
NEW WORKS

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WHO AM I – I AM?: REFLECTIONS OF/ON SELF IN SRĐAN HOFMAN'S *OGLEDALO* [MIRROR] FOR TRIO (MEZZO-SOPRANO, VIOLONCELLO, PIANO) AND CHAMBER ENSEMBLE (2012)*

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Abstract: The article deals with Srđan Hofman's recent piece – *Ogledalo* for trio and chamber ensemble. The interpretation aims at discovering the vehicles for Hofman's procedures, as well as defining the results he achieved in the piece. Starting from the assumption that the piece, in a way, sublimates all of his previous achievements, the article follows the lines of Hofman's mature poetics in the form of a 'story' of composers searching and finding the answers to ontological, phenomenological and existential questions.

Key words: Serbian music, Srđan Hofman, chamber music, sound objects, becoming

...Once upon a time, in a land almost forgotten, and in an "interactive screen-free world", there was a composer who began his lifelong quest to answer two main questions: *who?* and *how?* So, back in those days, he started to compose (as in 'to put together') and decompose, arrange and rearrange, shape

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and reshape his reflections of sound, his reflections on music/the world. Each time he looked at his musical mirror, and heard his sound objects in space, the questions about their 'provenance' and about their 'destiny' kept popping up, as if he himself had been staring at the mirror at his own (interrogative) reflection(s). Hence, the questions about the objects he had invented, about who they were and how they worked, kept converging with the reflections of/on his own being, of who he was and of how he came to know the world, how varied and always new/the constant processes of his becoming were.

So, he kept searching/reflecting and becoming, through composing, in search of the 'perfect' sound object, capable of expressing the numerous ways in which he heard and sensed the world of music, the world around him. His attention was caught by the motion of spatial mirror reflections in *Pokretna ogledala* [*Moving Mirrors*],¹ then there was a feverish exploration of the intra-musical motion of 'pitch-objects' in *Heksagoni* [*Hexagons*].² Once he entered the studio and became familiar with how it worked, he was both blessed and doomed to continue his quest. He began reflecting via quotations/samples/signs, deconstructing their 'meanings', inventing new, non-existing ones – *Déjà vu*, *Bajka* [*Fairytales*], *Uzorci* [*Samples*], *Znakovi* [*Signs*], *Makamba Ritual*.³

In the process, he started looking at the screen more and more often, and it became his mirror. The question he once asked: "Who am I?" and tried to answer in Alice's manner, by entering the world behind the 'looking glass', now had to be rephrased since that world was not there anymore – only a flat, smooth surface that was already showing the world he was making. The quest had 'shifted' its direction, it moved not behind, but rested upon the surface that began to invade and penetrate the body of the 'beholder'. Thus, the questions

¹ *Pokretna ogledala* [*Moving Mirrors*] for two pianos (four performers), 1979.

² Cycle *Heksagoni* – *Monodrama*, *Farsa*, *Pastorala*, *Ritual* [*Hexagons* – *Monodrama*, *Farce*, *Pastoral*, *Ritual*]; for more cf. Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, *Stvaralačka prisutnost evropske avangarde u nas*, Beograd, Univerzitet umetnosti, 1981.

³ *Déjà vu*, tape (1985); *Kosamja? – bajka* [*Who am I? – a Fairytales*] for mezzo-soprano, eight actresses, female choir, chamber ensemble and magnetic tape (1988); *Uzorci* [*Samples*] for flute, clarinet and electronics (1991); *Znakovi* [*Signs*] for flute, violoncello, piano and live electronics (1995); *Makamba ritual* (1997) for female choir and chamber ensemble. For more cf. Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, *Fragments o muzičkoj postmoderni*, Matica srpska, Novi Sad, 1997, and: Vesna Mikić, "Hofman's Electroacoustic Music / Constructing a Story of Serbian Electroacoustics and Beyond", *Music and Society in Eastern Europe*, vol. 7, 2012, 11-21, Idyllwild, CA; Zoran Erić, "Signs, by Srđan Hofman, a Directory for the Use of Live Electronics, in the Process of Creating Real Music Time", *International Magazine for music New Sound*, 6, 1995, 101-105; Miško Šuvaković, "Mimesis of Mimesis. The Aesthetic as a Transgressive Element of Music", *International Magazine for music New Sound*, 10, 1997, 85-94; etc.

posed till then, questions that back then were still 'clinging' on a thin shred of *différance* between actualities of sounds of the self and self as such, permeated all strata, becoming one and the same with the statement of be(com)ing– I am.

