

**SUITE *JURIJEV KRUG* FOR THE OPERA *ZVEZDANI GRAD* BY  
DRAGANA JOVANOVIĆ; CHAMBER OPERA *KO JE UBIO  
PRINCEZU MOND?* BY TATJANA MILOŠEVIĆ; CHAMBER  
OPERA *PETERSBURG* BY BRANKA POPOVIĆ**

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**On some elements of the narrative structure of the works**

**Abstract:** Three works by contemporary Serbian female composers, although disparate as to the manner of their realization, do have some similarities. An affinity can be perceived by analysing the poetical planes supporting the textual bases of these compositions, as well as their relationships with the musical component. The intersections can be found in the specific attitude towards the subject and the subject's identity, problematized in the librettos, as well as in the issue of the time/space dichotomy within the narrative.

**Key words:** Dragana Jovanović, Tatjana Milošević, Branka Popović, chamber opera, Dragan Živadinov, postgravity art, Morian Lagartia, Andrei Bely

Chamber operas *Ko je ubio princezu Mond?* [*Who Killed Princess Mond?*] by Tatjana Milošević and *Petersburg* by Branka Popović, as well as the suite *Jurijev krug* [*Yuri's Circle*] for the opera *Zvezdani grad* [*Star City*] by Dragana Jovanović, are works with divergent poetical foundations. The creative impulses and the basic conceptual ideas are different, and hence, naturally, the realizations of these compositions are disparate. However, one can register certain points within the works in which the poetical procedures of the three composers become closer. In that respect, what is evident is the similarity between certain components of the librettos, as well as their musical treatment. Of course, we are not talking about the similarities of stylistic traits, but of the authors' attitudes towards certain elements of the works.

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On this occasion a deeper musical analysis, which would certainly provide more complete answers, will be omitted. Therefore we shall come to general conclusions about the compositions and their possible affinities. Thus, we are facing the issues of the *narrativity* of these works, the position (or dislocation) of the protagonists' identity, and a specific attitude towards the elements of space/time within the narrative.

### ***Teleportation suite for chamber ensemble and electronics Jurijev krug*<sup>1</sup>**

*Jurijev krug* is a suite which, paradoxically, anticipates the opera *Zvezdani grad*. It is based on a libretto by Dragan Živadinov, which deals with the basic ideas of postgravity art. In that respect, the suite, in its compressed form and with a specific *narrative* structure, presents a philosophical thought which is the foundation of Živadinov's concept. This art is based on the idea of establishing a continuity with avant-garde movements, of joining two antagonistic styles – Constructivism and Suprematism. These two movements are framed by a discourse stemming from the ideas of cosmism and transhumanism, thus, in fact, resulting in a sort of futurist theoretical platform based on metaphysics. In that respect, the goal of postgravity art is transcending physics through physics. For this exact reason, the full description of the composition is *teleportacijska svita* [*teleportation suite*], which also creates a direct link to the libretto, given that the main protagonist, a cosmonaut Yuri, is trying to *teleport* himself to another, metaphysical dimension. In the composer's own words: "On teži da pređe u novo – antigravitaciono stanje, da se prebaci preko empirijske i fiktivne rampe koja ga deli od bestežinskog prostora i druge dimenzije. On razume sve jezike, njegov cilj je da sva znanja i iskustva prevede u 'um, zaum i vakuum'" ["He strives to change into a new – antigravitational state, to get across a empirical and imaginary barrier separating him from weightless space and the other dimension. He understands all languages, his goal is to transform all knowledge and experience into 'rationality, transrationality and vacuum'"].<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the opera is constructed on quasi-narrativity, which follows the protagonist's physical and mental state through philosophical statements and pseudo-dialogues. His linear model of cognition, which is supposed to lead him to the ultimate

<sup>1</sup> Suite for the opera *Zvezdani grad* was premiered on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2013 at the Belgrade Youth Centre. The text by Dragan Živadinov was translated into Russian and adapted by Yuri Baturin. The work contains five movements: *Орбитализация* [*Orbitalization*], *Супраорганизм* [*Supraorganism*], *Вакуум заум* [*Vacuum Transrationality*], *Методологи* [*Methodologists*], *С\_БИТАНЬЕ* [*D\_AYBREYK*]. The work was performed by the vocal-instrumental ensemble "Mir", conducted by Ivan Marković.

