

Article received on 15th May 2012

Article accepted on 24th October 2012

UDC: 785.161.091.4(497.11)"2011"(049.32)

Milan Milojković*

University of Novi Sad
Academy of Arts – Department of Music,
Section for Musicology and Ethnomusicology

BELGRADE JAZZ FESTIVAL 27–30 October 2011

In mid-October of 2011, the public spaces of Belgrade were decorated with motley posters that differed greatly in appearance and content from the rest of the deluge of media messages smothering the murky autumn landscape of our capital. On numerous enclosures around the construction sites of never-to-be-finished architectural heralds of Europeanization, in the public transport vehicles and at bus-stops, there were posters with the contours of a female face in a Warholian graphic conveying the message: 'I ti si džez – beogradski džez festival Doma Omladine od 27. do 30. oktobra' ['You are Jazz Too – Belgrade Youth Centre's Jazz Festival from 27th to 30th October']. Given the domestic advertising practice, what was confusing at first was this mystification of the usually blunt and stereotypical use of a female for marketing purposes. Unlike the majority of almost pornographic visual solutions for advertise-

ments, whose message is clearly geared to instant gratification and the pan-consumerism of today's world, the secretive and seductive portrayal of a woman on the poster of the Belgrade Jazz Festival, combined with the message to the passer-by, was an invitation to actively participate in the event, in a certain way, promising the potential audience that only with their participation would the idea of the advertisement become complete. And while other advertisers offer the object of mass desire 'in plain view', utterly ignoring the identity of the individual, the Jazz Festival tried to secure its position in the media by addressing the individual, inviting him/her to cooperate and partake, instead of joining in the hysterical, massive release of urges that is frequent in today's society of the spectacle.

The loyal audience expected that from the Belgrade Jazz Festival. The entire, glorious, but nevertheless tumultuous history of this manifestation created the need among domestic jazz lovers to organize a respectable and comprehensive rally of agents of this important aspect of our cultural life in these times of uncertainty. In the second half of October 2011, there were constant rumours about great stars who had announced their guest appearances, such as Pat Metheny, Charles Lloyd and Marc Ribot. The less famous ones were also talked about, those who maintained the spirit and comprehensiveness of this scene, whose performances were anticipated with equal impatience, but also with a more daring, critical attitude. It seemed that the slogan 'You Are Jazz Too' resounded in the minds of many inhabitants of the capital, who filled the concert venues of the Youth Centre evening after evening.

* Author contact information:
milanmuz@gmail.com

On the opening night, we could glimpse what kind of 'jazz' was inspired in the audience by the mysterious female eyes from the posters and billboards. In the address of the master of ceremonies – whose appearance was more like that of a bank clerk than of the host of a cultural event – and then in Vojislav Simić's speech and later during the festival, the past of this manifestation was strongly emphasized. What was particularly noted was the construction of the narrative of the jazz festival as a sort of glamorous gathering of proponents of world trends in the 1970s, who visited Belgrade just like they visited Paris, Vienna, London... Finally, the bottom line of the whole story about tradition was that Belgrade in those times was 'part of the world', and the events that took place in it were important landmarks on a global cultural map. Hence, the 2011 edition of the Belgrade Jazz Festival was presented as a re-creation of its former glory, a moment when those present would forget their permanent state of waiting for the status of a candidate for that big world, which they once belonged to. It was stressed that the great jazz stars were there again, like before, that the audience came from all the (ex-)Yugoslav republics, like before, that the abundant programme was of the highest quality and chosen by the best for the best, like before. So, beside all the digressions from present-day clichés, the Belgrade Jazz Festival still offers a Utopia to the audience, which is, as it seems, the main condition for survival on the current Serbian cultural market. Since a wistful memory of the former good life had already become embedded in domestic public opinion, the Belgrade Jazz Festival only drew from existing consumer interest.

