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**THE SUMATRAIST SECRET OF COUNT
SAVA VLADISLAVIĆ'S GREAT DREAMING:
THE ANAMORPHOSIC AIM OF THEATRICAL DOUBLING,
THE EX-CENTRED OBSERVER, AND THE REGENERATIVE
POWER OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY¹**

Abstract: In her discussion of *Melanholični snovi grofa Save Vladislavića* (The Melancholy Dreams of Count Sava Vladislavić), an opera by Serbian composer Svetislav Božić, the author begins by discussing the composer's operatic allusion to anamorphosis, an architecture and painting technique, in both of its application modes (the perspectival and the catoptric). The trans-media and temporal conversion of this visual tool into the aspect of staged drama is notable in the theatrical procedure of reflective doublings of roles/characters and production of visual syntactic parallelisms, which deepen semantic relations between otherwise unrelated personages and events from various but important layers of Serbian cultural and intellectual history (Nemanjić, Nikola Tesla, Count Sava Vladislavić). The logic of unclose similarity and borderline contact relates anamorphosis

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to a special way of ordering the imagery of dreams, whereby the symbolic interiority of a hidden image, the mysterious pattern of sense, may be penetrated only by finding the correct viewing angle. In its longing for the obscure, anamorphotic focalization counts on the ex-centred spectator's capacity to approximate the remote and relate the unrelated. In that sense, shaping the Count's great dreaming by means of a polyphony of oneiric subjects and states and a heteroglossia of remote contexts and other people's stories and lyrical contemplations suggests Sumatraism as a chronotope, as the idea that there is universal connectedness and harmony in the world. The idea of Sumatraist connections informs both the understanding of the opera libretto's inter-textuality (along the lines of the quotation-collage form of the *cento*, the literary genre) and the arc of association that the composer draws in harmonic-motivic terms as well, in order to produce a special nexus of music-dramatic narration and presentation. In that Sumatraist inter-textual nexus, other people's stories and lyrical contemplations, *qua* manifestations of a collective consciousness, are deepened by means of a collectively unconscious (archetypal) perspective of a mythical, allegorical, and phantasmagorical dance-pantomime procession, as yet another oneiric form, whose typical Dionysian sequence, *intoxicatio-phalophoria-sparagmos*, affirms not only the theatrical model of anamorphotic doubling and Sumatraist connections, but also a unique theme in this operatic narrative – transcending sacrifice, tribulation, and death in a foreign land by means of the regenerative power of collective (historical and cultural) memory.

Keywords: Svetislav Božić, opera of oneiric states, anamorphic perspective, Sumatraism, collective memory

Since Perspective is but a Counterfeiting of the Truth, the Painter is not obliged to make it appear real when seen from Any part, but from One determinate Point only.²

(Andrea Pozzo, *Perspectiva pictorum et architectorum*)

With these words, stated in his two-volume treatise *Perspectiva pictorum et architectorum* (1693 and 1698), the Baroque fresco painter, architect, stage designer, and art theorist Andrea Pozzo (1642–1709) did more than just describe the concept of a special kind of architectural illusion, which he produced on the ceiling of the Sant'Ignazio church in Rome, where he used the *trompe l'oeil* technique to paint the saint's ascent to heaven in such a way that there is only one position from which the observer may perceive the scene as though it were real, in three dimensions, with the illusion of perfection. Also, he

² Quoted in Maurice Henri Pirenne, *Optics Painting and Photography*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970, 90.

evoked the famous early-Flemish-style painting by Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8–1543), *The Ambassadors* (1533), in which this renaissance German artist simultaneously affirmed and challenged the rules of linear *perspectivae communis* and conventions of representation. Observed from a centrally located position, this painting, actually a double portrait, represents two well-known male figures, one of whom, on the left, is dressed in secular garb while the other, standing on the right, is dressed like a priest. The objects included in the painting (a terrestrial and celestial globe, a book on arithmetic, a lute, a hymnbook or Psalter, etc.) quite obviously represent the Quadrivium world of the liberal arts (geometry/mathematics/astronomy and music). Between them, in the forefront of the painting, in its lower central part, there is a quite indistinct and distorted image – if observed from a conventional angle – which may be recognized, however, only if one steps away from the centre, to the right. In other words, only by shifting the usual focal point may the observer encounter something that makes sense, which is a *memento mori* (Image 1). In renaissance and early baroque painting and philosophy, the figure of the human skull, combined precisely with the arts mentioned above, was classified as a symbol of melancholy and death. Melancholy is the shadowy suffering of a man of scientific and creative genius,³ death is a prerequisite of regeneration, while nostalgic evocation of the past is a guardian of collective (historical and cultural) memory.

If taking an unconventional viewing angle on the observer's part conditions the possibility of reshaping (*ana-morphosis*) a distorted image that is superficially twisted either perspectivally (by means of perspective) or catoptrically (by means of a mirror) and viewing it as essentially un-deformed, then viewing an image from a special angle in other words means being able to see it in its true shape. To solve such a visual riddle means, furthermore, to be able to possess its secret, to resolve its meaning. The creative and spiritual call of anamorphosis to engage in an (a)perceptual and cognitive play with the conventions of viewing and seeing, perceiving and understanding, has an effect precisely due to its longing for the obscure. That is precisely why its call counts on an ex-centred observer, because, by tying her to the object of gazing by means of decentring and pulling her into a game of uncovering meaning by reshaping a distorted image, it expects her to approximate the unclose and capture that glimmer of unclose similarity. The fact that anamorphosis allows various scenes to unfold and mix, while at the same time hiding the image, a mysterious matrix of meaning

³ Since as early as Aristotle and Plato, via the medieval Arab philosophers, to the renaissance neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino, melancholy was viewed as a sort of divine madness, which means that it was associated with divinely inspired cogitations and was therefore ascribed to all great ingenious minds.

and sense, brings us to the possibility of relating it to a special mode of ordering the imagery of dreams. Observed from the surface, from, so to speak, the forefront of dreaming, images follow one another in isolation, incoherently, and fluidly. However, upon taking a more penetrating view of the symbolic interiority of dreams, and that means by seeking out an adequate anamorphic viewing angle of the fluidity of its images, we come to face a coherent whole featuring a special logic whereby one image resembles the next, which in turn suggests a third image, etc., in a word, with the logic of unclose similarity and borderline contact.



