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(FOOT)NOTES ON MUSIC

An Interview with Kornelije Bata Kovač

Kornelije Bata Kovač (b. 1942) is a renowned composer and performer of popular music.¹ Coming from a musical family, upon graduating at the

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¹ Kornelije Bata Kovač (Niš, 1942) is a composer of popular and applied (film, television, and theatre) music, producer, songwriter, and author of three books. He has composed a large number of pop songs, some of which have attained evergreen status in ex-Yugoslav pop music (e.g. “Ti si mi u krvi”, “April u Beogradu”, “Milo moje”, “Zlatni dan”, “Ti samo budi dovoljno daleko”...). Some of them, such as “Moja generacija” and “Trla baba lan”, were performed by *Korni grupa*, one of the first big 1970s pop (prog-rock) acts in former Yugoslavia, a band founded and led by Kovač, which released six LPs/CDs and around 20 singles. According to his own selection (*Muzička biografija*, Belgrade: UKS, 2016), his most significant achievements include the following: national and international awards for the songs “Pastir i cvet” (*Korni grupa*, 1969), “Jedna žena” (*Korni grupa*, 1970), the musical poem “1941” (a setting of verses by Branko Ćopić, *Korni grupa*, 1971), a Golden Arena for music originally composed for *Bez*, a film by Miša Radivojević (Pula, 1971), etc. He has collaborated with every important performer in Yugoslavia and with many foreign performers. Stemming from his lifetime commitment to instrumental music, Kovač has also made six LP/CD releases in that genre (e.g. *Između svetlosti i tame*, 1976; *Sampled Moonlight*, 1986; *Balkan*, 1993; *Dvojni identitet*, 2000). He has scored 50 feature and documentary films, 20 theatre plays, and a large number of television shows and series. Kovač articulated his experiences from his Spanish sojourn in the book *Tamne dirke* (Novi Sad: Prometej, 2003) and tried his hand in fiction in a book of short stories, *Falko i druge priče* (K.K. Music Production, 2007), leaving his autobiographical mark in his book *Fusnota* (Belgrade:



Kornelije Bata Kovač
(Photo Aleksandar Anđić)

Music Academy in Sarajevo (1964), Kovač embarked on what has become a 50-year-long career of an independent artist, collaborating as a pianist and keyboardist as well as arranger with various ensembles and singers and simultaneously working as an author in jazz and pop music composition. After moving to Belgrade, Kovač founded *Korni grupa* (1968), one of Yugoslavia's leading prog-rock bands of the time, with whom he gained much popularity ("Jedna žena", "Moja generacija", "Ivo Lola", "Etida", etc.). At the same time, Kovač tried his hand as an author of pop hits for famous Yugoslav singers (e.g. "Milo moje" by Bisera Veletanlić). In that regard, his most important collaboration was with Zdravko Čolić, for whom he composed songs that turned him into Yugoslavia's first genuine pop superstar ("Ako prideš bliže", "Stanica Podlugovi", "Jedna zima sa Kristinom"). Kovač spent the late 1980s and '90s in London, working with various British musicians, and then extended his experiences of living and working abroad with another, longer stay in Spain, during the mid 1990s. Upon returning to Belgrade, he resumed collaborating with Serbian musicians, increas-

Laguna, 2010). Kovač has won a large number of prizes and awards in various domains of his oeuvre; most recently, he was the first recipient of the newly established lifetime achievement award presented by the Composers' Association of Serbia (the popular music chapter), the *Darko Kraljić Award*.