<sup>2</sup> Programme booklet for the premiere performance of the work.

foundationalist point, is constantly disturbed by Her,<sup>3</sup> who in fact is a dynamic counterbalance in the narrative. As it happens, She does not contribute to the ontological attainment of the *Truth* by, for instance, some sort of case history; instead, She makes Yuri's position harder, by raising doubt.<sup>4</sup> If we delved more deeply into psychoanalysis, we could use the feminist discourse and develop the claim on *the mythical female*, which *hampers*, but also *helps* a man in confirming his own identity. However, if we put aside possible implications of that kind, the issue of Yuri's identity remains central in the opera. He actually acquires his identity by losing it. The vacillation of his personality is the skeleton of the libretto, and consequently the music which adheres to the text, charged with high expressivity. Yuri's dematerialization, namely, is accompanied by *the disappearance of the bodies* of all the performers, with only the voices *remaining*, preserved in an audio recording. Electronically modified vocal parts are treated in a particular way, and the vocal timbres, i.e. the recorded performers, are integrated into the general acoustic image. They became independent signs, which/who lost their identity, yet, paradoxically, like Yuri, acquired it. In that regard, Yuri's identity is built by means of various performers, which underlines the character of his struggle and *transformation*. Apart from a bass,<sup>5</sup> a baritone<sup>6</sup> and a tenor,<sup>7</sup> the most important in creating the dramaturgy of Yuri's *teleportation* are the voice of a chanter and a child.<sup>8</sup> The chanter represents Yuri in the second movement, *Супраорганизм* [*Supraorganism*], and renders his final parts in the last movements. The child's voice, on the other hand, brings forward Yuri's last words, which symbolically completes the circle of his journey by *areturn to innocence*. The simulation of Christian Orthodox music, apart from plenty of polystylistic elements, quasi-quotations and simulations, is thus a signifier, reinforced by the fact that it is represented by the specific voice of Pavle Aksentijević.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, with the words "попробуйте, измерьтемойэкстаз" ["try and measure my ecstasy"], the opera ends with a child's voice, "glas derla, oslobođen testosterona, oslobođen svih napora ove

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<sup>3</sup> The part of She/Her was performed by Sanjana Nikolić, alto.

<sup>4</sup> Apart from Yuri and Her, the composition also features Observatory (Aneta Ilić, soprano) and Laboratory (Natalija Mladenović, soprano). Their role is to comment Yuri's state and situation. Besides, the author also uses a choir, *Vox Populi*.

<sup>5</sup> Darko Manić.

<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Dinić.

<sup>7</sup> Ivan Debeljak.

<sup>8</sup> Dimitrije Mladenović.

<sup>9</sup> In the last movement, the meditative coda to the work suggestively follows after the culmination on the words, "без акта веры вселенная не существует!" ["Without the act of faith, the universe does not exist!"].

dimenzije” [“the voice of a brat, free of testosterone, free from all the struggles in this dimension”],<sup>10</sup> as the author herself put it. In that respect, the choice of the musical procedures is directly related to the basic idea of *destroying* identity and creating what could perhaps be defined as *super-identity*.

On the other hand, the act of teleportation entails the problem of time. Musically, it is manifested in the polystylistic construction of the composition, which, actually, presents the listener indiscriminately with divergent idioms *teleported* from one musical *sphere* to another. This makes the anti-temporality of Postmodernism obvious, which is also in keeping with the textual tissue. The poetic idea in such a procedure ultimately becomes similar to one of the points in the manifesto of postgravity artists – “there is no past and no future, just the absolute present! Theatre is the absolute present!”<sup>11</sup>

