
MEMORIES

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*Ivana Ognjanović**
*Marko Nikodijević**

GORAN KAPETANOVIĆ: IN TRACES OF MEMORY/FLASHBACKS**



“Goran has died.” It was a moment when all you could do was close your eyes in horror and hope that the email message would be gone when you opened them again; that you’re having a bad dream, from which you’re trying to wake up, like scared children covering their eyes with their hands.

He went peacefully, in his sleep. Along with him, an age went, too,

never to return, leaving unfinished conversations in its wake, dilemmas, and open questions, a bunch of wonderful memories, all that made the moment of that terrifying revelation utterly unbearable. Another blow was the news that I had a concert scheduled three hours after the funeral, but in another country. The spasm of a smile I kept on my face in rehearsals those days, trying to remain composed and dedicated to my work, turned into tears in my hotel room. It’s hard to cry over Skype. Two days after the concert, I returned to Belgrade, which, without Goran, would never be the same.

* Author’s contact information: ivana.ognjanovic@gmail.com; markomn@yahoo.com

** These two perspectives of memories will be orthographically differentiated: the ‘voice’ of Ivana Ognjanović will be marked with the Roman typeface, while the ‘voice’ of Marko Nikodijević will be marked as Italic.

“Goran has died.” I’m standing frozen at Heathrow Airport, waiting to board, and staring at the screen of my mobile phone. The feeling of contented fatigue following an author’s recital in London is replaced by a state of shock. I’m dragging my hand luggage with me and it seems as if a ton of memories were blocking the wheels, because I can’t move. An unfathomable and horrid feeling of existential solitude, a paralysis of thought. Whatever was left unsaid will remain unsaid forever. I need my closest ones to cry with me over Skype.

Code of Echo (1992) for 15 strings was the first piece by Goran that I heard during a Camerata academica recording session in the hall of the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad. I didn’t know who Goran was; I just noticed a tall, slender figure with a pleasant face, who was “milling about” among the ensemble, Professor Erić,¹ and the sound engineer. Later I found out that was Goran, a student of Erić. A month or two later, sitting with Professor Erić in his office at the time, Goran was advising me what keyboard to buy and whether to get a used or a new computer. Another year would go by before we became close friends.

I met Goran during my entrance exam in 1997, where he “chaperoned” us, candidates, during the five-hour sitting. For as long as Goran worked at the Faculty,² our relationship was distanced and professional, and we addressed each other in the formal manner; my admiration for my brilliant colleague was adolescently boundless.

My friendship with Goran occupies a special place in my life. Our shared “psychologizings” all day on various topics and current problems and conversations about whatever was making our lives more pleasant or utterly unbearable grew over the years into all-nighters at his place, with his mother Milena’s exquisite cuisine, and along with another one or two friends who’d drop by unannounced (as always) and stay till dawn, not wanting to miss a great party. Unforgettable were the “twisted” humour and stream of consciousness of those evenings that often crossed the boundaries imposed on us by good manners, which Goran especially enjoyed. I will never forget ideas that only he – brilliantly intelligent, multitalented, witty – could think of and that connected quite incompatible things into something else. Spontaneous translations of popular songs and titles of compositions in various situations and contexts, typically about people from our circle and about us, about situations in which we found ourselves at the time and the life experiences we were undergoing, or simply one of his typical moments of inspiration triggered by high spirits, were an obligatory part of his peculiar manner of communication. Goran’s ingenious

¹ Zoran Erić, professor of composition and orchestration at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, in whose class Goran Kapetanović graduated composition in 1996 (editorial note).

² The Faculty of Music in Belgrade (editorial note).

emails of support to Marko and me during our studies in Germany, our chats together, are a treasure and a unique archive that I still keep.

Nor did our relationship change when he became an assistant at the Department of Composition at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. Moreover, that encouraged me to ask him questions about things that had confused me for years (and my ego hadn't allowed me to ask him before). Goran's explanations were always so clear and logical that they made you wonder how you couldn't understand those things before. Today I often think how many people would've graduated from the Faculty of Music enriched by that experience, had Goran stayed on as a lecturer. Few people know about his gift for mathematics, so I thought that sound programming could bring him back to music and composing. Unfortunately, I did not succeed in drawing his interest to that, which I consider a great personal failure of mine.

Our friendship began in earnest sort of by accident, through shared acquaintances and friends. When we came out of our formal relations at the Faculty of Music, the discipline and distance that academic good manners impose on teaching staff towards students, a deep friendship evolved between us. In fact, it was a mental ménage à trois – Ivana Ognjanović was the third and inseparable link. Trust, that most exclusive privilege of friendship, knowing that he shared with you his most intimate thoughts... The void resulting from his departure is unfathomable.

Carefree memories of our alternating, almost syncopated bursts of laughter, explosions of wittiness at everybody's and especially our own expense, an essential category of friendship that we shared: enjoyment and happiness in mutual closeness and presence.