ingly turning to instrumental music and his first love, free jazz improvisation in live public and unplugged performances. The professional authority and vitality of Bata Kovač recommended him for various posts and activities at the Composers' Association of Serbia, Association of Musical Artists of Serbia, and *SOKOJ*.² Kornelije Kovač is the first laureate of the *Darko Kraljić* Award, the newly founded lifetime achievement award presented by the Composers' Association of Serbia. In short, the poetics of Kornelije Kovač is characterised by a penchant for experimentation in terms of phrasing, form, and harmonic language of pop songs (often ballads), coupled with a refined sense of balance and sometimes “unforgiving” self-discipline and self-criticism. Bearing in mind that he boldly accepted all kinds of professional challenges and apparently, as a well-educated musician, found it easy to “reconcile” them, one may view his career as a sort of “amalgam” of a performer’s and author’s expression and his work as a unique product of various dualities and multiplicities of identity. That is why we went for a little “pun” in the title of this interview, referencing the title of the biography of another musician with a “double identity”, Darius Milhaud (*Notes sans musique*); also, we used the title of one of Kornelije Kovač’s books – *Fusnota* (Footnote), as well as his *Muzička biografija* (Music Biography).

On the eve of your 75th birthday, perhaps it wouldn't be inappropriate to begin this interview by asking you, combining the titles/“contents” of songs that marked your career and crucial information from your music biography, to begin by providing a general (historical) overview of the challenges, risks, and opportunities of “Your Generation” (of 1942) in the domain of popular music?

I think that when it came to popular music, “my generation” was, generally speaking, fortunate. Although we spent our early years in scarcity and with relatively few opportunities acquire crucial information, circumstances had already changed to a significant degree by the time we reached full creative maturity. And although, on the one hand, after the emergence of The Beatles everything changed in terms of wider audiences’ interest in other forms of music-making, which were my primary interests, like, say, jazz (the same period saw the initial formation of a specialised audience for this kind of music), on the other hand, the “door” opened to us for all kinds of experimentation in pop and rock sounds. We were able to work, perform, and earn our living that way, which certainly, given the current condition of the music industry and market, makes us a “fortunate” generation.

² *Savez organizacija kompozitora Jugoslavije* (Union of Composers’ Associations of Yugoslavia), former Yugoslavia’s federal composers’ union – Translator’s note.

In your case, it seems as though there had been no dilemma in terms of choosing the kind of music (genre, type, field) you would pursue? How did you combine your classical music training with your “other” interests in music? Who were your “unofficial” teachers, when it came to music? Finally, what is your perception today of “Daddy Ko” and “Mummy Spo” in the context of the music history of your immediate family, the Kovačs?

I wouldn't say I was immediately aware of the choice I was going to make. At first, music was a “side business”, a family trade – at the time I was much more interested in kicking a cloth football around. But it is a fact that our family circumstances were such that music was always present and that in our home, classical and “light” music enjoyed the same status, that we listened to the radio and that very early on we also had a gramophone.

My grandfather Kornél Kovács (Kornel Kovač) did not leave much behind. He spoke his native language, Hungarian, Serbian only a little, but why – as a child, I could only guess. The image of him sitting at the kitchen table in our family house at No. 26, Šantić Street, the little knife with which he cut bacon into tiny pieces, barely a piece of bread or two, and a glass with red hot chilies protruding from it, that was the inventory on the canvas that flashed in front of my eyes during long plane rides, which I didn't quite enjoy, whenever I thought of my grandfather. That canvas could've been painted by Brueghel.

Another scene in my memories of my grandfather Kornél used to take place on the veranda of our family house, almost every Sunday afternoon. Four pensioners, lost in profound deliberations about choosing the right card to tackle the combinations taking place in the middle of the table. But once a week, those card players would get together in the city centre, with their string instruments in their boxes. My grandfather always took me to these string quartet sessions. I would sit in a corner, confused, listening to Vivaldi's *Seasons*, Beethoven's and Haydn's string quartets. Of course, sometimes I found their rehearsals monotonous, but I felt that even upon returning home, the harmony of those four instruments blending together nonetheless kept ringing in my ears.

The third scene, in which my grandfather Kornél played a priceless role, happened when he was a member of the Subotica symphony orchestra. Ernő Lányi, a Hungarian conductor, came from Budapest to Subotica, which meant that quality and noteworthy music-making soon enriched the cultural life of the city and of Vojvodina in general. At a difficult moment, when the orchestra lost its one and only double-bass player, Lányi didn't know how to resolve that unexpected predicament. The orchestra could not go on without the double-bass line. So my grandfather, who played the second violin, offered the conductor to replace the double bassist, who had passed away. Everybody was impressed and

grateful. On the 50th anniversary of his engagement with the orchestra (1908–1958), Kornél Kovács received a goldleaf seal.