However, we should emphasize that, unlike most of today's manifestations, the organizers did not resort to banalization and they gave the audience the opportunity to really enjoy outstanding concerts. In keeping with the festival's glorious past, Pat Metheny had the honour of opening the Belgrade jazz review. Although it is unnecessary to stress how important Metheny is in the history of jazz, his fourth performance in the Sava Centre left the impression that in this big world, whose representative he undoubtedly was, not everything was 'like it used to be', when we were part of it.

Metheny became world-famous at the peak of Postmodernism, affirming in jazz the eclectic manner of behaviour that was prevalent at the time. He matured in the era of hard-bop and post-bop, but he based his commitment on the constant changes in the environment in which he was executing his artistic act. As a kind of residue of Modernism in jazz, Metheny, like many other musicians, kept the trio as the base formation for the presentation of 'real' jazz, while he concurrently worked with Lyle Mays within the Pat Metheny Group, on projects aimed primarily at American, or rather the New Yorker upper middle class, flirting with the labels of lounge, acid, pop and other modes of selling the acoustic layer of everyday life. He also collaborated with other kindred artists, such as Steve Reich, the Kronos Quartet, Joni Mitchell and others. Metheny elevated guitar to the level of a means for media manipulation, since in all of his releases he appears in the role of the guitar player, which he has built to incorporate all the other aspects of his practice, such as compositional work, arranging and his very important activities as a producer.

However, as the world of art transformed from Postmodern to globalist – some would say, post-continental – so did Metheny's approach to the new circumstances. The New York guitarist gradually abandoned the role of a sideman, emphasizing the retrospection of his works when performing with the trio. Fusion approach, that was characteristic for musicians of his generation, such as Chick Corea, Dave Holland, Jack DeJohnette, Herbie Hancock, largely gave way to the traditional lingua franca jazz, which Metheny often enriched by frequent changes of guitars and a performance segment where he presented a new album. That also happened at the Belgrade Jazz Festival opening. The concert began stereotypically: by performers joining in to Metheny's introductory improvisation – first the bass player Larry Grenadier, and then the drummer Billy Stewart. The performance consisted of a sequence of numbers from Metheny's rich opus, which the ensemble members played at a superb technical and artistic level, as expected. However, it was exactly this standardization of the performance that significantly contributed to the impression that the stage was occupied by some of the top-class Pat Metheny tribute bands, rather than by the artist whose innovations changed the world of jazz. In contrast to that, a part of the performance dedicated to the American guitarist's new project, titled *Orchestrion*, revealed that this artist does not live only on his name, but that he has a strategy for creating an innovative artistic act. It was a sort of cybernetic project, which in a certain way could be placed in the domain of musical prosthetics. Inspired by mechanical devices for music reproduction from the 19th century, from which he

borrowed the name *Orchestrion*, Metheny created a complex system for handling mechanical instruments using a sampler, a controller and, what is most significant, his guitar. When Metheny appeared on the Sava Centre stage, under the obligatory limelight, just with the guitar, while a small accordion was compressing and expanding above him, playing the notes he was plucking on the strings, it was just an overture for an unusual union of live performance and digital-analogous systems. In a reduced size, appropriate for the tour conditions, *Orchestrion* consisted of percussion with definite and indefinite pitches, water bottles and accordion. Metheny first created patterns successively, building a loop effect with certain segments of his solo entrances on the guitar, whereby he in fact handled these instrumental complexes. Then, combining sequences from the pool thus generated, he created the compositional tissue, playing alongside the bassist and the drummer. Basically, one could say that orchestrion is a complex system of non-synthetic, analogous-digital-analogous effects on a guitar. Metheny produced notes on his guitar that, in their digitalized form, generated the controller signal in the system of samplers, by means of which a mechanism connected to the instruments was put into motion.

Thus, Metheny's performance definitely acquired a new dimension. He became an individual who completely controlled the performance process, by multiplying his performing activity, so to speak, since he was playing on several instruments at the same time. On the other hand, it can be said that he completely eliminated the performance aspect, or more correctly, he dehumanized it, consigning

the execution of his compositional and performance ideas to machines. In that sense, the orchestrion was the fruition of the old Fordian dream about automated mass production – in this case, of music – and, in that respect, about the capitalist idea of increasing productivity by investing in the means of production, by reducing workforce costs. Ironically, the orchestrion replaced the large number of performers who were once members of the hit-making Pat Metheny Group.