We retained our deep rapport even after my departure from Belgrade, but the best memories go back to the endless nights and days of our socializing together. He was a magnet and centre of gravity, the figura dramatis of our lives. Capricious like an opera diva, moody, with a somewhat cinematic penchant for mysterious disappearances and reappearances (which we had to accept as a natural phenomenon – it never crossed his mind to explain why he missed a scheduled meeting), quite in line with that Latin proverb: Quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi.

Another wish of mine that will remain unfulfilled is that Goran publish a book of recipes; I got the idea from the witty style of the recipe for American pancakes he gave me, which I relay here in its entirety.

Anyway, following carefully conducted scientific measurements, I've come to the irrefutable conclusion that a cup (the American unit of measurement equal to 0.25 litres in volume) is identical to a FULL TO THE BRINK, EVENED Serbian yoghurt cup, so henceforward the implication is that you should use that as your unit of measurement:

For the quantity of pancakes we had at my place, you need:

Dry ingredients:

2 cups of flour

1 packet of baking powder

3 tablespoons of sugar (or less, if you prefer them less sweet)

0.5 teaspoon of salt

Liquid ingredients:

2 large eggs

1.5 cup of milk

2 tablespoons of oil

You mix all the dry ingredients. You mix all the liquid ingredients and then add the mixed dry ingredients. If the batter seems too thick, you can add some milk, but no more than a quarter of a cup, so as not to water it down too much. If you have time, they say it's not bad to leave the batter alone for awhile (cc. 20 min.) before frying. If you're a total waste of space, you can separate the eggs and add only the yolks to the dough and whip the whites into a foam, and then add them to the batter like that, for "an ultimate airy experience". It'd be ideal to fry them without oil on a non-sticky surface. A pancake should be flipped when the upside gets "smallpox", i.e. when it's covered with little bubbles.

Fillings: whatever crosses your mind. Cream cheese, salami, ham, pâté, mayonnaise, cream cheese sprinkled with powdered garlic, butter with nothing else, ham and grated cheese, ham and finely chopped dill... Not to mention the sweets.

Goran is the wittiest person I've ever met; his perspicuity and education, the speed and depth with which he comprehended the world around him: the extraordinary capabilities of an extraordinary man. His comments, made en passant, turned my ideas of some people and phenomena upside down. It was his wide shot with which he saw the world.

Behind the mask of his brilliant witticisms, venomous remarks, and (usually rhyming) word puns there was a sensibility at odds with his impressive tall figure. Overly sensitive, in proportion to his unbelievable intelligence and wittiness, he had a hard time taking the "torments of his heart"; his hypersensitive nature was known only to his closest friends. The aura of a cold cynic, which

he carefully cultivated, was his public mask. He took everything to heart; his brilliant mind was not thick enough. What I saw as petty bourgeois spite hurt him like betrayal.

When the Composers' Review introduced its student awards in 1996 and the first of those "first awards" (single quotation marks would not suffice here) went to Goran's *Speed*, it hit him right in the heart – it was a slap to his invention, placing it in the category of student works, as a public rebuke against a fictional lack of independent composing. Still, I can't remember another piece being so eagerly awaited that year, polarizing our little, so little interested public.

Speed exploded, pulsating with a new, autochthonous sensibility, anticipating a different spirit of the time. Manifest in expression and form, *Speed* turned academic ideas of developmental form and orchestral dynamics "upside down"; as a triumph of concept over old-fashioned ideas of "musicality". Goran's reputation as the *enfant terrible* of Serbian music was thereby cemented.

Speed is composed in three by every musical parameter heterogeneous sections, highly disproportionate in length. The texture and density of the orchestration are also as contrasting as possible. The connecting factor of the overlapping rhythmic formulae (dominated by a complementary samba rhythm) is their cohesive factor. The simultaneous, almost soloistically layered "squeaking" of violin harmonics and pointillist staccato chords of smaller orchestral groups in the first section is totally contrasted to the extensive, almost unbroken orchestral tutti of the central section. Precisely that central section turns the orchestra into a pulsating rhythm machine, defying the traditional order of the chordal and textural stability of a symphonic orchestra.

His final finished composition, *Tormento del mio cuore* (*The Torment of My Heart*) for a double women's choir, mixed choir, and two horns, is his most intimate work. In it, music comes to the brink of silence. The musical material is reduced down to the minimum: simple melodies and imitative procedures over extended pedals, rare harmonic changes that emanate an almost Gesualdoan spleen, frozen chordal surfaces in which voices are mutually hocketting chord notes, scattered horns from the off. The choirs have no text, not even the compulsory vowels (a rule that Goran probably considered a boring academicism); eloquently, authentically, and compellingly they express the ineffable – the torment of the heart. Following *Tormento*, Goran did not complete any more pieces. Most of his pieces have been performed only once and most of the premières were less than optimal. We are obliged to preserve his contribution to Serbian music, above all by presenting his music to the audience again and by preserving it in score.