My father, Josip Kovač, was caned, when he was barely 11, whenever he failed to prepare his violin etude well enough. His first teacher was my grandfather, an irritable choirmaster, violinist at the symphony orchestra, before that a teacher, who expected much more from his son and when his expectations fell through, he gave up on teaching him, enrolled him at the music school, and then secured him private lessons with professor Mirko Kramer, a well-known artist and conductor of the Subotica Philharmonic.

When he turned 18, he wanted to learn a wind instrument and join the Sokol Band. At that time, they often marched up and down the streets of Subotica, playing in their wonderful uniforms, and he, as a young man, was enchanted by that. Over the next few years, he learned to play several wind instruments: the trumpet, the trombone, and other wind instruments. Over the course of his career, he became a multi-instrumentalist, arranger, and conductor. He founded the Subotica Youth Festival, which saw performances by many young singers and musicians from all over former Yugoslavia.

My brother Mihajlo Kovač and I were still very young when they put us at music school. I finished my secondary education in music with a major in theory and pedagogy and then took the entrance exam at the Music Academy in Belgrade. Much to my regret, I didn't get a place, so I went to Sarajevo and got a place in the same department I majored in Subotica.

During our schooling in Subotica, our father Josip spent more time on young musicians from the Festival orchestra and also on giving private lessons in violin, guitar, accordion, and saxophone. My brother and I were obliged to perform well at the music school. Our father did not expect us to become top pianists or anything like that.

Let's go back, for a moment, to your "classical" music education. All the way from your jazz trio (1961) to Kovač-Mlačak-Džanefendić trio recently at the "Parobrod", for 55 years, (jazz) piano was a constant in your performing and creative work. Could you describe how you articulated this feature in your music? For sure, it was most compellingly and, at the time, "most naturally" and relevantly articulated in your work with Kornij grupa, that is, in your prog-rock/art-rock works for Kornij grupa?

My earliest (independent) experiences of music were mostly predicated on boring technical exercises for mastering piano technique and my futile attempts to find at least one or two interesting segments in those etudes by Czerny and Clementi. I discovered that Bach's G-major Minuet also contained some nice passages.

Following those long repetitions and warming up sessions for my piano lessons at the primary music school in Subotica, I used to recuperate by pressing random keys on the piano, hoping for a string of notes that might surprise me with a motive, a phrase, and then even a sentence or two. Then I quickly wrote down those phrases in my music notebook and started feeling happy that its pages were beginning to fill up with what I regarded as my own music, music I created without even knowing how. Thus I made my first steps as a creator and since I was good at solfège, those musings on the keyboard gave me much pleasure. That was when I first felt what it means to create something that is yours. And I also thought it sounded good, too. At least my schoolmates liked it, and then also my friends at the Academy.

My secondary school teachers focused on classical music education, so in addition to radio, during my secondary school days, I acquired crucial information on other types of music mostly by going to lectures on jazz (bebop) and blues organised at the Workers' University in Subotica. Also, I followed the *Metronom* magazine, which always included sheet music of popular standards. For instance, I practised and played Kosta Tepavica's "Mambo" and, at the same time, worked out songs on the piano and tried to make melodies of my own.

I was lucky, because at some point during the late 1950s (that is what they called it at the time, luck), I came into the possession of a handful of LPs, some of which made an impact on my black-and-white taste in music. Even today, they remain etched in my ears and memory. The first of them was an LP album by Oscar Peterson, the jazz pianist; the second was Elvis Presley and his *Jailhouse Rock*; the third was Dizzy Gillespie and his bebop themes, and finally, Bobby Darin and his soft rock, "Splish Splash". It was four different types of music, of which, in the beginning, my favourite was Peterson, whose technique truly knocked me right off the ground. One blues form, the so called 12-bar blues, I practised for months, even more than I practised Czerny's etudes, first only the right hand and then the left, also by itself. I really wanted to play with both hands as soon as possible, but I didn't dare to make that decisive step. I couldn't wait any longer and of course, my left hand kept lagging behind my right hand and I was inevitably disappointed. Then I applied a technique from piano practice. Playing at half the tempo, then in triplets, then the first half of each bar *pianissimo* and the second half *fortissimo*, and so on... That went on for a year. Eventually, I was ecstatic, happy, and satisfied. Now, almost 60 years after accomplishing that mission impossible, I'm back to square one. And I have to fight with my hands, to coordinate them in terms of speed and staying together.