### **Chamber opera Ko je ubio princezu Mond?<sup>12</sup>**

The idea of a Cartesian subject and the issue of temporality are parts of the poetical framework within which the chamber opera *Ko je ubio princezu Mond?* was composed. Namely, the libretto of this opera, written after a short text by Morian Lagartia, uses the form of narrative based on the tradition of French Renaissance literature to raise an immanently Modernist question of personal freedom. In that respect, Tatjana Milošević, like Dragana Jovanović, uses Modernist poetics combined with a Postmodernist stylistic envelope. Morian (the Grand Page), like Yuri, acquires his identity by losing it.<sup>13</sup> His mother, Eva, is represented in the opera by three performers, which explicitly presents her split personality, torn and divided into characters that complement each other (the fact implied by their insufficiently differentiated musical parts). By killing her, Morian kills himself, but at the same time he frees himself of an imaginary world he is part of. In fact, he needs her just as much as she needs him, and the epilogue is mutual *liberation* through death. In that respect, it is worth noting that the segments of the opera related to Morian’s *liberation* through death – first of the Decorator and then of Eva – are accompanied by hints of

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<sup>10</sup> The show “Vreme muzike” [“Time of Music”], Radio Belgrade 2, author and host Bojana Žižić. Broadcast on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Manifesto of postgravity art, section 17. Cf. <http://elmcip.net/sites/default/files/files/attachments/criticalwriting/31079708-50-topics.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> Željko Mijanović translated and adapted the libretto. The premiere took place on 9<sup>th</sup> June 2012 in the BITEF Theatre in Belgrade, performed by the ensemble *Gradilište* [Construction Site] and conducted by Premil Petrović.

<sup>13</sup> The work features the following characters: Morian (the Grand Page), Balthazar, Eva and Ludovico (the Decorator).

tonal waltz-like music. At the same time, these are the only moments in the composition that are explicitly, in such a way, separated from the rest of the musical tissue, thus representing the work's *punctum saliens*. Abrupt changes in the character of the musical material follow the key points in the narrative structure, which are related to the gradual destruction of the protagonists' imaginary world. Such a world is constructed by the characters, but it, in turn, shapes their personalities. In that respect, the opera also problematizes the time/space dichotomy, i.e. its role in making Morian's, Eva's and the Decorator's identities. Namely, the action takes place in the world of illusions (initiated by the Decorator, through the idea of *die neuzeitlich Sicht*), and therefore it is significant that in Morian's original text, the world of Princess Mond is compared to the world of Princess Brambilla, from the eponymous novella by E. T. A. Hoffmann. There, Hoffmann, like Morian, brings actuality *per se* to the fore, by interpreting everyday life as a dream, but also as hell created by human vanity.<sup>14</sup> Such viewpoint can be compared to what was said in the programme note: that "opera pokušaj da se prikažu psihološki portreti protagonista drame u njihovim apsurdnim traganjima za vlastitim identitetom i njihovoj nemoći da prevaziđu opsednutost narcisoidnom imaginacijom" ["the opera is an attempt to present the psychological portrayals of the protagonists in their absurd quests for their own identities, and in their powerlessness to overcome the obsession with narcissistic imagination"].<sup>15</sup> In that respect, one can draw a parallel between the action in this opera and a Romanticist wondering about life, i.e. a Hoffmannian question about the relationship between the subject and the world around that subject. This world, in the opera *Ko je ubio princezu Mond?*, exists trapped in time and space, because that is the exact habitat of fantasy, which subsequently creates its own protagonists. The unreality of time, as a philosophical construct but also as a theoretical thesis,<sup>16</sup> is problematized within the context of the idea of personal freedom, i.e. a divided subject. Namely, the key point in the opera is the movement titled *Neprekinuti trenutak zabave* [*An Uninterrupted Moment of Entertainment*], where the Grand Page declares that "kuća bila mašina za proizvodnju veštačkih rajeva" ["the house was a machine for producing artificial paradises"], and that "svi satovi u kući zaustavljeni" ["all the clocks in the house are stopped"]. The last sentence is repeated by the protagonists, as a clear

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Helga Slessarev, *E. T. A. Hoffmann's "Prinzessin Brambilla": A Romanticist's Contribution to Aesthetic Education of Man*, Studies in Romanticism, 19/3, Boston University, Boston, 1970, 151.

