

Article received on 8th October 2015

Article accepted on 9th October 2015

UDC: 785.7.083.2

78.071.1 Тошић В.

COBISS.SR-ID 223353612

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MEDIAL 623 BY VLADIMIR TOŠIĆ

Abstract: The subject of the article is *Medial 623*, a piece by Vladimir Tošić, and examines the composer's "trademark" strict minimalist style in light of the "postmodernist turn".

Key words: minimalism, reductionism, abstraction, repetitiveness, postmodernism, simulation, play, phantasm

It is fifty years since the première of the first minimalist work of music, Steve Reich's *It's Gonna Rain*, which was based on playing segments from a sermon by Brother Walter on two phase-synchronized tape recorders. Also, it is forty years since Vladimir Tošić wrote the first minimalist piece in Serbian music, *Mélange* for piano, timpani, gong, and cymbals. That is long enough to address the "minimalist revolution" from a diachronic perspective and to observe the individual stylistic paths of its main representatives.

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In Serbia, Vladimir Tošić¹ is the most prominent representative of the minimalist style in music, to which he remained loyal for four decades. Prone to objectifying and analyzing not only the creative process as such, but also his own style, Tošić has observed his own compositional and technical procedures, musical language, and its stylistic phases with ample clarity, articulation, and logic.²

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¹ Cf. Marija Masnikosa, *Muzički minimalizam*, Clio, Beograd, 1998, 188–192.

² "A significant and prominent trait in Vladimir Tošić's oeuvre is his novel organization of the work, which is almost invariably processual. This means that form emerges through

The reductionist procedure, that is, minimalist concept remains at the core of his music even today. But has everything really remained so “minimal”, that is, literally abstract in terms of observing/perceiving music as a re-shaped/organized acoustic event/data/process? Does the composer remain content with thinking about and/through sound in terms and techniques of a science resting on algorithmic (para-)mathematical logic? Radicality is always a short-lived though far-reaching and powerful excess in any kind of creativity. The more defined and narrowly determined an autochthonous (radical, integral, avant-garde) artistic language is, the less likely it is to exhibit internal aberrations and diversity of expression, which is why I am under the impression that Vladimir Tošić (for that reason precisely) has occupied, for over two decades now, the peculiar position of ever more prominently treating his own style as a postmodernist: quoting, paraphrasing, and imitating of himself. In my opinion, self-referentiality is not detrimental to his music; it is only that his style imperceptibly evolved from radical minimalism into the “postmodern condition”.

The way his fine and carefully measured changes of sound unfold in all of his (standard) minimalist and reductionist pieces, in the same way, from a broader perspective, one may notice the appearance of symptoms of postmodernist self-referentiality in his compositional procedure, which is “wrapped up” in its own self.³ The first symptom of that self-observant musical expression was

a rather gradual development of an initial core, by using the selected procedure, wherefrom everything else is derived, with no sudden changes or clashes of different musical materials. This principle is very important, because this music of moods, not events, rests on fine and slow changes of sonority, which necessarily and inevitably entails relatively long durations, when compared to the materials presented. Tension is therefore lower, but more protracted. To make development as gradual and seamless as possible, a suitable sonic material is likewise necessary, which typically rests on the harmonic series, arranged into an aliquot mode. This mode comprises a series of odd-numbered pitches from the harmonic series, arranged within an octave. The harmonic series was selected deliberately, because it simultaneously constitutes the neutral and all-encompassing fundamental basis of sound, which is heard continually along both the horizontal and vertical axes of the work. From this kind of processual organization of the work, there usually emerges a symmetric arc-shaped form, with all of its parameters rising or falling in the same direction. Thus almost all of Vladimir Tošić’s works may be described as sharing some important and noticeable traits: 1) processual organization, 2) symmetric arc-shaped form, and 3) insistence upon “colour”; *ibid.*, 189.