So be it. It's OK to face "the enemy" again. Now, after all these years. In my case, I don't think it's important to "define" the music I perform as jazz – I couldn't say that I'm a jazz pianist, or a jazz composer. For me, what matters the most is to establish communication, first and foremost with the performers I'm playing with. I call it "supersonic" communication – I tell young colleagues I play with that one shouldn't "hold forth" forever, but stop and listen to the others. That kind of communication is more important to me than communicating with the audience. I don't need to prove myself anymore, I'm where I'm supposed to be. I play the way I've always played – in "harmony" with myself. My favourite gigs are free gigs, with no fixed solutions, or limitations in terms of form or time.

Nonetheless, before, while I was still in school, in Subotica and then in Sarajevo, although jazz was my first interest, the circumstances were such that I went for that which the audience wanted the most, on the one hand, and on the other, for the kind of music that I could pursue with much more ease, toward pop and light rock. It was easier to "work out" than bebop or other kinds of jazz. Had I been able to find sheet music with entire phrases written down back then, I would've probably made different decisions. We all had a problem with "working out" jazz harmonies. Also, during the late 1950s and '60s, while I was studying, and later, more young people pursued pop than jazz. And although one of my first notable festival performances, which was also the first festival performance by a jazz ensemble from Bosnia and Herzegovina, when we also performed a piece of my own, happened at the jazz festival in Bled (Slovenia), in those years I found more work and gigs as a performer, arranger, and composer of pop music. In fact, a couple of producers from Radio Sarajevo heard me play in Sarajevo and enabled me to do not only covers and arrangements, jazz arrangements of foreign hits, but also to work with my own songs and compositions. And that wasn't just me. That door opened to a lot of musicians – let me mention again – from "my generation" as well as younger. We made arrangements of San Remo songs, of Paul Anka's hits, and the like, until The Beatles came, and then a lot changed. Nevertheless, I had not one but two stints working at Radio Sarajevo as a music editor and for years I was also the pianist of the Sarajevo Radio and Television Revue Orchestra, which meant I also played at important pop music festivals, such as Opatija. After that, I played with the Sarajevo band *Indexi*, so it only made sense, in a way, that I would eventually establish *Korni grupa* and not "go back" to jazz. But, of course, the way *Korni grupa* and its work were conceived combined my interests in jazz, classical music, and pop into a peculiar, in terms of the Yugoslav scene at the time, form of symphonic rock. One could say that at I was more of a keyboardist than a pianist at the time. Symphonic rock meant experimenting with elec-

tronic timbres and sound, but after awhile I got tired of technology. Today, from my current perspective, I can totally say that the acoustic piano, especially when it's a good Steinway, was and remains at the centre of my musical being.

Your travels and cities have been an important factor in your life and professional journey. From Niš via Sarajevo, Belgrade, London, with many additional "stops" on the way, and then returning to Belgrade, you've had opportunities to meet various kinds of people and establish a whole range of interesting collaborations, developing along the way your own competences as a producer, editor, arranger, and performer. From one of those four guys from Trebević ("Četiri mladića..."), via "April" in Belgrade and "Podlugovi", to winters in Vojvodina, it is clear that cities, landscapes, and visual stimuli are an important part of your poetics?