WHO– MIRROR

Srđan Hofman (1944) is, of course, the composer in this story. And, the reason I have decided to begin the story in the manner of a fairy-tale is hidden in the relations that on the surface are shown in his latest piece, *Ogledalo* with his 1988 piece *Kosamja? – Bajka* for mezzo-soprano, eight actresses, female choir, chamber ensemble and tape. This story, however, is not a fairy-tale, inasmuch as the relations mentioned are nothing more than associative. Still, with the addition of the connections this piece has with the previous one –*Looking at the Mirrors by Anish Kapoor*,⁴ as well as Hofman's other compositions, they led me to a process of interpretation reduced to two 'simple' questions, I believe, are crucial for Hofman's poetics. Hence, if I am to tell who is in question in *Ogledalo*, I will start from the facts.

Ogledalo was written in 2012 for trio (mezzo-soprano, violoncello, piano) and chamber ensemble, consisting of a string orchestra with the addition of two flutes and two clarinets.⁵ Hence, for smaller and larger chamber orchestras, that of course could trigger the comparison with the medium of a Baroque concerto grosso. Yet, be it concerto grosso or not, more important seems to be the dual division, as such. It opens the space for ensembles to reflect upon one another instead of compete, and this is exactly the procedure Hofman came upon most obviously in his live electronic pieces such as *Duel*⁶ or *Looking at...* The 'surface' for this 'discovery' was that of a screen, not of a mirror. Hence, the notion of reflecting has actually been remediated in the medium of the flat, but responsive-interactive surface of the computer screen. In such an environment there is no way that the 'role playing' as a means of self-identification conceived for instance in *Fairytales* could still be possible.⁷ For, there is an interactive self-

⁴ *Gledajući u Ogledala Aniša Kapura* [Looking at the Mirrors of Anish Kapoor] for two amplified harps and Logic Pro software, 2010. For more cf. Vesna Mikić, "From (Listening to) Moving Mirrors to (Listening Through/In) Mirrors in Motion – Srđan Hofman: Looking at the Mirrors of Anish Kapoor for two Amplified Harps and Logic Pro Software, *International Magazine for Music New Sound*, 37, 1/2011, 63-74

⁵ The piece is devoted to the Ensemble *Gradilište*, and was commissioned by Belgrade Music Festival (BEMUS). It had its premiere in October 2012 in Kolarac Concert Hall in Belgrade.

⁶ *Duel* for piano and MIDI keyboard, 1996. More in: Vesna Mikić, "The Duel as the Answer", *International Magazine for Music New Sound*, 8, 1996, 39-42, and in Mikić, Vesna, "Hofman's Electroacoustic Music / Constructing a Story...", op.cit.

⁷ Referring to the 'role-playing' of actresses each of whom plays one female character from

identifying ‘feedback’ from that flat surface that penetrates and changes the ‘players’. Furthermore, not only that ‘concertino’ is the reflection of grosso and vice versa, but the voice, cello and piano, almost incessantly mirror one another. So, different and sometimes simultaneous sound reflections, distortions and echoes make the musical flow of the piece.

Recently, Hofman’s more frequent use of text and human voice(s) could be matter for another discussion, but for this interpretation it bears the signs of coming up, once again, to the answers to the questions asked. Notably, for this piece he chooses verses from two, not just one text: from the verbal-vocal-visual piece *Reflections* by David Taylor⁸, and excerpts from Sylvia Plath’s poem “Mirror” (App. 1).⁹ And, aware of the constant interaction between the two questions he’s asking, the inseparability of *who* and *how*, of mirror and reflection, of reflecting and becoming, he mixes the two texts, beginning with the mixture of Plath’s and Taylor’s verses and ending with Plath’s verses, while ‘filling’ the middle with the ‘echoes’ of Taylor’s *Reflections*.

Of course, the mezzo-soprano is the only medium for pronouncing the lyrics ranging from ‘silver and exact’ speech to widely flourished melismata of “I am” instrumental-like statements, but the rest of the ensemble joins it in their interpretation, sometimes giving way to ‘sound poetry’ moments with ‘exchanged’ roles of vocal and instrument (such as in recitative ‘solo entrances’ of the violoncello and voice, or imitative glissandi in voice and instruments on the word ‘swallow’, or in the moments where the composer demands the ‘re-sounding’ interpretation of the words ‘mirror’ or ‘fish’ by sustaining the voice at the consonant ‘r’ or ‘sh’, thus simulation of the instrumental or non-musical sounds, etc. Examples 1a, 1b).

Taylor’s lines bring about the specific word play typical for the verbal-vocal games Hofman himself is fond of. Hence he’s been attracted to the ‘echoing’ and ‘mirroring’ of each line of the poem, that in its circling poses the questions of who is reflecting who in the mirror, and the only answer one can get while looking at the mirror is the one confirmed by the reflection – I am.

On the other hand, Plath’s poem is shortened in the “gender-proof” way,¹⁰ putting forth the notion of the mirror’s truthfulness and objectivity, yet keeping the role the mirror assumes in the poem - the role of the (omnipresent) narrator.

the fairytales such as: stepmother, Cinderella, the witch, etc..

