language, every type of language, is suited to its own style of music. Let us take, for example, European orchestral music, after the Renaissance. You listen to a piece, to a symphony movement; you do not need to recognize the work or the composer, that depends on your education, but with just a little of getting used to, you could easily recognize the origin of that music and say: “This is Russian music, that is Italian music, etc.” How come? There are no words but, simply put, melody and prosody, rhythm and the complete form of that music reproduce the form of the language it originates from. The Russian language does not “sing” in the same way as the Italian.

When the music contours are seemingly simple, it is the result of an extremely complex search for the right expression. For example, when you clear Haydn's music of all the micro gestures, the articulation, the dynamic, it often remains lifeless. In that sense, what I write is minute and fragile.

I do not create music theatre where the dramatic element is crucial. For me, the scenic is above all in a gesture. I create figures, a kind of silhouette of a separate world, where I invite people to join me.

What is the difference between the music you write for the theatre and stand-alone stage music works?

In the theatre, I receive particular assignments and I need to find myself in them. I do not make much of a distinction between what I do for myself and what I do for the theatre. The only difference is in the assignments. If I am working on a play where the sound of early Romanticism should be heard, then I have to find myself in that style. If I have to write a rap number, I have to respond to the challenge. Nevertheless, I always strive to find something of myself in those worlds, which are remote to me. I do not want to simulate anybody else but to speak up through those assignments, as well.

I will return to a personality from the history of music who was also a composer and singer – Barbara Strozzi. She is not the only such figure among artists, of course. But among female composers, Strozzi is one of the most famous. What is your attitude towards the heritage, towards your place as a female author and towards the fact that the type of engagement you cultivate is bound to the world of vocal creation?

Very roughly, I would describe the history of music in relation to the vocal tradition in the following way: when the vocal current gained force, when operas were flourishing, it was as if vocal music heralded a new art. In my opinion, vocal music distils the style, because with a voice you can do what you want, and it is also readily available. An instrument, on the other hand, can endure much more, things that a voice cannot achieve. I perceive voice as a kind of stylistic purification. Feminine writing, therefore, has always been connected with singing, because it is often more reduced and linked with the affective domain.

Do you like opera?

I like Baroque opera and bel canto, most of all; I do not like Wagner, although I like his instrumental passages. I admit – I go to the opera to cry. The bond between music and my being is deep and symbiotic. I understood many affective states only through music. As if music revealed to me what particular emotions mean and how I should use them. Even my first emotional experience, my bond

with my mother, is connected with music. I expect simple things from music. Although I respect cerebral types of music, I am not a fan.

FLL: Musique est un art de l'émotion : de cette sorte de mouvement qui nous a bercés avant notre douloureuse entrée dans l'existence... La musique peut être gaie ou triste, heureuse ou lugubre. On peut aimer telle musique, et détester telle autre. Mais dès qu'on est touché, quelque chose est immédiatement provoqué, qui s'appelle la joie : une émotion bouleversante. Il arrive fréquemment qu'on voie des gens pleurer en écoutant un morceau de musique, quel qu'il soit : ils ne pleurent pas de tristesse, ils pleurent de joie. Et s'ils pleurent ainsi de joie, c'est parce que cette émotion très ancienne – la plus ancienne – vient tout à coup les submerger.⁵

Translated by Goran Kapetanović

5 Music is the art of emotions: of the movement which was gently rocking us before we painfully stepped into existence... Music can be merry or melancholic, happy or sad. We can love one piece of music and hate another. But from the moment it touches us, something immediately stirs, and that something is called joy: a disruptive emotion. So often do we see people crying while they are listening to a piece of music: they do not cry out of sadness, but out of joy. And if they cry out of joy, it is because the emotion – that primordial emotion, older than all the others – comes suddenly, without restraint, and overwhelms them.