In the first place, these were visual stimuli and personal experiences, confessions of sorts. Because I have always associated places with people, I can say that one could produce a hierarchy of places in terms of their significance in my career. First, there is Subotica and its vicinity – generally speaking, landscapes from Vojvodina, the winters in Vojvodina that I spent with close friends. Then, there is Sarajevo – my mates, dance parties, students' joints, Bosnian jazz musicians doing "temporary work" in Germany, "working out" hits from Radio Monte Carlo and Radio Luxembourg with my "quartet", travelling across Yugoslavia with the Revue Orchestra, Yugoslav and foreign tours with *Indexi*. Then, of course, Belgrade from 1968. By contrast, London (1978–1982) and Spain (the mid 1990s) were an entirely different matter. There was none of that inspiration. I managed to see big and important concerts at Wembley Stadium. But my relations with the English were entirely professional. As soon as the job was done, communication likewise stopped. Interestingly, I was able to strike up a closer relationship with two Irishmen, one in London and another one in Spain. I have some nice memories from there as well. Still, you're always a foreigner. Especially when they realise you're competition, then they'll always first protect, hire, and promote "their own". In Yugoslavia, despite my "double" identity, never and nowhere have I felt like a foreigner. Even today, nowhere in former Yugoslavia do I feel foreign.

Not only due to the time period, but also to the context of its emergence and activity, Kornij grupa may certainly be viewed as a sort of Yugoslav brand. In that context, which, among other things, must inevitably inform any consideration of expectations and conceptions concerning what went by the name of (Yugoslav) pop as well as pop-rock music, also encompassing some "(supra)

national” aspects that were supposed to mark that music, so, in that context, how did you perceive the role of (musical) folklore? In other words, how did Kornelije Kovač, a Yugoslav pop-music composer, get from “Trla baba lan” to “Bum, Cile, bum”?

Since we were all Yugoslavs, *Korni grupa* was a Yugoslav band, too. I used my experiences from jazz and working with *Indexi* (on whom I never wanted to “impose” my ideas) to make *Korni grupa*. We had to work hard. The other members of the band had a different kind of education and experiences, so I had to “push” them to practise according to my ideas. Besides, I must emphasise that *Korni grupa* indeed was a Yugoslav brand, but not a regime band, so to speak. Sure, we had the backing of PGP,³ but back then there were no other labels anyway. As soon as I gained that kind of freedom, I “cut loose”... My foreign models were bands such as *Gentle Giant* and *Yes*. However, symphonic rock didn’t have an easy time in Europe either. Maybe that was one of the reasons why I said goodbye to *Korni grupa*.

Also, *Korni grupa* was Yugoslavia’s entry at the 1974 Eurovision song contest in Brighton, which also affirmed its “Yugoslav” status (the song was selected to represent Yugoslavia because it had come first at the Opatija festival). Yugoslavia meant a lot to us and to me it still does. In addition to the song “Moja generacija”, which, as a symphonic rock ballad (with a complex structure and complex harmonic features) couldn’t “fly” at the Contest, likewise adhering to the “Yugoslav idea” were my songs “Ivo Lola” and “1941”, an epic setting of verses by Branko Ćopić, with the extraordinary female vocals of Jospa Lisac.

Besides working at *Korni grupa*, I also worked on festival songs (Opatija, Zagreb, Sarajevo), because I wanted to see if I could make a song that would win one of the awards. In that sense I tried my hand in the so-called more commercial sphere of popular music, hence my work in some of *Korni grupa*’s allegedly “easier” hits, such as “Trla baba lan”, should be viewed in that light – even though there are folk intonations of those verses, the treatment of song’s musical text and harmonic vocal texture has nothing in common with folk music. Later bands were quite shrewd in packaging folk-music elements. In those days, everybody found it hard to forgive me for “Trla baba lan”, as though it was a kind of betrayal of “art rock”, the complexity of its constructions and “selling

³ *Produkcija gramofonskih ploča Radio televizije Beograd* (Belgrade Radio Television Gramophone Record Production), Serbia’s leading and one of socialist Yugoslavia’s major state-owned record label and chain record stores, the music production branch of Serbia’s state television network, Radio Television Belgrade – Translator’s note.