Image 1. Hans Holbein the Younger (1497/8–1543), *The Ambassadors* (1533)

There is not only the possibility of a temporal version of this painterly and architectural technique of creating images and scenes on the basis of anamorphic focalization, familiar already in the early renaissance, in other words, a version that includes a trans-media conversion of a visual tool into one of drama and staging (for instance, in some of Shakespeare's plays), but equally, one might easily transpose the fictional structure and episodic logic of dreams, with their altered reality and flexible causality, temporal and spatial transitions, intrusions and tangles, into an epic narrative and theatre play (which was af-

firmed already by Freud and Jung). The interrelation of anamorphosis, in either mode, as a perspective of dramatic representation onstage and a way of relating unclosed similarity, and dreams, as a motive, literary trope, narrative structure, and plot tool, will shape together, following in the footsteps of the Sumatraist perception of the world, my interpretation of the latest stage-music work by Serbian composer Svetislav Božić, *Melanholični snovi grofa Save Vladislavića* (The Melancholy Dreams of Count Sava Vladislavić), an opera in seven dream visions. The opera was premièred on 28 February 2015 at the National Theatre in Belgrade, directed by Aleksandar Nikolić, choreographed by Aleksandar Ilić, and conducted by Đorđe Pavlović.⁴

Referring in the title to (melancholy) dreams as the motive and, in the subtitle, to (seven) dream visions as the dramaturgical model of his work, the composer clearly presents a vision of the work as an opera of oneiric states. In other words, the operatic model he develops rests on multiple subjects, forms, and functions of dreams. Although only seldom visible onstage and for the most part invisible,⁵ that is, freed from corporeality, but intensely the omnipresent, main character of the opera, Count Sava Vladislavić is,⁶ in fact, the chief dreamer. His dream visions, coloured by foreboding, pain, consolation, and nostalgia, dive into important historical layers of the Serbian collective being, or, rather, give rise to the dreams of giants of Serbian spirituality and science (members of the Nemanjić dynasty and Tesla). By constantly weaving one dream into another, the forms of the Count's great dreaming are shaped together and reshaped as a dream within a dream, a dream of a dream, a vigil of a dream, consolation from a dream, suffering in a dream, the shadow of a dream, and daydreaming, not only leaving the identity of the main dreamer in constant fluctuation, but also dissolving the borders that define the remaining characters as well. The shifting and hence unstable relations, interrelations, and blending of these oneiric subjects shift the perspective of watching, albeit, however, always from one and the same epitomized position: the count's great dreaming. In this light, it seems

⁴ The stage set was designed by Boris Maksimović, the costumes by Katarina Grčić Nikolić, and the set was computer-designed by Milica Maksimović.

⁵ He appears in visible incarnations in the opening and final scene, when he wakes up and goes to bed, as well as in the third vision, when he walks around the stage with a lighted candle in his hand.

⁶ Count Sava Vladislavić Raguzinski (1668–1738), born to the same Herzegovina family that would later spawn the poet Jovan Dučić, was a seafarer and a highly educated man. Setting out to sea, he found himself in Imperial Russia, at the court of Peter the Great and Catherine I, where he was entrusted with a number of diplomatic missions, most notably to China. It was owing to his spiritual activities that the first Serbian school was established in Sremski Karlovci. Shortly before dying, he erected Saint Sava's Church in Kyakhta, Siberia.

as though the composer and the director produced a sort of operatic allusion to the perspectival technique employed by Holbein in his double portrait, enabling an ex-centred observer/listener metonymically to conjure the referenced image. On the one hand, the conversion of a catoptric-type instance of anamorphosis to the *mise-en-scène* is notable in the development of the narrative's internal world around the doubling of roles, which has the consequence of turning the singers/actors who sing/act various roles/characters also into co(de)notative character mates/doubles despite their respective costumes' visual differences⁷ and, related to that, around theatrical visual syntactic parallelisms – Thanatos- and Eros-oriented⁸ – which deepen and intensify the semantic links and proximities of otherwise remote characters and contrasting events. On the other hand, the opera's narrative flow is pervaded by sudden appearances of Count Sava Vladislavić's dark and obscure ghost (the black-costumed figure), rather like the perspectivally distorted human skull (*memento mori*) from Holbein's painting (Image 2). The effect of concealment and mystery is a desired effect for anamorphosis and its semantic uncovering is precisely its objective. However, the parenthetic quality not only of the Count's ghost, but also of the doubled roles does not require the audience, in this operatic anamorphosis, to move during the performance in order to find an adequate anamorphic viewing angle, but, rather, entails that the

⁷ These include: The Ruler/Tenor-Tesla/Nikola Tesla; the Female Ruler/Mother in Black/Angel of Temptation; Muse/Dove/Ellen; the Boy Ruler/Tesla as a Boy; Prince/the boy Nikola; Princess/Remorse; Girl/Vision.