<sup>15</sup> Programme booklet for the premiere performance of the work.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. e.g. Robin Le Poidevin (ed.), "The Philosophy of Time", Oxford University Press, New York City, 1993.

symbol of time flowing, i.e. not flowing, which was underlined at the beginning of the opera, when the initial motive is repeated accompanied by percussion. By employing repetition, the composer actually establishes a correlation between two types of time, which is typical of any kind of narration, and consequently of the musical accompaniment to a narrative structure. Namely, on this occasion we can resort to the theory of the narrativity of a novel, which states that the very fabric of the novel establishes “tensions [and aporias] between narrated time and the time of the narration, chronology and plot, objective and subjective time, cosmological and phenomenological time, time as topic and time as technique (...) [this is] the discourse in which the dynamics and dialectics of time are most faithfully and properly observed”.<sup>17</sup> The chamber opera *Ko je ubio princezu Mond?* establishes a correlation between the musical and the narrative tissues, on the one hand, and the temporal stagnation indicated by the very content of the libretto, on the other.

The staging of the premiere, however, offered an addition to the text, as well as the resolution to the opera and the problem of the time and the protagonists’ identities: a child appears on the stage. Morian, like Yuri, returns to the age of *innocence*, i.e. childhood.

### ***Chamber opera Petersburg***<sup>18</sup>

The Neo-Kantian concept of rationalism and intuitiveness as a stereotypical trait of the East are two confronted spheres which, in the literary work *Petersburg* by Andrei Bely,<sup>19</sup> are personified in the two main protagonists, Apollon Apollonovich and Nikolai Apollonovich. The question of identity is central. However, the clash of their identities is presented just like *one of many*, and in the same way they are only (arche)typical characters within a complex social system. That system is depicted by the urban space of Petersburg, and described by the subjective and complex narrative structure of the narrator. Thus, the mythologization of everyday life takes place within a deconstructed dichotomy of time/space.

The musical theatre piece *Petersburg* retains such dichotomic characteristics of the text, although Aleksandra Sekulić logically compressed it by her adaptation. The music, on the other hand, follows the narration and the action talked about instead of the individual characters, given that the protagonists are merely observed through the lens of the human myriapod in Petersburg,

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*, Edinburgh University Press LTD, Edinburgh, 2007, 92–93.

<sup>18</sup> The premiere of the work took place on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2012 in the Belgrade Youth Centre.

<sup>19</sup> The novel was published in 1916 in Russia.

and thus are musically nondescript. Also, the musical tissue, in the composer's own words, was reduced,<sup>20</sup> and thus the basic building material of the work was based on repeating shorter motives, melodically and harmonically simple. They put into music the textual structure which Bely built, taking care of the sound of the words and sentences, guided by the ideas of Symbolist poetics. The writer in this work used both semantics and phonetics to construct a stratified narrative base.<sup>21</sup> In that regard, the musical motives in the opera are often reduced to the rhythmical *outlining* of the sentences, or words, in the parts of the protagonists, while the narrator is the catalyst of the more expressive musical drama. The music thus *decides* on *adhering* to the external flow of time, given that the text actually represents a symbolic dualism, which can be linked to Bergson's poetics that juxtaposes external form and fluid internal duration.<sup>22</sup> Also, it seems that the musical structure is reduced to something like geometrical shapes, which directly corresponds with the treatment of space in the novel: the writer sees it precisely through the prism of geometry. The linearity of the musical tissue and the repetition as the symbol of the circular can be compared to Bely's interpretation of the world – circularly and linearly as probably different, but nevertheless identical forms.<sup>23</sup> It can be said that the music of the opera establishes a correlation between the Apollonian form and the Dionysian content of the text.<sup>24</sup>

In that respect, the opera *Petersburg*, like the other two works, raises the basic question related to the position of the subject within the narrative, the subject's placement in time and the relationship of the musical parameters with the narrative structure and poetics of the libretto.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. the programme booklet for the premiere performance of the work.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Eva Maliti, *The World of Novel "Petersburg" by Andrei Bely*, Human Affairs, 8, 1998, 90.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Hilary Fink, *Andrei Bely and the Music of Bergsonian Duration*, The Slavic and East European Journal, 41/2, 1997, 289.

<sup>23</sup> Sandra Joy Russell, *The City as Dialectic: Andrei Bely's Creative Consciousness, its Nietzschean Influence, and the Urban Centre in Petersburg*, TranscUltrA, 1/4, 2011, 38.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Eva Maliti, op. cit., 288.

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