After the opening event, which was at any rate worthy of the festival's history – revealing, at the same time, many modern fractures in a nostalgic rapture – the programme began in the Americana Hall of the Youth Centre, which is reputed to be the spot where 'real' jazz is played, free of commercial spectacles. The highly valued club atmosphere of this part of the Belgrade Jazz Festival was in fact a re-enactment of former jam sessions in which the world stars, informally, outside of the official programme, took part with domestic players. However, the whole programme adhered to the fixed schedule, without improvisations outside the venues provided for the purpose, with just a few exceptions that, as small sensations, reminded the audience that it was a festival of improvised music that they were attending.

The performance of the Anat Fort Duo raised gender issues at the Belgrade Jazz Festival 2011. Anat Fort is an Israeli pianist who is building her career in the USA. Her style is completely opposite to that of Metheny, who preceded her. Anat Fort poured over the keyboard fragments of the music that surrounds us every day, almost as if she refused to create an entity of content or style. Her playing sounded like a

quest for meaning by associations from the acoustic world, which did not reach the level of a statement, in the sense of the traditional concept of a jazz solo; rather, their emergences, which could not be definitely established either, opened a wide field of connotations. Such an approach dismantled the idea of World Music, which would normally be expected from a Middle Eastern woman behind the piano, and at the same time it affirmed a new subjectivity in expression, one that was not hiding behind the stereotypes of otherness, either general or cultural. In the darkness of the Americana Hall, it was as if Anat Fort, playing her instrument, was defying Metheny's glamorous *Orchestrion*, and thus trying, like a saboteur of sorts, to loosen the screws in Metheny's monumental mechanism, hoping for its destruction.

The idea of restoration, and the support of the state institutions, particularly of the Serbian Broadcasting Company (RTS), reached its peak in the events surrounding the performance of Duško Gojković. The elderly *maestro* of the trumpet, who enjoys a world reputation, held two concerts with the RTS Big Band on the occasion of his 80th birthday. They were intended to be a review of his impressive career, whose unbreakable link with the festival was strongly emphasized by the organizers. However, the enormous interest in this event somehow entitled the television crews to decide which reporters would be allowed to attend the first concert, and so an extremely large number of journalists were left standing outside. The second concert was inconsiderately scheduled at the same time as performances by other artists.

On the festival's second evening, Stefano Bollani performed with his trio, fea-

turing the bassist Jesper Bodilsen and the drummer Morten Lund. This Italian pianist introduced a bodily element to his performances, diverting attention from an acoustic materialization of music to a live body on stage, the body producing that music. Bollani is a virtuoso who 'lures' sound out of the piano with his movements, making the played passages and chords not mere strokes of hammers on strings, but entire bodily gestures. For him, sound is the result of motion within the space of interpretation and it emerges as a syncretic act, i.e. as the musician's improvisation on the theme of his own existence in the given circumstances. In a certain way, Bollani's physical closeness to the music and the audience in the Americana Hall was, as in Anat Fort's case, antagonistic to Metheny's prosthetic concept. Metheny incorporated his corporeality into the mechanisms of data manipulation and their militarization in brokered capitalism, while Bollani and Fort's musical ventures, compared to his, in a manner of speaking, stood as representatives of the remaining 99% of the people, who are discontented. Anat Fort and Stefano Bollani were also similar, with their readiness and courage, in ripping the integral semantic tissue of improvisation with the sharp shards of criticism, not constructing a homage to or repetition of a known structure, but abandoning themselves intentionally – and also helplessly, as it seems – to the game of chance that is at work during the performance of an artistic act.