⁸ Presumably written in 2008 by British poet David Taylor (1956). Hofman uses the whole poem.

⁹ ‘Mirror’ was written in 1961, and appeared in the collection *Crossing the Water: Transitional Poems* (1971).

¹⁰ Of course, most of the analysis of this particular poem, as for that matter the Sylvia Plath’s work in general, focus at the woman issues dealt with in it.

Hence, the object becomes subject, yet only through the process of reflection. And, in reflecting it, shapes the subjects/objects it reflects. This is why Hofman decides to finish the work with the two last lines of Plath's poem,¹¹ even though they reject the proclaimed "objectivity" of the narrator. For, beside the fact that they structurally-wise had to be there (needless to say that the structure is symmetrically shaped, this 'codetta' balancing the opening bars of the piece), and moreover, the last word offers that particular 'sound picture' solution he's so fond of (which actually through the 'concrete' sound solution enables his music to 'fade out' in space as if it were electronic, see again Ex. 1b) the two lines introduce the time dimension necessary to confirm that the processes of becoming, of "I am" are endless and in constant flux.

Finally, who is the "I" of *Ogledalo*? Apart from the fact that the 'mirror' assumes the "I" position in "Plath's sections" of the piece, i.e. in the text spoken or sung, is there any other object/subject? And, there we meet again that 'perfect' Hofman's sound object we first met in *Duel*, and after that in *Muzičke igračke* [*Musical Toys*] for violoncello and doublebass, and in *Looking at...* (Example 2). It looks almost as if it moved from the 'obsessive', 'returning' object to the state of the 'self-confirming', perfect object. For, while in the previous three pieces it occurred as one of the materials (usually somewhat hidden in the opening sections and more evident in the fast, central ones), now it is the ultimate, omnipresent material. Its omnipresence is equal to the mirror's/screen's omnipresence, meaning that there is no reflection, no world, no self without it. It has been tested in a "one-on-one" manner for the piano medium in *Duel*, as well as a "one-on-one", this time, for the violoncello medium in *Muzičke igračke*. The "closeness" of the media (MIDI keyboard – piano; violoncello – doublebass) in both cases was not coincidental, it was envisioned as an investigation in the human-machine, and colour reflections' relations. The possibilities of sound reflecting were pushed further in *Looking at...* Now, as if the time has come for the perfect object to step up and stand for the self without fear of its 'unstable', 'subject/object', movable and shape shifting nature, admitting to its state of constant becoming through the interaction/reflection which enables it to state – I am, and that's all. Hence, the question "who" shall be temporarily dismissed, or maybe forgotten forever by this admission, or better yet, it will be reformulated in the "who is reflecting (who)" of Taylor's poem.

¹¹ "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish."

HOW – REFLECTIONS

Since we have established who the players of this mirroring/reflecting are, and that has often meant evoking the way they playing/reflect, since they are inseparable from how they are, let us turn to the specific reflections through which they are becoming in *Ogledalo*.

As already mentioned, the ‘perfect’ object plays the crucial part as does its specific ‘reflection’/echo structured in intervals of major/minor seconds and their inversions. This exchange of the ‘same’ that begins the piece, as well as its sequential transpositions would set the stage for the whole. Thus, the structure is driven from inside by the transpositions, inversions, shifts, divisions, ‘vertical/chordal reductions’ of the ‘perfect’ object, while from outside it is driven by the textual segmentation of the texts. The overall plan is designed as a three-part whole: the first section up to 4 bars before score mark J, the final beginning in mark BB with the string ‘chorale’.

The middle section revolves around Taylor’s ‘who is reflecting who’ lines (App. 1), while the outer section treats Plath’s verses and Taylor’s “am I: I am” line jointly. The further consequence of the concept to the structure is that each of the sections has been built in ‘double blocks’ of materials, double reflections of the same material, often paralleled by the sequential shift of the block adding to the expressiveness, “zooming in” on the reflection in question.

This procedure is especially successful in the middle section of the piece. Starting from not to long lasting, yet ‘screaming’ seconds in piano supported by flutes, and ‘inversion’ of the ‘perfect’ object, it announces the almost ‘Petroushkian’ sound and feeling of the section. Maybe those clarinets in B are not there just for their accordance with mezzo-soprano and cello? Really, ‘playful’ seconds in the piano part accompanied by strings with abrupt changes in dynamics, for a moment rephrase Stravinsky’s rhetorical question: “Aren’t we all the puppets on the strings of destiny” in the question: “Aren’t we all just the reflections of self/other?” (Ex. 3) After that, follows the gradation in double blocks with different actors- piano and cello with woodwinds and whole ensemble (score mark L), strings with piano (score mark N), trio with the accompaniment of flutes (by which the particular ‘metallic’ effect is obtained, score mark Q and after, and later in W), etc. The gradual immersion in the reflection by reflecting the results in horror, the almost expressionistic scream in the culmination (score marks from V to AA) achieved by the abrupt oscillations and exchange of energies of the grosso and concertino, which are finally ‘united’ in a tutti of almost destructive strength (from score mark Z). After this complete disaster of facing the truth in the mirror, peace arrives in the guise of a string ‘chorale’ at the be-

ginning of the final section. This moment of peace freezes the time/image, and the reflecting can start once again, towards the (temporary) conclusion...