³ Here is what the composer himself has said about different stages of his oeuvre: “In the initial stage of my work, around 1990, it is noticeable that the basic parameter of sound that attracted me the most was colour, or musical timbre... Already my first work, *Melanž*, rests only on mixing (*mélange*) four sound colours and on certain principles... This group of pieces also comprises *Hromoserije* (Chromoserries), *Fuzija* (Fusion), and *Ne/zavisnost* (In/dependence)... Following that period, colour became an equal factor in my works. The en-

the phenomenon of the composer's arranging of one and the same content for different instrumental ensembles and thus "observing" (listening to) it in various timbral and factual aliases.⁴ It is unclear (and probably irrelevant) which one of them is the principal or original one and all one can establish is which one of them was the first to be performed in public. Thus gradually and seamlessly, by means of diverse timbral articulation of the same musical material and essentially without affecting his own minimalist procedure, Tošić started moving toward postmodernist fiction. His fixation on integral, processual, and reductionist minimalism thus began turning into fiction. According to Marija Masnikosa, the best connoisseur of Tošić's oeuvre, since 2010 the composer's oeuvre has entered its third stage, beginning with *Medial 623* (2011) and *Rondo* (2011).⁵ I would hazard to argue that those pieces also marked Tošić's self-observant/self-analytical/self-interpreting "postmodern turn". Writing about this period, beginning in 2010, M. Masnikosa argues that "his works are still 'signed' by his usage of the aliquot mode, his processes are shorter and somewhat freer, his repetitive models acquire motivic organization, while his pieces are segmented, though the contrasts between individual segments are never too pronounced. What is different is the texture of Tošić's pieces from this time. Already his layered repetitive models themselves [...] have lost their non-hierarchical organization and contextual neutrality. Their 'tri-dimensional' structure, which simulates a conventionally coded texture – melody-theme + accompaniment – combined with a diatonic vertical axis, refers to the pre-modernist, tonal musical practice. In this way Tošić's repetitive models actually simulate a traditional organization of musical material, wherein one may 'inscribe' different linguistic-stylistic meanings [...]"⁶ Thus began the composer's play with his own works and compositional and technical peculiarities, as well as universal meanings inscribed in music, and where play begins – there begins postmodern fiction as well.⁷

suining period was perhaps characterized by *colouring* one and the same piece in different ways, by arranging it for different ensembles. Sometimes, that produces interesting results, because the character of the instrument supplies some entirely new dimensions to the same piece (e.g. *Variational, Voxal, Dual...*)", Z. Premate, "Minimalizam je u meni našao idealnu rezonantnu kutiju", *Politika*, culture supplement, 31 January 2015, 2.

⁴ Thus his cycle *Medial* comprises, among other pieces, *Medial 1* for solo flute or piano or violoncello and harp; *Medial 2* is for a flute chorus or for piano or chamber ensemble, whereas *Medial 623* is an orchestral piece.

⁵ M. Masnikosa, public lecture at the forum of the Centre for Musical Action and Composers' Association of Serbia, 27 March 2015, addressing precisely these pieces.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Cf. Z. Premate, *Dvanaest lakih komada*, Belgrade, Prosveta, 1997, 153–78.

In his works from 2011, *Medial 623* and *Rondo*, Vladimir Tošić continued “conquering freedom” from his own (rigidly understood) style, by integrating already narrowly defined and eclectically clearly recognizable references to a general fictional “Western European artistic musical” language into an existing repetitive-processual model. More specifically: into necessary (reduction!) formal-expressive symbols/sublimates of the musical language that ruled Western European music from the 17th to the 20th century, but which, in such a concise interpretation, never quite existed up to now.

The questions are the following: is this a case of reconstructing or re/constructing the musical language of Western Europe, based on tonality and thematic formal patterns?

Does the composer treat this content as a material or theme of his own?

Besides the concept, did Tošić begin to invest in the context as well?

Has a modernist thus become a postmodernist?

*Medial 623*⁸ is an orchestral suite comprising two fast movements framing the slow middle movement, while all three of them exhibit mutual similarities in terms of the harmonic progression of their processes (third relations), as well as being structured in “a non-tripartite reprise form”,⁹ which, however, may be identified according to its “thematic” characteristics.¹⁰ The scores of the first (*Medial 6*) and third segment (*Medial 3*) contain clear indications of different layers: four-bar repetitive models, each one of which containing a “slower” bass line, a “pulsation” or “figuration” line, and melodic-rhythmic models acting like melodies-themes. All of this bears too much resemblance to a classic score, to be just a coincidence. “It is interesting that during the repetitive process, in this initial four-bar aggregate [...] model, only the ‘selected’ pitches change and, consequently, the harmonic vertical! The aggregate repetitive model here acts like a cast mould, wherein, almost every two bars, new pitches are inscribed,