The *Phronesis* ensemble, featuring Danish bassist Jasper Hoibi, Swedish drummer Anton Eger and British pianist Ivo Neame, added to Bollani's energetic performance, mostly by the relaxed quality and freedom displayed in their collective

improvisations. The Nordic rhythm section in this ensemble appeared to be dominant. The pulsation was lost in the landslides of beats forming the chains of echo carried away by the ringing vibrations of the cymbals, while the bass lines often acted as a companion in this rustic dialogue. Seemingly, it was the tension of the sound in the lowest register that was the main characteristic of the *Phronesis* ensemble, since the pianist acted with too much restraint, and did not respond to the demands set by the rhythm section. This difference made the *Phronesis* performance less impressive than the energetic show by Bollani's trio. While the northern ensemble was, occasionally, even too temperate, Bollani's Mediterranean passion coincided with the sensibility of the audience in the Americana, who did not hesitate to show their enthusiasm, particularly for the segments based on repeated riffs.

For optimists on the domestic jazz scene, the performance by Neša Petrović's quartet could have been a strong stimulant in the belief that culture in Serbia is on the path of progress, whereas for pessimists, it was just a ripple in a stagnant artistic pond where the battle for survival destroys any kind of progress. Petrović's ensemble, featuring the pianist Ivan Aleksijević, the bassist Milan Pavković and the drummer Dušan Ivanišević, presented very pleasant and sleek post-bop, at an enviable technical level with witty and virtuoso solos. It is highly commendable that our saxophonist detached himself from pseudo-folklore digressions and opted for profiling a be-bop expression, by which Serbian jazz lovers have learned to recognize him. Petrović's compositions written in the tradition of modern jazz were saturated mostly with

tertian harmonies, but not without occasional quartal or cluster sonorities and incisive arabesques coiling above. The ensemble easily complied with the inventiveness of Petrović's solos, following closely the itinerary of his occasional chalumeau sound. On the other hand, Petrović's performance did not bring anything new. In today's jazz, post-bop is the basis for academic lingua franca expression, the mastering of which is the imperative of almost all curricula at jazz academies. Since we do not have such an institution, Petrović's 'public lesson' was indeed a refreshment and attraction within the scope of the domestic jazz scene.

The chasm between us and the world, which was bridged so successfully and conspicuously by nostalgia during this manifestation, yawned wide when, after the Neša Petrović quartet, the stage was taken by the Charles Lloyd quartet. The elderly saxophonist gave the audience in the Youth Centre's great hall the opportunity to experience some of the sublime rapture of the prophet on the saxophone, whose dramatic persuasiveness, shamanic pathos and organic virtuosity carried the listeners away, beyond everyday life, forcing them to surrender to the swirl of illusions and reality created by Lloyd's ensemble on stage. The bassist Reuben Rogers and the drummer Eric Harland, with another jazz greatness, the pianist Jason Moran, provided Lloyd's endless melodies with much more than an accompaniment, showing that top-class jazz nowadays is liberated from stereotypical 'quadratic' structures, removing the sediments of historical conventions from harmonic progressions, and not conforming to effective and, since long ago, trivial patterns. Far from it that Lloyd's en-

semble escaped history: that was even underscored by references to gospel or pop, in the numbers *Go Down, Moses* and *Caroline, No.* However, the echoes of the past in this ensemble's music reached the audience de-canonized, and somewhat grotesquely detached from the possibility of creating an arrogant narrative structure of meaning; therefore, in the lethargic tone of the entire performance, they were shrouded in a veil of delight in a hopeless Utopia.

Unlike the way Anat Fort dealt with her otherness, Armenian pianist Tigran Hamasyan presented the audience with an almost mail-order model of World Music, apparently assuming the passive role of the exotic other-worldly agent with a limited scope of use. Hamasyan's command of the piano is indeed enviable, as he demonstrated with numerous acrobatic feats on the keys during his improvisations. However, the stereotypical harmonic progressions and melodies the pianist enveloped them in concealed the lack of a personal imprint, essentially critical towards the environment, since Hamasyan also sang 'sugared' Oriental tunes, as if he was striving to complete the model of a music industry to which these poetics correspond. The wider commercial success of such a product is undisputable, because the consumers, without much effort, are led into a world of art adapted for them. However, just as the one that Hamasyan came from, our society is already on the margins compared to 'the world', so in both cases it would be more meaningful to find a way out from the role assigned to us than to encourage compliance with the market conventions.