Another unfinished project that Goran left is his chamber opera *Little Mermaid*. That *Brief Account...* (1994)³ was only the first step towards that goal. He conceived the character of Ursula the Witch as four singers physically joined in one dress, representing thereby the different sides of that character. Goran's invention was inexhaustible. A number of years later, I saw a similar solution in a Robert Wilson staging of *Woyzeck*, where the Doctor character was played by two actors tied together, a man and a woman, showing the character's duplicity and sort of madness.

I wished Goran's quiet abandonment of his vocation as a composer to be temporary. Now I feel disturbed, because I was lucky enough to see his sketches for pieces he will never write: a one-hour cycle of piano studies modelled after Ligeti and Chopin; a sketch of the first study, with quick octave leaps and jazzy syncopation, stood for years on his upright piano, like a carelessly left letter. The idea of the opera Little Mermaid never ceased to preoccupy him.

I never thought I would skim through the composer legacy of a friend, assuming that "some other people" did that sort of thing. My wish is that his music will not be forgotten, that not a single piece will remain locked away in a cupboard or accidentally discarded, not only because most of his (so-called student) compositions won awards – one of them was shortlisted for the Gaud-eamus award – but also because of their quality, originality, and the significance they command in Serbian contemporary music.

Goran was able to dramatically step into Serbian music with only a handful of compositions written during his formative studies (Zoran Erić proudly commended Goran's independence as a unique case in his career in pedagogy), and he then immediately withdrew into silence.

For a long time now, Goran's music has been unjustly absent from the Serbian concert stage. I was appalled by the fact that new students of composition have never heard of Goran Kapetanović. We may find reasons for that in various circumstances, the disinterest of others, perhaps also vanity, but also in his own neglect or resistance – a desire to withdraw entirely from whatever reminded him of a bygone time, covered with fine dust that prevented him from drawing a deep breath without it getting stuck in his throat. Along with Goran, there ended a time when we eagerly awaited new compositions from our elder and younger colleagues alike. His departure from the active music scene closed the door on an age in the culture of Serbia remembered only by those who strive not to forget it. My shelves today are full of Goran's translations from English.

³ The full title of the work reads *A Brief Account of the Inexorable and Tragic Course of Destiny that Led the Little Mermaid's Fragile Being into Total Disaster*.

He was shortlisted for translator of the year already in the early years of doing that job and later proclaimed one of the leading translators in Serbia.

People often couldn't understand what was hiding behind a seemingly too self-confident young man, who touched the stars in every line of work he took up.

Lately, he returned to concert halls, but as a listener. He had a quite clear picture of the current situation on Serbia's contemporary music scene. At the annual examination of doctoral students of composition, skimming through my orchestral score, just a few minutes before the exam itself, he spotted three serious errors that no one on the committee had seen – Goran's sharp eye never missed a thing.

Goran's life, brutally and terribly cut short, symbolically marks the tragedy of a misunderstood and lost generation. It is the bitter and too frequent fate of a generation that, instead of changing the aesthetic direction of Yugoslav and Serbian music, instead of lending a new face to the "Belgrade" school of composition, retreated from the nihilism of war into external and internal emigration and almost invariably into a deafening silence. The end result of that exodus into silence is crushing.

Grillparzer's epitaph on Schubert's grave is a fitting and terrible summary of the sorrow and gravity of our farewell to Goran Kapetanović: "Here music has buried a treasure, but even fairer hopes".⁴

⁴ Goran Kapetanović (1969–2014) was born in Sisak, Croatia. Upon graduating from the High School of Mathematics in Belgrade, with no secondary formal training in music, he enrolled in the composition class of Professor Zoran Erić at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. He graduated in 1996 with *Speed*, a symphonic orchestra piece, and became an assistant at the Department of Composition and Orchestration. After six years of working at the Faculty, Goran withdrew from musical life and took up translating, mostly for the Laguna publishing house and later for *New Sound: International Magazine for Music*.

In his compact but major oeuvre, beside *Speed* (which won the First Prize in the category of student works at the 1997 Composers' Review), other pieces that stand out include *Tormento del mio cuore* for a mixed choir and two horns, a piece commissioned by the Obilić choral society in 1995, *Code of Echo* for 15 strings, a piece he wrote in his third year at the Faculty, and *A Brief Account of the Inexorable and Tragic Course of Destiny that Led the Little Mermaid's Fragile Being into Total Disaster* for an ensemble of soloists and magnetic tape, a work from his fourth year at the Faculty, which won the second prize at the 1994 International Composers' Review, as well as the October Prize of the City of Belgrade for young artists.

Among Goran's numerous translations from English, especially noteworthy are those of Barbara Kingsolver's novel *The Poisonwood Bible*, Jonathan Frenzen's *Corrections*, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Ray Bradbury *Fahrenheit 451*, and Cormack McCarthy's *Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West*.