out” to the cheap preferences of the masses. Later, that song was also recorded by such a great star as Dalida, so I have nothing to be ashamed of. In my opinion, the same might apply to “Bum, Cile, bum”, except that in this case, it was the verses by Marina Tucaković that bore folk “overtones”, sung by the folk superstar Lepa Brena, and since the song took part in the “Jugovizija” contest (Yugoslavia’s national Eurosong contest), learning from my previous experiences, I made a “mix” of folksy and pop elements (the czardas-like instrumental intro and the simple poppy harmonic expression *à la Bony M* in the verses and chorus with *tapans*). In fact, however, I seldom entirely “yielded” to folk sound – even today, when, as I said, I no longer need to compete (I’ve already come first a number of times), and when, for instance, I’m playing with Ešref Džanefendić, who plays the *kanun*, it is precisely the fact that he manages to perform music that is not “oriental”, and thus cannot be considered folk, on an oriental musical instrument that entices me to collaborate with him.

In your case, folk inspiration has typically tended to “stop” at some typical linguistic, “folksy” twists and formulations, folk poetry, although it sometimes also extended to Romanticist national poets such as Branko Radičević. Although at least during the Kornji grupa era you often wrote the lyrics as well, you often “turned” to important Serbian poets for your texts? And when that resulted in a hit (e.g. “Pevam danju, pevam noću”), performed, moreover, by top pop music performers – by superstars – it seems that in your case, classical, prog-rock “procedures” bore fruits that would be as unexpected in an artistic solo song as in a prog-rock ballad? In your Music Biography you attribute extreme importance to poets (ranging from Branko Radičević to Duško Trifunović and Dušan Radović) and recently I’ve also bumped into something you said about Yesenin?

Poems by Vojvodina poets as well as my personal perceptions, mentioned above, of Vojvodina (winter) landscapes somehow matched, with their sensibility, my prog-rock musical structures and “ranges”. Thus I wrote “Jedna zima sa Kristinom” (lyrics and music) in a very complex structure (evidently stemming from my work with *Kornji grupa*). Then, similar “triggers” came in the form of lyrics by Vlado Dijak (“Stanica Podlugovi”) and Spomenka Kovač (the ballad “Ti si mi u krvi”). Likewise complex in terms of structure is my setting of Branko Radičević’s poem “Pevam danju, pevam noću”. Interestingly, some of these symphonic rock “relapses” became the greatest this of Yugoslavia’s greatest singer superstar – Zdravko Čolić. Basically, when I choose top poetry, I typically do it with a specific singer in mind. Simply put, Čolić was able to sing those lines by Radičević. Then there were also verses by Duško Radović, most

notably my setting of his poem “Milo moje”, but it is less widely known that I did a lot of settings of his poems for children and television.

And Yesenin is a special story! Namely, for a number of years now I’ve been working on a musical, *Ispovest jednog mangupa* (The Confessions of a Rascal). I started work on it in 1978, following the breakup of *Korni grupa*, when I went to England. It includes a number of heterogeneous textual sources by Yesenin (prose writings, lyrics, correspondence, memories, reviews), which I put together as a specific narrative about his life. Unfortunately, I’ve been struggling to finish the libretto and find proper people to complete it with me.

How significant were your activities in production, which you pursued whilst living abroad as well as upon returning to Belgrade, in your authorial work?

It was a sort of expansion of my job as a composer, where intuition and experience played an important role, as well as financial means for securing equipment. First you must compose the music, then make an arrangement, which I call orchestration, and then comes the production, where you have your solutions all planned out, but then something else happens in the studio – and they you try it out... As a producer, I was never one of those who knew all the equipment; rather, I worked by ear, but I also arrived at some interesting results in terms of sound (for instance, working with *Bajaga i instruktori*).

We’ve already mentioned the singers. You’re credited not only with the “discovery”, promotion, and evolution of some of the leading stars of the former Yugoslav scene, such as Zlatko Pejaković, Zdravko Čolić, Bisera Veletanlić, etc., since it was you who composed some of their greatest hits, which are today evergreen songs in these parts, but one could also say that along with them you also traversed and in fact broke the path for Yugoslav music from zabavna muzika (entertainment music) to pop, which was, of course, conditioned by other, cultural and media circumstances as well. How important is the performer to the composer of a song, given that in pop music (its production and reception aspects), performativity commands decisive importance? In other words, do you think that you would still be this Kornelije Kovač without Topić, Pejaković, Čolić, Bisera Veletanlić, Maja Odžaklijevska, Tanja Banjanin, and, finally, Aleksandra Kovač? And vice versa?

There are no special explanations there. When, for instance, I wrote two songs for Dalibor Bruno, I knew what he’d sung before, I understood the man, and wrote the songs in line with that; for Zdravko Čolić I wrote songs that no one else would sing the same way; ditto for Bisera Veletanlić.

Another important aspect of your collaboration with performers/singers is certainly your sort of “pedagogical” commitment, which, in fact, you’ve pursued for years now, promoting young singers? How important do you consider this kind of commitment, not only for yourself, but for Yugoslav pop music and how, in that context, do you see your efforts to revive the Subotica festival (the oldest festival of this kind in the country)?

It doesn’t take me very long to tell whether someone has talent to do what they’re doing. So if I’m attracted to something, if I hear something out of the ordinary, then occasionally I support young people – singers and players. I invested much effort in reviving the Subotica Youth Festival, which was founded in 1961 by my father, who also ran it for the first five years. Our revival even started out nicely, but in the meantime the audience had changed completely. The original idea was to use the festival to present composers and entirely unknown singers from across the former Yugoslavia. It was total amateurism, but an honest and beautiful amateurism, with a refined audience; it was a real event. But today, when we’re totally surrounded by music reality TV shows, with entirely different habits in terms of lifestyle and music-listening, hardly anyone will come to see such performances or participate in such events.

Precisely those various “statuses” of your music, or, in this context, music-making, might serve to describe your trajectory from the piano to keyboard and back? For the sake of this conversation, could you “separate” your work in performance from your work in composition, or would that in fact be impossible?

Maybe it would be best to say: Bata Kovač – “a performing composer”? I prefer playing, for which I have fewer and fewer opportunities; because composing is something that happens unexpectedly; or you get a commission and it’s a job that needs to be done. When I’m composing by commission, it doesn’t matter what domain of music it is. And audience-wise, my songs were always more fortunate. When you have a text that is explicit – that’s what you say and what you sing – that has an effect on your listeners, they see a movie; whereas instrumental music is much stronger in terms of emotion, because it lets you create your own image – there’s nothing to guide or thwart you...

Korni grupa never played dance rock. Whenever we played “Put za Istok”, our most r’n’r song, as soon as the tempo changed, the audience would stop, it bothered them, so I had to consider going back to the familiar, for their sake. When I’m playing jazz or, rather, free improvisation, I don’t think in those terms.

*The last question may actually serve to take us to the following question, with which I'd like to conclude our conversation. Namely, in your discography, there is a release titled *Dvojni identitet* (Double Identity). In light of your various activities as well as the different historical/cultural formations that, because you were born in 1942, shaped your life journey, is it possible to speak of “double identities” of Kornelije Kovač – a composer and performer, a Yugoslav and an ex-Yugoslav, a Yugoslav star and an ex-Yugoslav celebrity?*

Specifically concerning that release, *Dvojni identitet*, which we recorded in my home during the bombing, I had neither a large pool of musicians to choose from, nor much equipment. It was later processed in a big studio. I didn't have enough resources to realise what I wanted. On the other hand, if we look at my entire life story, throughout my life, I've always felt both like a Hungarian and a Serb. That release is precisely an expression of that “split”, which I, too, find somewhat hard to navigate. I get very emotional regarding some things from Serbian history, while I'm totally “owned” by Hungarian culture. No matter how I've identified myself, I've never met anyone who objected to my being one and the other. But above all else, I think, “black on white”, I'm a Yugoslav who managed to reach the stars by playing and composing using black and white keys and win the public's approval as well as remain himself and win the approval of his peers. I think I've managed much better in that sort of “split”, which is, in fact, what life is all about.