I AM

Clashing with/stumbling upon one's own reflection while looking at the mirror is unavoidable. As the conclusion is that there is nothing behind it, there is only the reflection that, however, defines who we are for ourselves and, maybe others. The computer screen has taught us that the play takes place at the surface, and that there is nothing more than a constant re-inventing of the self that is destined to constant and an ever-different emerging, becoming and actualizing.

So, after numerous adventures, our composer seems to have come upon the answers he was seeking. For, the 'land' of *Ogledalo* showed him the answer that was so simple, yet hidden. And, he had to be wise and brave to face it. And, once he had done it, he knew. His sound objects, his music as himself were in a constant flux of re-invention. And, it suddenly struck him - however complex, however terrifying, however difficult, yet beautiful, innocent and comforting, 'everything I made are the reflections of (my) self'. And to that one, which is usually followed by the question – (who) am I? the best answer is – I am.

I am in this or that particular instant of the self, immersed in its own reflection, reflecting through time and space in these particular instances of actuality. Finally reaching the answer, the composer and his selves/reflections/sound objects continued to live happily ever after...

APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Sylvia Plath's and David Taylor's poems

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963)

Mirror (1961)

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.

What ever you see I swallow immediately

Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

I am not cruel, only truthful---

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.

It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long

I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.

Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,

Searching my reaches for what she really is.

Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.

I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.

I am important to her. She comes and goes.

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.

In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman

Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

N.B. - the underlined lines are the one Hofman uses in his piece.

David Taylor (1956)

Reflections (2008?)

am I : I am

:

reflecting who : who reflecting

:

mirrormirror, who : who, mirror mirror

.....:

who, mirror mirror: mirror mirror, who

:

who reflecting : reflecting who

:

I am : am I

Ex. 1 a

The musical score for Ex. 1 a consists of five staves. The top two staves are for the vocal line (M.S. and S.Vlc.), with lyrics written below the notes. The lyrics are: "Mirror Mir-ror re- flect - ting re- flect - ting", "who, mirror mirror: mirror mirror, who", and "who reflecting : reflecting who". The piano accompaniment (Pno.) is on the third staff, featuring complex rhythmic patterns and dynamics such as *pp*, *mf*, and *f*. The two flute parts (Fl.1 and Fl.2) are on the bottom two staves, with Fl.1 mostly silent and Fl.2 playing a few notes at the end of the piece.

Ex. 1 b

Musical score for Ex. 1 b. The score includes parts for M.S. (Mezzo-Soprano), S.Vlc. (Solo Violoncello), Pno. (Piano), Fl. 1 & 2 (Flutes), B♭ Cl. 1 & 2 (Clarinet in B-flat), and D.B. (Double Bass). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 52. The vocal line has lyrics: "her, like a ter - ri - ble (sh) _____ (sh)". The piano accompaniment includes a section titled "Inside the Piano" with the instruction "with the palm of the hand". Dynamics range from *ppp* to *ff*. The flute parts include "key slaps" and "a niente" markings. The double bass part starts with *pp*.

Ex. 2

Musical score for Ex. 2. The score includes parts for M. Soprano (Mezzo-Soprano), Solo Cello, Piano, Flute 1, Flute 2, Clarinet in B♭ 1, and Clarinet in B♭ 2. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 56-60. The vocal line has lyrics: "I am silver and exact." The Solo Cello part includes markings for *pizz.*, *arco*, *sul Sol*, *sul La*, *pizz. s. arco*, and *pizz.*. The piano accompaniment includes dynamics *f* and *p*. The flute parts include a sixteenth-note pattern marked *pp*.

Ex. 3

The musical score for Ex. 3 is written for Piano (Pno.), Flute 1 (Fl. 1), Flute 2 (Fl. 2), Bass Clarinet 1 (B. Cl. 1), and Bass Clarinet 2 (B. Cl. 2). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 52. The score is divided into three measures with changing time signatures: 3/4, 4/4, and 3/4. The Piano part features dynamics of *ff*, *f*, *mf*, *p*, and *f*. The Flute parts play *ff* in the first measure. The Bass Clarinet parts play *p* in the second and third measures. A circled 'J' is placed above the Piano staff in the third measure. Performance markings include accents, slurs, and a sixteenth-note sextuplet in the Piano part.