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POETICAL MECHANISM OF *LINES AND CIRCLES*: COMPOSITIONAL UNDERSTATEMENT OF BRANKA POPOVIĆ

The underbelly of a sound mechanism unfolds before our eyes. The notes act as if they are some kind of atomic particles that appear and disappear, making a new combination, attractions and energy fields. This is the unmediated effect of the compositional technique applied by Branka Popović in her recent work *Lines and Circles*: And the author states as much in her linear notes: “*Lines and Circles* is a delicate and precise musical mechanism, made of tiny musical particles and sonorities, stimulated to revolve and circulate”. And we hear this, however, cryptic this statement is. Branka Popović keeps the mystery of her work close to herself. In contemporary Serbian music she is unique in her usage of understatement and shying away from the limelight, even though she is one of the most exciting and accomplished contemporary composers. But, let us try to unravel within the limits of an analytical framework this poetical mystery of abstract music narrativity pertinent to Popović’s *Lines and Circles*.

The composition lasts around 10 minutes and is scored for an unusual choice of instruments: the harp, trumpet in C, soprano recorder in C and accordion. The reason for this lies in the composer’s collaboration with Ensemble Studio 6. This musical group is characterised by the unorthodox choice of instruments which they seek to engage in the contemporary musical process. This ensemble was founded in 2012 and it gathers internationally acclaimed soloists

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and performers of contemporary composed and improvised music. As Ensemble Studio6 states in their presentation they encourage “an open dialogue between listening, interpreting and creating in contemporary artistic practices”. In this respect the special focus is on commissions and collaborative practice on creating new pieces, especially those by younger generations of Serbian composers, improvisers and sound artists.

Lines and Circles is therefore the fruit of the first cycle of commissions by the Ensemble Studio6 and it was premiered at a concert held in Radio Belgrade in April 2013, which was broadcast and recorded.¹ Later that year, the work was presented at the International Rostrum of Composers in Tallinn where it was shortlisted among the recommended works of this manifestation, which, in the last 60 years chooses works on the basis of their compositional merit, but also of their radiophonic (air-time) potential and overall artistic impact.

So far we have stated the factual side of the *Lines and Circles* – its creation, international reception and feedback, as well as its existence among recent creations by Serbian composers. Now, we shall observe the musical unfolding of the composition itself.

The first mark in the score is ‘Misterioso’ and the beginning is punctuated by an accord in harp with simultaneously underlined tone B flat (A#) in the accordion. This tone functions as a harmonic anchor, since the whole composition dies out in the end on this very note. In other words, the presented accord is a vertical presentation of the motivic cell/tone set of the composition, since tones B flat C sharp D E F sharp G A flat will be used in various combinations in the piece. Right now they are superimposed on each other from B to B, forming the vertical dispositive of a scale formation consisting of two tetrachords with tone/halfnote/halfnote/tone disposition. In a way, if we follow the logic of the title of the work, these are the lines that in the course of a few rotations join in together into the familiar assemblage of tonal, melodious music we hear at the very end of the score. Branka Popović unfolds her composition process in front of us. From the first ‘sound molecule’ to its development and reconfiguration into the melodic outline.

From the bar 9, the tone B natural is introduced in the accordion, which, from bar 17 onwards, will feature prominently in the first appearance of the recorder. In other words, the recorder in the next 16 bars sounds only this note, with the addition of a “fluctuation in intonation up to a quarter tone below the

¹ The original version was performed by: Milana Zarić, harp, Nenad Marković, trumpet, Karolina Bater, recorder and Vladimir Blagojević, accordion. In November 2016, the Ensemble Studio6 made another recording of this composition for Radio Belgrade, with a different trumpet player, Mladen Đorđević.

written” as it is noted in the score. In this powerful timbral statement, Branka Popović manages to create a very strong presence of the recorder, traditionally regarded as a sonically more modest instrument, with a much smaller frequency range and volume of all those used in the composition. It is important to note that the recorder retains this prominence throughout the work and that it is the propelling force of the ‘circles’ or new rotations and recompositions of the initial cell. From this moment on, tone B natural enters into the harmonic relations with the initial tone set, as part of it and as the mirroring other. The music from bar 42 starts to spin, entering into rotational flux. It is propelled forth by the first appearance of the trumpet (bar 44) with a sordino, which adds another melodic, treble line to the score. This segment builds in sound density and volume, by still keeping the delicate disposition of the timbral characters of the four instruments. The two treble instruments – the trumpet and the recorder provide counterpoint flux, while the accordion and especially harp build in accord sequences and fill in the frequency range. The interplay is based on prominent quartal harmonies and different combinations of the initial tone set until a downward chromatic motion in the recorder from D until B Flat propels forth a C anchoring tone in the trumpet with which this segment ends (bar 100).

One of the most prominent and structurally important developments of this section is the introduction of the trumpet motive in bars 87–88, consisting of the repetition of tone E flat and then the augmented fifth, the natural fourth circular motion in tones (B-F-E-BA-C). This motive will be repeated in the course of the composition, making it an important structural element.