⁸ The opera's Thanatos line of syntactic theatrical parallelisms comprises the following: the crowd crucifying the Pagan deity Pan (I) – the young prince Nemanjić killing the girl/"dragon"/ (I) – the young prince Nemanjić stabbed, dying (II) – a mother dressed in black, holding a baby in her arms and then laying her in her grave (IV) – the mass crucifying (Ellen's) female body (VI) – the furies crucifying the Ruler (VI) – Count Sava taking the sacrificed dead female body (of Ellen) in his arms (VII). The Eros line of theatrical syntactic parallelisms in the opera includes the following: the pagan sacrificial dance of Pan's satyrs with virgins/nymphs dressed in white robes (I) – the Amazon seductive dance around the phallic pole of the Angel of Temptation dressed in black trousers, leather boots, and with a cigar in its mouth (IV) – the Angel of Temptation seducing Nikola Tesla (IV) – Ellen hopelessly in love with Tesla (V) – the virgin dance of a semi-nude Girl/nymph, whom the Furies clothe in a white dress, similarly to the opening, virgins' ritual dance (VI) – the Girl/Vision, now wearing a white dress, touching Tesla with her hands, who is dressed in a white suit (VI), just as Ellen was touching Nikola Tesla wearing a black suit (V). Another line of theatrical syntactic parallelisms in this opera might be labelled divine/heavenly: the Dove descending from the sky and scattering her feathers (I) – the Dove descending from the sky with the deceased young prince (III) – the Dove descending from the sky with the deceased baby (IV) – the black ghost of Count Sava touching the "white" Tesla with white gloves on his hands, whose fingertips are covered with feathers similar to those scattered by the Dove (V).

dramatic narrative and theatrical performance do that instead. The anamorphic quality of theatrical doubling, reified by means of metonymic relations and exchanges of characters and dreams, reveals that dreams are the medium and expression of dream visions in the sense of seeing in and through dreams.



Image 2. The operatic allusion to perspectival anamorphosis used in the painting by Hans Holbein the Younger (the replica of Holbein's painting was produced by Vesna Milanović Bombek, a formally trained painter and graphic designer)

The dream visions of Count Sava Vladislavić are articulated along an axis comprising seven scenes and forming dense tangles of events in all three temporal hypostases, as evocation [*pri-zivanje*], phantasm [*pri-viđenje*], and providence [*pro-viđenje*]. The evocation of memory (*memoria*) is manifested either

as a collective (national) memory based on the sacrifice and suffering of the Serbian people (visions 1, 2, and 4), as well as the principle of spirituality and faith in the fulfilment of divine justice (visions 1, 2, and 7), as their personal (the Ruler's, Tesla's, the Count's) memory of their native and maternal roots, childhood, and youth (visions 2 and 4). Present phantasms (*phantasma*) comprise a bundle of (Tesla's, the Count's) phantasmagorical dream visions of contrasting dancelike female figures, seductive (*virago*) and virgin (*virgo*), under the veil of shadow or, rather, whiteness (visions 4 and 6), as well as the vision of a silhouette-like mass of male and female characters scattered under the dark veils of pain and melancholy (vision 5). The premonition of the future (*praemonitius*) is concentrated in a painful anticipation of death (vision 4), as well as new, unknown forms of life in the Hyperborean eschaton (vision 5). The pervasion of the Count's great dreaming with numerous reminiscences of real individuals and real events from different layers of history and culture – transformed into unreal fictions where one finds connections and proximities, as well as portents of the destinies of all dedicated giants, which are repeated again and again – suggests more than just the live presence of the past and the future in the present. Even more importantly, entirely in the spirit of the Sumatraist vision of the world and life, developed in his literary poetics by the author Miloš Crnjanski (1892–1977), emanates the idea of universal connectedness, the idea of world harmony, whereby the distant may become close and the close may become distant, in temporal and spatial terms alike.

Exploring the domains of happiness in Crnjanski's works, the literary historian and critic Petar Džadžić asserts that the Sumatraist hero is omnipresent, infinite, almost divine ("the gigantization of the subject in poetical images").⁹ Pursuing unknown and cosmically infinite distances and searching for his cosmogonic paths to the Hyperborean origin of everything, he lives his great dream, entirely devoted to science, art, or some other, noble, spiritual goal, and at the same time strives to retain his moral purity. Permeated by the hero's tormenting internal dilemma between his homeland and a foreign land, between the present and the past, between Thanatos and Eros, the elegy and the dithyramb, light and darkness, the sun and the moon, the temple and the sphinx, the Sumatraist dream also reveals the Odyssean states of the soul and achieves fulfilment in Odysseanism as one's fate. The intensity of the desire to return home (as another mode of longing for distances) and to the privileged domains of one's childhood and youth (as the domain of happiness, serenity, and bliss) culminates at the moment of a premonition of the imminence of death (Tesla: "I, too, will be seeing /Smiljan/ when I come close to dying"). That is why the Sumatraist hero's

⁹ Petar Džadžić, *Prostori sreće u delu Miloša Crnjanskog*, Belgrade, Nolit, 1976, 50.

Odyssean fate is shaded by the semantics of melancholy and loneliness, which also explains the hero's rejection of Eros in favour of something more sublime. After the Odyssean wilderness between Circe/Calypso and Nausicaa, and driven by the desire to return to his origin and roots as well as to remain untainted, the premonition of the end of life turns into something metaphysical, namely, into a new desire – the desire to return to the origin and eternity, because the sources of consolation and calm are those that provide meaning.