⁸ Concerning this piece, the author wrote the following lines in the programme notes for the concert that featured, 4 June 2015, a performance of the piece by the Symphony Orchestra of the Serbian Broadcasting Corporation led by Bojan Sudić: “Apparently, today’s tempo of life and incessant tension around us have largely exhausted our patience, so one may note a general predilection for more compact pieces... Since I, too, have no more patience to listen to lengthy pieces, I have also turned to shorter forms. The result of such a mood is a series of short pieces, each lasting 2–3 minutes, under the joint title of ‘MEDIAL’. These short pieces, for various soloists or small ensembles, came to be over the past several years. They may be performed individually, or combined in small cycles – just like ‘MEDIAL 623’”.

⁹ Cf. M. Masnikosa, public lecture, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ *Medial 6* and *Medial 3* calls for the same orchestral ensemble (one flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, trumpet, and trombone each, strings, cymbals, and timpani), while *Medial 2* entails a somewhat smaller ensemble (flute, oboe, clarinet, horn, strings).

new verticals and their variable, typically mediant harmonic relations”.¹¹ A similar pattern of organization prevails in the repetitive process of the second movement (*Medial 2*) as well, which is perhaps closest to a standard score image with its drone in the violins and violas, repetitive “figurations” in the violoncellos and double basses, and “melody” in the “conversation” between the flute, oboe, and the clarinet. What this piece does is awaken our acoustic memory, it stimulates us to remember what music it resembles, and to read (private) meanings into that fictive sonic image, an entire rich semantic world, one that essentially it cannot possess. *Medial 623* contains that “vector of classicization”, which brings us back to the classical (standard, stereotypical?) beauty of music, its textural clarity, expressive clarity, and ordered abstraction of tones, all that artistic music symbolized for centuries, but without the original aesthetic fullness and substance of a long vanished culture. *Medial 623* is a mellifluous testimony that mellifluousness may still exist in high art today (only) as a radical (“avant-garde”?) excess...

Still, mellifluousness covers the world today: with its banality, eclectic vulgarity, with too easily accomplished effects of avoiding acoustic and any other kind of trauma... An average listener cannot get enough of mellifluousness: whether high-art mellifluousness, historical, or turbo-composed, prepackaged, or vain-entertaining mellifluousness. Well, here is an extra-product for her ears: a piece of music that actually has no “memory code” of its own, that only has tones with no history, just suitable incentives to hear in it even that which it does communicate. Thus we actually get to listen to our own longing for classicist beauty, clear and substantive.

Therefore I wonder, what is *Medial 623*? Did Tošić in this piece perform his “postmodern turn” from his own radical minimalism? Based on the canon of order in sounding time, his music gained a foray into fiction, into semantic confusion, as well as an opportunity to win listeners. Minimalism, as an embodiment of the ideal of eternal presence, acquires its (false) historical depth, while its repetitive models become a figure and ornament of a larger, more encompassing, and superior whole that entails the historical models of tripartite forms, themes, and functional harmony.¹² In that sense, one may view as indicative Tošić’s decision to freely use, in addition to his long-canonized aliquot mode, all pitches (although he still subjects them to reduction in his repetitive models), as well as to introduce in his tripartite piece/suite, instead of identity, a contrast between, on the one hand, the opening and the final and, on the other, the central movement.

¹¹ M. Masnikosa, *ibid.*

¹² In his 2011 piece *Rondo*, the author constructs a surrogate-substrate of the rondo form: ABACA!

Also, in this piece, Tošić removes the strictly gradual pace of the unfolding of musical changes in time, which thus “accelerates” and ceases to be minimalist musical time that symbolizes eternity itself as the “home of time”. *Medial 623* is too short for a minimalist piece – there is not enough *time* in it for abstract consumption and pulsated counting to eternity, but there is re-signifying and reading different meanings into the music. And whether those re-significations or readings are honest or staged, fake or “genuine”, an attack on tradition, or longing for history or “history” – they are what they are: a symptom of the postmodern narrative.

Returning to the beginning of this text: is this Vladimir Tošić’s interpretation of minimalism, or, perhaps, the meta-language of European musical civilization? In *Medial 623*, what is the original and what is the copy?

The original and the copy have switched places here, so that the original minimalist procedure serves to copy “classicist” content, while the composer interprets his own minimalist compositional-technical procedure in order to “interpret” a general listener’s phantasm.