This was the first rotational circle of the composition and in bar 101 starts the new segment with a slight reminiscence of the first exposition of the material. That means that the sonic dispositive is again ‘scaled down’ to the basic particles (lines). In other words, it is sonically diluted and distilled. The recorder again takes up the tone B natural (one octave lower than in the first appearance), but right now in the accordion we hear the delicate melodic movement centred around tone E (and its minor scale formation). This introduction of the tonal centre is delicate and fleeting, but it is important to note it however, since it is the anticipation of future events, especially of the E minor finishing the piece. At this point, we start to notice the compositional gesture of Branka Popović. It is a particular brand of musical understatement. She introduces motivic situations from the backdoor, similar to the refined yet silent entrance of an actor on the ‘stage’. This segment lasts only 16 bars, and from then on, the sonic energy becomes slightly denser with the usage of smaller rhythmical values (quintuplet) for the repetition C in the recorder line. In this segment (from bar 117 onwards), the harp is silent, until bar 129 when it appears with the rendition of the motivic cell we have already encountered in bar 36. At the same time the trumpet is

playing just the tone F, which proves to be another centre for the subsequent development of this segment. Now in bar 139, the recorder in a changed tempo starts to spin the melodic fabric with counterpoint (the loose rhythmical canonic imitation) in the trumpet. Meantime the harp is instructed to improvise without pitch or to produce an aural event just by ‘moving the fingers across the strings behind the tuning pins in the high register’ as it is written in the score. This creates a specific light and breezy timbral activity on the very edge of the acoustic spectrum of the piece that nevertheless engages and ‘colours’ the interwoven lines of the recorder and trumpet, with the accordion remaining silent all the while. This whole segment ends with an unexpected trumpet melodic solo around the E centre with emphasis on the minor major second (E-F-E-F sharp) in the first trumpet phrase. The climax of this contour is B2 natural, from which the melodic movement starts to descend downwards until it reaches the B, two octaves lower. At the same time the accordion either punctuates the B or just ‘breathes’ through it. This is the first time that the breathing effect is introduced and it is also an anticipation of the final segment of this composition. In a way, this part of the work is dedicated to the concept of ‘lines’ and their interwoven combinations, with solo statements and combinations. In other words, from bar 100 to bar 170, we have a delicate exploration of different textures (often with exception of one of the instruments) that render the ‘idea of chamber music’ into this chamber music situation. We could say we are facing the lines of a specific acoustic hall of mirrors that Branka Popović creates in this segment of the composition.

The next part (from bar 171 to bar 220) is a new rotational circle that also functions as a summation of the different particles and parts of the music mechanism. Formally it stands in for the idea of development and recapitulation, while introducing new arrangements of the previously exposed motivic cells and harmonic materials. First of all, it uses the gesture of repetition in the highest register – in the recorder line, which gives the particular energy of an acute, shrill frequency to the instrumental mixture that propels the rotation of the lines. With the *accelerando* indication, this becomes even more obvious and this whole section starts to resemble, with its polyrhythmic fluctuation and juxtapositions, an updated ‘Stravinskian’ gestural sphere. This impression is accentuated by the harp motive in bars 191–192, which itself leads to a reprise of the trumpet motive from the first part of the piece in bars 204–211, after which the flow quickly dies away. Yet, this is not the end of the work. On the contrary, with the particular force of a surprise, Branka Popović, at bar 221, introduces a seemingly new and tonal material, a sort of quirky valse-musette in the vein of Parisian ‘couleur’. I have endearingly named this segment *Amelie* – thinking of the film *Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain* – even though it has nothing to do with

this particular pop cultural reference. But, this segment is a sort of unusual coda, an understated tonal clearing, a sort of clever and gentle intrusion, amidst a very rigorous and precise mechanism of Branka Popović's technically superlative postmodernist writing.

In other words, from bar 221 to 261 we experience a 'volte-face', a changing of the guards, so to speak, to the previous harmonic and rhythmic drive of the piece with this little waltz in E minor, with the accordion playing the famous triple time beat. Above it, the recorder retains its Puckish role of a fragile yet powerful treble agent, while the harp makes a contrapuntal development of the recorder lines. All the way, the trumpet has just an indication of breathing through, adding a special sound effect to this delicate 'song'. Finally in the end, the harp and the recorder in a soft interplay leave the stage with a dynamic downsizing of the melody until the first tone of the composition – the tone B flat – is reached. We may say that the work has made a full circle on the chosen tones, presented simultaneously – as some sort of nod to Mahler – in the first bar of the piece.

Lines and Circles is a sort of untangled game of cross-references and inter-relationships between four instruments. It creates a very particular intersubjective space of shared musicianship that corresponds to the collaborative practice of Ensemble Studio6.

Lines and Circles is a showpiece of delicate craftsmanship in treating the unusual sound combinations, but more so it is a work that offers a clear insight into Branka Popović's particular brand of poetical form. As I stated before in the title of this article, she favours sonic understatement to bold and brash gestures, she offers listeners and researchers just a few words and not many explications or directions. Yet, she is one of the boldest and most consistent composers of her generation (and beyond) in Serbia. The sheer quality of her writing and the clarity of her vision is completely in sync with the academic and mainstream framework of contemporary music today. At the same time, she has developed a clear artistic voice, that is singular and recognisable.

It is a voice of great precision, almost artisanal finesse, of a particular and tactile pleasure of working with just a few precious elements, of the creation of very refined sound mechanisms. But, the quality of the sonic embroidery of her work opens up – as we have seen by looking closely into *Lines and Circles* also something very distinctive and pertinent to her work – a lyrical heart that communicates the poetical truths and affective nuances hidden within.