In a Sumatraist world, the transformation of opposites, differences, and distances into connections and proximities, which can merge into one only in dreams and eternity, unfolds in the vast domains of text as the expansion and reshaping of one meaning into another and their mutual reflection, burdened by numerous allusions to other texts. Consequently, inter-textuality, a major trait of textuality (in Miloš Crnjanski), is revealed as yet another type of Sumatraist connections stemming from the community of 'giant' writers. In that light, although Svetislav Božić formally works with the so-called special inter-textuality of operatic librettos and does that along the lines of the quotation-collage structure of the *cento*, a literary genre from late antiquity, thereby exclusively from various already existing literary (lyrical and dramatic) texts by 'giant' Serbian authors (Momčilo Nastasijević, Jovan Dučić, Dejan Medaković, Miloš Crnjanski), it is nonetheless entirely Sumatraist in its ideality, as is the semantic-associative arc that the composer draws, linking different and distant characters and cultural-historical levels of time and space, in order to form an entirely different and specific procedure of music-dramatic representation and narration and pour such a densely networked operatic text into a coherent whole.

Oneiric presences and states, their distinctions, contrasts, and analogical configurations, encounters and lapses have various effects in the dramatic construction of the opera, informing its ring-like composition, episodic structure, as well as its internal multilayered event flow, wherein an entire mosaic of motives forms relations without a clear sense of continuity, like fragments torn out from collective history, from one's personal past, childhood, dreams, or visions. The overall complexity of the opera's narrative dynamic stems from its juxtaposition of divergent but parallel narrative flows, stories-within-stories (explicitly, about the Nemanjić dynasty and Nikola Tesla; implicitly, about Count Sava Vladislavić). The dream visions are dramatized by means of a dynamic interplay between two distinctive forms of narrativity, mimetic (presented onstage) and diegetic (telling the story). Although so-called exposition in mimetic form, referring to visual-musical representation of temporal series of occurrences and their spatial organization and stage design, as well as to characters singing in monologues and dialogues, their gestures, movements, dances, pantomimes, etc., is a typical constitutive element of theatre and opera, in this opera, there

is also the presence of the diegetic narration technique. It features a subtle way of using diverse narrator figures and narrative forms, which are functionalized in relation to the space and time of the events occurring in the dream visions. On the one hand, the narrator's role is performed by intra-diegetic narrators (the Ruler, Nikola Tesla, Count Sava Vladislavić), who tell their own stories or those of others, which means that their narratives are present in the world that gives rise to their discourse and, on the other hand, the choir as an extra-diegetic narrator, whose narrative is extraneous to the world of the story. In creating the opera's dramatic structure, the composer used not only narrative elements from ancient drama (the choral *parodos*, *parabasis*, and *exodos*), but also contemporary developmental dramatic flows, which, in addition to extensive staging directions that have a narrative quality (thereby forming another, external textual level), also include the form of play-within-a-play, a memory play, an embodiment of the narrative into a dramatic dialogue or monologue and even trans-generic narrative strategies, such as the diegetic use of lyrics (forming an internal textual level).

In the first vision, which emerges from the orchestrally and choreographically conceived Prologue and projections of scenes from Herzegovina and the Mediterranean on movable screens, a mixed choir performs decasyllabic verses from "Hrišćansko proljeće" (Christian Spring), a poem by Jovan Dučić (1871–1943). The frequency with which single notes, groups of notes, individual chords, chord progressions, and bichords are repeated in the voice parts (which are organized homophonically and polyphonically, imitatively) reifies the continual, reciting tone of singing. It is supported by a pervading, multilayered presence of an ostinato-based, polymetric, and mixed-metrically directed sonic fluidity in the orchestra. In four quatrains, separated in the musical flow by orchestral interludes and constructed in a configuration featuring a double motivic core – one, rhythmic (the repetition of a tone), and the other, melodic (chromaticism spanning a tritone) – the choir relays the New Testament parable of sacrifice, death, and rebirth, thereby assuming the function of the *parodos* or the opening choral song in ancient Greek drama. The idea of resurrection, which gives rise to the poetic image of a Christian spring, is paradoxical in nature because it reveals death as a precondition of life. This paradox clarifies the sprouting of the entire choral song from interactions and transformations of diatonic and chromatic, modal, and non-modal collections of tones, stemming from the opening, tonally ambiguous (Lydian-whole-tone) segment encompassing six bars centred in *D* (D–E–F/–F sharp–G/–G sharp–A sharp, Example 1). The twofold division of the ancient Greek *parodos* into a stanza and an anti-stanza encompasses here two quatrains each, precisely comprising the Christian turn from Thanatos ("the horizon is all edged in blood/an early blackbird is sing-

ing thinly and thinner still/Saint George killed the dragon... by the church a black cypress tree grows denser...”) into a catharsis of resurrection (“a dove shining in the sun / holy arias dripping from the leaves.../with a message from immaculate Mary’s son... and shines the eternal and new halo/of the lamb that walks across the meadow”). In musical terms, this is a turn from a rhythmically quick and sharp (*Allegro*; quaver-based metres) as well as chromatically intoned delivery, spanning a circle of semitone- and tritone-related modal areas (Phrygian, Lydian, and Aeolian),¹⁰ to a serene kind of delivery marked by retaining a Dorian D minor, a rhythmic deceleration (*Moderato*; crotchet-based metres), sustained durations in the ison parts, and more ethereal texture with pastoral arpeggios on the harp, giving rise to a rather gradual, intervallic rise of a diatonically purified melody (from a unison via a second and third to a fourth and fifth from the ison D), blending into mediievally amplified vocal parallelisms (sixths in relations to the ison D).