Igor Lumpert's *Innertextures* are, in that respect, a more interesting case. Slovenian saxophonist and expert in electronics

performed with the drummer Tommy Crane, and the improvisations of these two artists were complemented by samples from a laptop. Their jazz story began with a conspicuous lack of bass and a harmonic instrument, and the ontological difference of the acoustic participants already confronted what the audience was accustomed to listening to from the first bars. Contributing to this was another transgression: the substitution of traditional functional structures with samples, whose eccentricity grew stronger as the sound excerpts became more humanized. Apparently, the musicians on stage in this way rejected the possibility of being categorized, readily accepting the possibility of losing the intermediary network, which is an important factor in communicating with the audience. Lumpert is a saxophonist who, due the autonomy of his inner texture, seems able to fathom all the domains his instrument permits. However, unlike Crane, who remained in the sphere of percussion, Lumpert, as the author, stepped out of the discant realm of the saxophone, placing the means of information technology at the core of the musical structure, in the place upon which the system of harmonic and formal functionality rests. But this intervention was innovative only in appearance, since the logical and acoustic systemic causality of music, centred on the notion of key, could have been expressed in today's vocabulary by the notion of interface. Lumpert only executed this idea literally. On the other hand, the saxophone and drum parts were not subordinate to the samples, although they certainly created the most diverse relationships with them, from the *backing track* treatment to destructive tendencies. In this way, Lumpert essentially

challenged the notion of jazz in its monetary form, opening the possibility for a critical and, in his case, distinctive saboteur action.

The jazz program at the 2011 festival began and ended with the guitar, as an instrument that reviewers are increasingly talking about in a subversive context. Symbolically, it can be said that the festival had a sort of circular structure. From Pat Metheny and the complex relations of capital, robotization and informatics in the *Orchestrion*, to pianistic subjectivities and saxophonistic activisms, to the guitar again, but this time in the hands of Marc Ribot, an artist whose remoteness from Metheny defined the diameter of the festival circle. Ribot presented a distorted sound, although not so much to obfuscate its origin, but only to assure that the blending of tone into noise would symbolically produce the deviant nature of the musical structure created by it. In chords, such a guitar tone behaved like an enemy to the harmonic series of the environment, multiplying the timbral overtones to the point where the hierarchy of the means of musical expression was negated. Ribot manipulated such a sound energetically. Its particular features apparently directed the improvisatory logic, since the guitarist boldly launched into massive tone projections, at times allowing motives to be discerned in drifts of chromaticism of timbres and frequencies, motives with which he introduced the game of meaning into the intoxicating sonority, ridiculing its well-known rules by rolling the excerpts over torrents of sound. He was wholeheartedly supported in that by the drummer Chad Taylor and the bassist Henry Grimes, musicians who, at a time distance but basically on the same princi-

ples, based their poetics on free jazz. Ribot's trio proved that this idea – immanent to the notion of jazz since its beginning, but reclaimed from the historical sediments only much later – could also be found in today's world of art, opposing most forcefully the very tradition that remained behind the artists whose activities took place in its wake.

The 27th Belgrade Jazz Festival, shadowed by the authority of its own tradition, once again gave the audience a reason to believe in the existence of a parallel world that we are a part of, almost the same as it was when Miles and Gillespie gave guest performances. Today, history and tradition are best sold on cultural markets with an identity crisis, and this one in Serbia is undoubtedly among them. Apart from the ex-

tensive 'glorious heritage' that was ravenously consumed with the compulsory possibility of deferred payment, the jazz tradition in Belgrade – with modest solvency, but with a fundamental significance for the civilizational synchronization of the Serbian capital with the rest of the 'world' – offers a reason at least for our capital to be more frequently shifted from the section 'Entertainment' to the section 'Culture' in the tourist guides – so as not to say: of us, as the Latter, becoming part of the Former. Those who took the risk of responding to that mysterious look to find their inner jazz are anticipating the 28th Belgrade Jazz Festival in the hope that the world will visit these parts more and more often.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović