
FESTIVALS AND SYMPOSIA

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The 22nd International Review of Composers (Belgrade, 7–11 November 2013)

For several years now, the Composers' Association of Serbia and Ivan Brkljačić, the programme selector of the International Review of Composers, have organized the festival around particular topics. Thus, recent editions of the festival have been inspired by music miniatures, the 'spatiality' of music, music theatre, vocal pieces, the promotion of new ensembles for contemporary music, and, in 2013, by a "Step into the Unusual", which was the motto of the 22nd International Review of Composers held in Belgrade between 7 and 11 November 2013.

Lately (and after all that the 20th and early 21st century brought on), the issue of the 'unusual' has in fact intensified into the 'bizarre', and this 'bizarreness' has been measured against the experiences and tradition of our local setting. Whether one

'steps' into the unusual and 'dives' into the bizarre is another question and both choices confronted the festival audience with a delightful intellectual game. Where is the individual aesthetic-empiric threshold situated when something becomes unusual or bizarre?

At any rate, the six festival concerts, organized by performing apparatuses i.e. ensembles, provided ample opportunities for such measuring and relating of the eclectic and the traditional, the ordinary and the uncommon, the strange and the bizarre. Apart from the *4Saxess*, an excellent Slovenian saxophone quartet, the stage was occupied by exquisite Serbian ensembles dedicated to contemporary music: the *LP Piano Duo*, the *Construction Site Ensemble*, the *Taurus Guitar Duo*, the *Accordion Ensemble*, and the *Studio 6 Contemporary Music Collective*.

Over the past ten years or so, the International Review of Composers has gained and expanded its audience, who once again filled the Hall of the National Bank of Serbia, the festival's home venue secured by courtesy of the host, as well as the newly acquired spaces of the Studio 6 at Radio Belgrade and the Americana Hall at the Belgrade Youth Centre. Obviously, the concert-going audience follow the Review in ever increasing numbers and are interested both in contemporary domestic achievements and global stylistic and per-

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forming trends. At the 22nd International Review of Composers, a total of 50 works were performed: 28 by domestic authors and 22 by authors from Hungary, the Netherlands, the United States, Colombia, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Japan, Slovenia, FYR Macedonia, Spain, Italy, Turkey, Ukraine, and Greece.

The *bizarria* began right on the opening night (at the Belgrade Youth Centre), with a concert that was one of the festival pinnacles: popular keyboard ensemble *LP Duo* with a programme for analogue synthesizers! The pop music of the 1970s and 1980s resonated once more through its original instruments (how did they ever find and restore them for the concert?!), this time in a postmodern, post-minimalist, and cross-over guise. The interrelating of these stylistic traits resounded with a pronounced pop-nostalgia in the works by the Dutch authors (Huba de Graaf, Chiel Meijering), post-minimalism (Kim Helweg from Denmark and Marc Melits from the United States), postmodernism (the nondescript Colombian Antonio Correa; a brilliant authorial couple from Serbia, Vladimir Pejković and Božidar Obradinović), and eclecticism (Ivan Božičević, educated in Belgrade, now living in Croatia). The bizarreness of this concert was completed by a performance of *Hungarian Rock* and *Continuum* – Ligeti's works from the 1960s and 1970s – but in an arrangement for analogue synthesizers instead on a harpsichord. Thus, in the nostalgic aura of post-modernist dealing with musical odds and ends, a strange encounter occurred between two historical peers: Ligeti's music and rock analogue keyboards.

The second concert featured the agile *Construction Site* Ensemble for New Music

(at Radio Belgrade's Studio 6), who on this occasion included not only strings, a flute and clarinet, but also a recorder, performed by Karolina Bäter as a guest. The programme included works for a standard string quartet (*Face 12 & 18* by Ionel Petroi from Serbia/France), string trio (*String Trio* by Hikari Kiyama from Japan; *Danze rustiche*, Op. 214, by Dejan Despić from Serbia), as well as clarinet and violoncello (*Four Pieces that Could Not Look Any Other Way* by Miloš Zatkalik from Serbia), flute, clarinet, violin, and viola (*Son-Barva* by Ana Korsun from Ukraine), flute and double bass (*Diva* by Stanislava Gajić from Serbia), recorder solo (*Soliloquy V* by Thomas Simaku from Albania / United Kingdom), and *Groove 1217* by Bill Doerfeld from the United States. Surprisingly, it was the classical string trio and string quartet that eventually sounded the most bizarre: through wanton playing with polytonality and folk melodic-rhythmic patterns in Ionel Petroi's piece and through *otaku*, i.e. 'estranged music', in composition by Hikari Kiyama, who made the instruments growl, grumble, squeal, and roar in the tempi of hysteric urban life. Yet such a setting led to another radical twist, whereby the neoclassical work by the doyen Dejan Despić sounded utterly bizarre next to the other works performed that night, as their traditional poetical 'negative'. Also, by its carefully calibrated timbres and delicate textures, Ukrainian Ana Korsun's piece left a very favourable impression as a lyrical 'stepping out'.

The third festival evening (at the Hall of the National Bank of Serbia) featured the *4Saxess* quartet from Slovenia with the task of gathering authors from the former Yugoslav republics: Igor Lunder and Nenad

Firšt from Slovenia, Jana Andreevska and Pande Šahov from FYR Macedonia, and Vladimir Tošić, Ivan Brkljačić, and Ante Grgin from Serbia. The most favourable impression was made by Jana Andreevska's *Am I a Falcon, a Storm*, a refined and subtle setting of Rilke's poetry, and by Ivan Brkljačić's concise and witty *Četiri temperamenta* [*Four Temperaments*]. Vladimir Tošić made a new adaptation of his minimalist opus *Altus*, Nenad Firšt wrote some serious post-avant-garde music under the title of *Hip*, and Pande Šahov described a few personal poetic impressions from the United Kingdom in a picturesque, extensive, and academically narcissistic score. Some of the authors (Igor Lunder, an excerpt from his *Pre-Jazz Trilogy*, and Ante Grgin, *Sonata for Saxophone and Piano*) succumbed to the habit of writing the commonplace kind of music that everyone first thinks of when it comes to the saxophone. Thus, we also heard eclectic para-academic reminiscences of jazz, which was hardly 'a step into the unusual'.

Works for small chamber ensembles were presented at two concerts (on 10 November), the first of which was mostly dedicated to the sound of guitar(s) and the second to that of accordion(s). Both concerts featured pieces experimenting with sound, compositional techniques, and playing, thus pertaining to the festival motto – a 'step into the unusual'. At the first concert, Agustin Castilla-Avila from Spain used three prepared guitars in his *Caged Music II & III*, a piece of subtle nuances at the threshold of audibility; Tatjana Milošević examined the strictness of the chosen compositional systems and their distribution between two violas (*Vice versa*); while Jovanka Trbojević (Serbia/Finland) took a

contemporary view of Bartók's folk arrangements for two violins (*Imajući Bartoka na umu* [*With Bartók in Mind*]). Also, Anica Sabo (*Nasmeh v slovarju* [*A Smile in the Dictionary*]) stepped into instrumental music theatre (having the violist play and recite verses by Slovenian poets), while Dragana Jovanović in her gossamer and semi-ironic way 'fused' the artistic and pop genres in *Prelude No. 1*, a miniature for two guitars. *Pulsar*, an ambient-programmatic piece for two guitars by Đorđe Marković, was every bit true to its title – its musical tissue pulsed, expanded and deflated again, while *Danse burlesque* by the Canadian Daniel Mehdizadeh, written for two guitars, presented a witty, contemporary, sarcastic, and satiric view of folklore. The remaining authors that night (Mirjana Živković and Jelena Dabić) fell in line with their own eclectic poetical procedures without apparently 'stepping out'.

The accordion concert was also one of this year's Review's high points, because it most strikingly showed the difference between 'typicality', 'stepping out', and 'bizarreness'. Namely, as composers often regard the accordion as a diminished, underdeveloped relative of the organ, they strive, when composing for the accordion (or groups of accordions), to match the organ's breadth and intensity of sound, its timbre and broad range of registers. Naturally, some domestic authors also resort to folk motives, which are also part of this eclectic world of the accordion as a 'lesser being' in the world of instruments. This would apply to the pieces by Jasna Veljanović-Ranković (*Fantazija* [*Fantasy*]), Matija Anđelković (*Mrtva priroda* [*Still Life*]), Ljubomir Nikolić (*Balkanski motivi* [*Balkan Motives*]), and even Draško

Adžić (*Die Drehorgel*), whose work was the most original in this group. A completely different attitude was assumed by Sonja Mutić, who explored the accordion as an autochthonous instrument and found inspiration in making the bellows ‘breathe’ and the keys ‘whisper’ by pressing them lightly, as did the Italian Ada Gentile, with her subtle and unpretentious correlations with the blues in *Blue andante*, whereas similar experiments with the instrument’s sound could be heard in *Soluk/suz* by Mesruh Savaş from Turkey.

This year’s International Review of Composers was closed by a concert of the Studio 6 Ensemble on 11 November, whose ‘common denominator’ was the recorder in the hands of the German virtuoso Karolina Bäter. Their programme was also sufficiently diverse, and its unblemished jewel of ‘bizarreness’ was *Paragraph 6* for a chamber ensemble by Cornelius Cardew, a British avant-gardist from the last century. Confronted with such original bizarreness from the historical avant-garde, one certainly must review one’s notions of the ordinary, extraordinary, and bizarre. There was a reason for ending the festival with this piece: it was a small ironic bow from the programme selector who, after 50 or so contemporary works, finally presented us with a work that was both ‘the most contemporary’ and oldest. The Review’s closing evening also featured *Trigonometrija* [*Trigonometry*], Bojan Barić’s ambientally conceived, luminous, and cheerful piece for recorder, oboe, trumpet, and tape, as well as *While Ripples Enlace* for recorder and tape by the Japanese Kotoka Suzuki, who, over the gentle course of her piece inspired by Telemann’s music, created ambient sounds of water, with quotations of

original baroque melodies ‘glowing’ or ‘stepping out’ only at the very end. Branka Popović took interest in linear and circular schematics, i.e. drones, ostinatos, and pulsations of musical particles, which represented these shapes in sound (*Lines & Circles* for recorder, trumpet, harp, and tape). The works by Nickos Harizanos from Greece (*Echo*, Op. 34), Božo Banović (*Ne suviše blistavo more* [*Not an Overly Glittering Sea*]), and Svetlana Maksimović (*Seni prethodnika* [*The Shadows of Predecessors*]), each in its own eclectic way, explored chosen fragments from the history of musical styles: avant-garde sonority, the discourse of Ravel and Poulenc, and post-impressionism, respectively. The most successful was Jasna Veličković’s composition *Kiseonik* [*Oxygen*] for recorder, trumpet, keyboard, harp, and accordion, with plenty of brilliant instrument preparing, which yielded bizarre and witty acoustic results. Her excellent treatment of musical time and expert post-minimalist reduction of material and compositional-technical procedures resulted in a global arc form and an exciting, even moving conclusion.

In a country where performances of domestic symphonic works (from whatever time period) can be counted on the fingers of one hand and where not a single official institution commissions new pieces of artistic music, it is vitally important that our only international chamber festival of contemporary music has had another successful edition. This new branding of the International Review of Composers as a “Step into the Unusual” was rewarding, in spite of almost total negligence by those institutions of Serbia and Belgrade that proudly display the word ‘culture’ in their names.