Example 1. Vision 1, opening choral song, “Hrišćansko proljeće” (Christian Spring)

The choir’s extra-diegetic narrator voice (in the third person) unfolds parallel to a choreographic staging of the archaic and archetypal ritual of making a sacrifice to the deity Pan and the rite of spring (the Girl).¹¹ The opening superimposition of a diegetic and mimetic flow, of telling and presenting, and, foremost, the poetic images of “a dove shining in the sun” from the third stanza and “the fall of a ray of beams from the middle of the sky” from the fourth stanza of the choral song give rise to a literal embodiment of the Dove onstage, the harbinger of apprehension in Count Sava’s dream (and the amazing companion

¹⁰ First stanza: Phrygian D minor – Aeolian C-sharp minor – Lydian A major – Aeolian E-flat minor – Aeolian E-flat minor – Aeolian C-sharp minor – Phrygian D minor; second stanza: Aeolian F minor – A-flat major – Phrygian G harmonic major.

¹¹ Pan was performed by Miloš Marijan and the Girl by Ivana Kozomara Duduković.

of Nikola Tesla), scored for a mezzo-soprano.¹² With the poem “Bratu” (To My Brother) by Momčilo Nastasijević (1894–1938),¹³ marked by semantic tension inherent to ideas of listening by means of singing the mystery of the origin, life, and death, and invoking the brother’s voice from below, in an archaic syntax, the Dove’s song lyrically reflects and sublimates the opening description of the primeval beginning and the primordial cry. The song’s ur-ancient intonation drove Božić to plunge the harmonic flow of his music from the opening Aeolian D minor to the depths of the concluding Aeolian C minor. The elegiac colouring of the verses’ native melody, so quintessential to Nastasijević’s poetic language, called for a Phrygian inflection in the music, conforming to the semantics of melancholy apprehension and death. It is manifested by means of a descending semitone fabric of melodic lines in lower-register chamber instrumental accompaniment, which secures a peculiar melancholy *gravita* quality, as well as by means of pedal and held tones at the ends of phrases, contributing to its protracted duration. The concise, condensed, elliptic, and enigmatic poetic expression is also shaped by the narrow melodic range of concise vocal phrases, which are linked like the verses themselves – in lyric circles (Example 2).

Example 2. Vision 1, *Elegija* (Elegy), a lyrical song for mezzo-soprano

The image shows a page of a musical score for a mezzo-soprano song. It features a vocal line with lyrics in Cyrillic script and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "О - снѣг - ши, м - мо - јесу, м - мо - јесу, тпе - ма тѣ - нѣ, тѣма - ма аде - тѣ". The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* and *mf*, and articulation markings like *pizz* and *arco*. The music is written in a key signature of one flat (D minor) and a 4/4 time signature.

Precisely at this point, when the mimetic flow stops, the diegetic flow begins in a trans-generic way – with Dučić’s sonnet “Žitije” (Hagiography), which

¹² The Dove/Muse/Ellen was performed by Sanja Kerkez.

¹³ In the libretto, the title of this song is “Elegija” (Elegy).

relates, in dodecasyllabic verse, the story of an emperor who spent “three nights and three days” reading the Book of Ancestors and “saw passing across the ceiling the terrible spectre of Nemanja, in a triumphant stride”. The object of the story is also the performing subject – the theatrical character of the Ruler, scored for a tenor.¹⁴ In other words, the object of the implicit narrator’s narration in the poem, which is the emperor, performs (in alternation with the choir’s homophonic recitation) the narration onstage, performing the role of an intra- and homo-diegetic, character narrator, by means of a narrow-ranged recitative declamation centred on D. The accompanying D minor *cantabile* melody featuring a melancholy and nostalgic tone in the clarinets and arpeggiated harmonies in the harp (as well as G minor harmonic progressions in the winds and strings) contextualizes the harmonic flow in a doubled tonic complex, which at the very beginning of the opera suggests the Sumatraism of the connection between the Ruler and Tesla, manifested only later. Telling us about himself, the Ruler begins a story-within-a-story, therefore, one of the three hypo-diegetic lines of the opera’s narrative structure (Image 3).

The diegetic narrativity is further extended and transformed by means of hypo-diegesis throughout the second, fourth, and fifth vision, where the composer, borrowing dialogic material from Miloš Crnjanski’s play *Nikola Tesla* (1952–66), develops a sort of play-within-a-play. This dramatic centre of the opera is shaped using the technique of framing dream visions reversibly. Namely, it is initiated by Count Sava’s falling asleep and dreaming of Nikola Tesla’s American period, which is first introduced, along the lines of a realist theatrical production, in an inter-media fashion, by means of an onscreen cinematic time machine featuring scenes from the history of New York’s everyday and theatre life of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and then represented with a configuration of stage and costume symbols (a dark backdrop filled with vertical arrays of lights and a couple of pantomimists wearing aprons and hats designed as stylizations of the red and white stripes of the American flag and the American army beret). That dramatic centre is re-rounded by submerging Tesla’s dream into that of Count Sava. Within this wider dramatic framework, wherein Nikola Tesla as a musical character (baritone)¹⁵ is marked by an *arioso* melodic style, there are occasional *parlando* bursts of autonomous acts of him telling his story or other people’s stories to other characters, for instance, when he remembers, in the first person, his homeland in spring and his early troubles in America, or when he mourns, in the third person, his deceased friend Nikola. This immersion, so to speak, of a character into and extraction out of the narrator, in a word, an act of

¹⁴ The Ruler and Tesla in a White Suit were performed by Nenad Čiča.

¹⁵ Nikola Tesla in a Black Suit was performed by Marko Kalajanović.

narration wherein the narrator is also a participant in events that are not shown onstage but that he relates to us in terms of memories, evokes a sort of memory play. This manifestation of its generic traits is also enhanced by the staging of Nikola Tesla's character, for the most part seated on a wooden chair, on the right-hand side of the stage, facing the audience.



Image 3. The Ruler

These diegetic breaks are comprised within the broader mimetic framework of Tesla's monologues and dialogues with his laboratory technician, friends, and

Ellen, which are always accompanied by a lyrical song as a reflection of the contents of the preceding monologue or dialogue. Thus, in the second vision, Tesla's memory of Becquerel's fake and unfulfilled promise of a large payment if he repairs his ship, while Tesla was offering his own great discovery of electricity "which would be cheaper than anything ever before", gains its full form in a grotesque antithesis between the poetic image of "building a temple as white as a monastery" and a nostalgic "walking of a crying Moon inside it" (instead of light and joy) in the first quatrain and the poetic image of the "monstrous smile of a black Sphinx rising over the temple" (instead of a cross) in the second quatrain of Miloš Crnjanski's poem "Groteska" (Grotesque), sung by the Woman Ruler (mezzo-soprano).¹⁶ The inter-textual interaction between Nikola Tesla's monologically embodied and utterly personalized narration and the Woman Ruler's metrically disembodied and depersonalized song rests on the procedure of subjecting the opposing motives (white and black, that is, divine and demonic) of the dramatic dialogue to satiric-allegorical lyricization. The effect of a grotesque distortion of the visual image of a temple as white as a monastery and the sonic image of the monstrous smile of a black Sphinx is produced in the music by means of a paradoxical deviation from harmony: in the first case, by means of a Phrygian intonation of the vocal melody (a descending intervallic spiral, like a melodic plunge) and orchestral parts (a rhythmicized descending second), as a sonic semantization of death, whereas in the second case it is achieved by means of a rising vocal melody in *crescendo*, arpeggiated harmonies in the woodwinds' *staccato* lines, and the bass instruments' lines in a protracted rising chromaticism, as a sonic stylization of sarcasm.

In the fourth vision, Tesla's moving story of his tormented childhood friend, who dies on the voyage to America and who, at the moment of dying, sees his beautiful homeland, just as Tesla would in his own time, is accompanied by a dark lyrical reflection, once again scored for a mezzo-soprano, but now in the role of a bereaved Mother, dressed in black.¹⁷ The free, non-rhymed verses, borrowed from the second and third stanza of Miloš Crnjanski's poem "Himna" (Hymn; Anthem), express contents that are entirely at odds with the poem's title, which suggests a precisely defined lyric genre with an exalted theme, religious inspiration, and rapturous tone. By contrast, the focus here is on the dynamics of vanishing and the disappearance of "forests, hills... mother, home", a grim destruction of everything, except blood. In other words, the subject of this cult celebration and exaltation is blood. In Božić's music, this parodic distortion of the hymn into an anti-hymn is manifested in terms of subverting D major's func-

¹⁶ The Woman Ruler/Angel of Temptation was sung by Jadranka Jovanović.

¹⁷ The role of the bereaved Mother in Black was sung by Jadranka Jovanović.

tionalized harmonic progressions, teleologically directed toward the certainty of a cadence, in a key that is traditionally associated with hymns and majestic qualities, using the dissonant quality of the Lydian fourth (D–G sharp). This is the same quality that had earlier, in the first vision, marked the motivic core of the opening choral song (“the horizon is all edged in blood... Saint George killed the dragon with his silver spear precisely at dawn”). In Božić’s music, the elegiac tones of death and loss, of wasteland and inadequacy, which Crnjanski produces in his subversive distortion of the basic precepts of the hymn as a genre and of hymnicity in general, call for a vocal stylization of lamenting within a D major tonal framework, using a twofold procedure of shaping the melodies of vocal phrases: one, defined by its initial figure of epic recitation on a single note (d²) and its final figure, characterized by a descending flickering, trembling of the voice, while the other rests on a rhythmically uniform and slow-moving chromatic vocal descent.

The motives of parting and departure are intensely concentrated in Nikola Tesla’s dialogue with Ellen, at the beginning of the fifth vision. Densely pervaded by a Phrygian-inflected auxiliary motive (A–G sharp–A–B/A–G sharp–A–F sharp) in parallel thirds scored for the flutes, this dialogue, ironically enough, unfolds in D major, in a waltz rhythm, a type of dance that traditionally brings a man and a woman close together, whilst also employing singing in parallel thirds as a conventional device from operatic love duets. The Eros in the music serves to ironize the Thanatos of this moment in the drama. The darkened ending of this waltz-intoned dialogue in the tonic D minor is introduced, like a sort of hint of something that is as yet unknown, by a quick ascent of an arpeggiated dominant 12-3 chord with a hard-diminished base (A–C sharp–E flat–G–B flat–D flat–F). Nikola Tesla’s feeling of depletion and cheerlessness in life on the eve of death is metonymically lyricized into the “lacklustre smile”, hard, “tired” breathing, and pervasion by a “terrible shiver and an endless sorrow” borrowed from Miloš Crnjanski’s poem “Stenje” (Rocks),¹⁸ which the Tenor, erstwhile singing the role of the Ruler but now transformed into the character of Tesla in a White Suit, sings (“serenely, with pain”) almost on the border of speaking (slow recitative) and whispering (*pp*). This song about *taedium vitae* takes the relational centre of F minor, which had emphasized the image of the black cypress tree’s thickening in the second stanza of the choral *parodos*, alternately saturating it with the tritone quality of the Lydian fourth (as in the Lydian major-minor scale) and the chromatic quality of the Phrygian second (as in the Phrygian minor scale). This Thanatos tension culminates in the final polarization between the tonic and the Lydian subdominant in the same hard-diminished guise (B–D#–F),

¹⁸ In the libretto, the poem appears under the title of “Predosećanje” (Premonition).

which already served to introduce the character of Nikola Tesla in a Black Suit in the second vision, but functioning there as the dominant of (a Phrygian-related) E minor.

The sinking of Nikola Tesla's dark feeling into forebodings of undreamt of, endless lines, this Sumatraist blending of one opposition into another, is simultaneously revealed on the staging level of mimetic presentation, first in their visually literal (black and white) encounter in the mirror and then in their holding together, in their hands, the opposite ends of the same thread of destiny woven by the Fates.¹⁹ The Sumatraist negation of (the fear of) death, metaphorized in Tesla's act of entangling and disentangling the severed thread of destiny, makes an unexpected point about strangeness and incredibility, because it offers Hyperboreanism as a synonym to Sumatraism – by virtue of their shared longing for transcendence. That is why, as the composer indicates in the stage directions, Tesla's premonition of the beams of Hyperborea is “continued” and “sung further” – by extending the broad tonal-harmonic line, established in vision 1, from D mode via E minor to F mode and even further – to F-sharp minor. In Miloš Crnjanski's poem “Sumatra”, sung by Ellen, the premonition crystallizes into a vision of “far-off coasts, beyond the seas”, “the snowy peaks of the Urals”, “caressing distant hills and icy mounts, tenderly, with hands”, where, to use Miloš Crnjanski's own words from the conclusion of his poetic Creed, “all of that intricacy turned into an immense serenity”, while sorrow paled and transformed into “limitless consolation”.²⁰ Hence also the call, again, for a musical conception of the idea of catharsis in resurrection from the poetic image of a Christian spring featured in the opening choral song, a conception expressed in polar interaction with a functionally closed harmonic element (F-sharp minor) of a non-functional and open element such as the whole-tone scale (here starting from C). The elegiac transformation of consciousness, whereby not only the expansive sensuality of feminine eroticism is abandoned, but also the coolness of a spring evening, scattered sorrow, and bitter questions are freed from pain, described in Miloš Crnjanski's poem “Stražilovo”, to be sung *con dolore*, in F-sharp minor,²¹ with minimal melodic movement, softly and contemplatively, by Tesla (Tenor), at the beginning of the sixth vision, opens the way toward “cosmic etherealism”. On the one hand, an ethereal perception of the world is another synonym of Sumatraism by virtue of understanding death as a transformation of being in an

¹⁹ The Fates are performed by Ines Marković, Drina Pešić, and Iva Ignjatović.

²⁰ Miloš Crnjanski, “Objašnjenje ‘Sumatre’”, *Srpski književni glasnik*, 1920.

²¹ Although the orchestral prelude and postlude are conceived in C-sharp minor, the vocal part of the song is set along a circular axis from F-sharp minor to A major and back, thus affirming the tonal-harmonic line explained above.

entirely new dimension and, on the other hand, by finding peace and consolation in equal measure. This is indicated both by the composer's opting for maximum textural etherization of sonority (just the strings, in no more than two layers) and the parallel undulation, at the edge of the stage, of a female figure, nude in the manner of Jovan Dučić, in "white, immeasurable silence, far off",²² as a symbol of beauty, petrified and cooled down by life's fatigue, vanishing in the mist.

The opera's diegetic narrative line reaches completion in the sixth and seventh vision, with the first incarnation of Count Sava Vladislavić, who was up to that point seen onstage only as an obscure, curled, or floating spectre (Image 4). He announces himself in a painful and spectral bass soliloquy, whose melodic narrativity resembles that of the Ruler's soliloquy from vision 1. With an anaphoric repetitiveness of unthinkability as a permanent, resonating strangeness and dilemma, the non-rhymed verses of Dejan Medaković's poem "Nezamislivo je, ali ipak" (It Is Unthinkable, But Still) tell us about the repeated tribulations of the Serbian people as a collective and its suffering "to the edge of a vanished world". That is also the subject of the succeeding chorus, a setting of Miloš Crnjanski's poem "Blagovesti" (The Annunciation), which performs the role of the *exodos* or closing choral song in ancient Greek drama. Following the *parabasis* or central choral song, which was in ancient drama separate from the main plot and placed midway through the play, while in this opera it is found in the third vision, with the central liturgical lines of the Creed (Symbol of Faith), the closing chorus in the sixth vision completes the arc that was begun by the opening chorus in vision 1. It does this by using the semantics of white lilies, that is, the antithesis between their "glow" (the verses of the opening chorus) and their "lack of fragrance" (the verses of the closing chorus). This antithesis is burdened by another significant antithesis, the one between "beams of light" and "the innocence of a lamb", on the one hand, and "a night full of sorrow and painful debauchery" on the other. The only thing that remains from this personal yet transient state at the border between dreams and reality, when even "over and above unhinged premonitions and intentions there is a heavy and painful sword hanging, under which one cannot venture even in dreams", as it says in the stage directions, is the preservation of the personal and collective memory of the spiritual roots of identity, whose symbol is the Great Book of Ancestors, in the future and for the future.

²² Paraphrased from Miloš Crnjanski, *op. cit.*

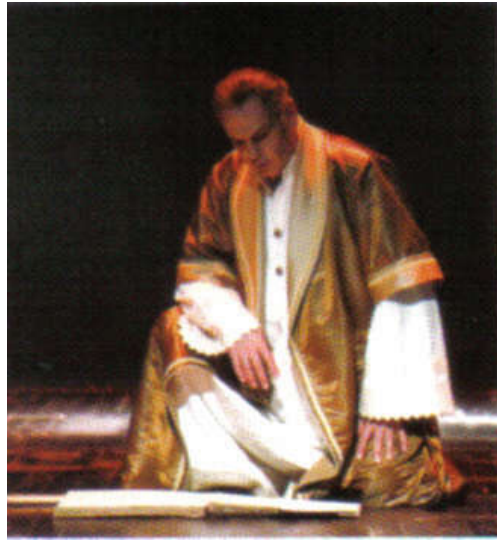


Image 4. Count Sava

Although existentially and ontologically specific, the opera's three hypo-di-
egetic flows (stories-within-a-story), though running in parallel, come together,
at the end, in a single point of meaning – the Great Book, “the central conver-
gence point of the energy of the dream and dreams” – revealing themselves as
fragments of a single and yet plurilinear flow. Its fragmented – when observed
from without – episodically abrupt chronology is a consequence of variations in
the temporal structure of the dramatic narrative, achieved by means of metalep-
sis, prolepsis, ellipsis, pausing, and summarizing. However, observing it from
within, in depth, one sees time circling around its spiritual centre, the divine
origin, which is at the same time the eschaton as well. In relation to that, the
opera's multilayered event flow develops according to the logic of dreams, in
other words, around similarities and borderline contacts between the characters
in terms of dream visions, until the initial ontological vertigo (visions 1–4) cul-
minates at the anamorphic moment (midway through vision 5), whose catop-
tric effect rises from the fact that the Tenor, who is simultaneously Tesla and
the Ruler, dressed in a black suit, occupies the position of a mirror reflection
of Nikola Tesla, the Baritone, who is dressed in a black suit right from his first
appearance (vision 2). In the sixth vision, the catoptric culmination, where the
Tenor sings Tesla and the Count's painful dream, Tesla's burdening under the
weight of the Count's spirit, leads to a series of successive catoptric convergen-
ces: first, between Nikola Tesla and the Ruler, because at that point, Tesla's role
is for the first time assigned to a tenor; then, between Nikola Tesla and Count

Sava, because Tesla switches from his dream to that of the Count; and, finally, between Count Sava and the Ruler, whose spirits are seen floating in parallel, over the darkened areas of the stage. At that point, for the first time, Count Sava himself speaks out as a character in his own right, in a soliloquy, and indeed, in the final, seventh vision, he repeats the Ruler's initial words: "Written at Gradac, illuminated at Žiča, bound in heavy gold in Venice, the Book of Ancestors, the pride of the Empire..." (Example 3). This kind of completion shows that the dreamers and their visions form one and the same consciousness of dreaming, which is the same from the very beginning. That consciousness is no longer just that of the Count or Tesla or the Ruler or the composer, but may be the collective's consciousness of its "moral lesson".

Example 3. Vision 7, Count Sava, the poem "Žitije" (Hagiography)

The image shows a page of a musical score for a vocal solo by Count Sava. The score is written for a full orchestra and includes the following parts: Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Arpeggiator (Ar.), Cello (Cello), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vcl.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The vocal line is written in a bass clef and includes the lyrics: "Пи - са - на у Гра - да - цу — сло - ва - на у Жи - чи — у Мле - ци - на ут - ро - шим зов - том — о - жи - ва - на." The music is in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor) and a 4/4 time signature. The score features various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings like *pizz.* (pizzicato) for the cello and *rit.* (ritardando) for the cello and contrabass.

The emanation of a "moral lesson" from the repository of the memory of collective consciousness, which is articulated in the opera by means of verbal dialogic and lyrical interaction, gains its dynamic reflection in non-verbal forms of mimetic narrativity, in dance and pantomime, as manifestations of the collective unconscious. The tragic-elegiac pattern of narration and contemplation

in dream visions is deepened by an archetypal perspective of mythic, pastoral, allegorical, and phantasmagorical figures and scenes. In its unity around the dramatic narrative's overarching theme – that of sacrifice, suffering, and dying in a foreign land – as well as in its integration with the dream visions in their shared Sumatraist semantic teleology (universal connectedness), the conception of this visual-choreographic setting of a spectacle, as an elaborate play-within-a-play, evokes the overall model of late-renaissance theatre, namely, verbal dramatic representations with various visual-musical-costumed intermedii or intermezzi. Beginning in the first vision, with the sacrifice of a young female body to the deity Pan, this dance-pantomime procession culminates midway through the fourth vision, in the lascivious seductive dance of the Angel of Temptation, introduced by Miloš Crnjanski's poem "Bespuća" (Wilderness), assigned to the Mezzo-soprano. The dance and the song express, "with horror in her eyes, debauched, cheerless... with a gloomy smile", a reminder that the end is close, "far, somewhere around the world... where everything yields to peace". The procession is completed in the sixth vision, with the act of a ritual sacrificial dismemberment of a female body. Manifesting a readily recognizable Dionysian archetypal impulse, with the typical sequence of *intoxicatio-phalophoria-sparagmos*, these dance-pantomime presencings in an oneiric form only further affirm the basic theatrical model of anamorphic doubling, because the archetypal-mythical attribute of Dionysus is not only the *xenos* or stranger, foreigner, or alien, which is what both Tesla and Vladislavić were in their real lives, but also the *dithyrambos* or the twice-born, the reborn, which is indicated by the opera's catoptric and Sumatraist relations. From that impulse, one may also understand the meaning of the cyclical alternation, articulated throughout the opera, between mortal singing and profound suffering and sorrow, nostalgia and melancholy, by way of divine ascendancy into heavenly joy in the Hyperborean eschaton.