

Glory and misery of the Avant-garde

On the occasion of the premiere of Concerto for Ivana (Marimba concerto)

Igor Kuljerić, composer and conductor, is about to premiere his new piece, Concerto for Ivana (Marimba concerto) with his daughter Ivana Kuljerić Bilić in the role of marimba soloist. Another reason for this conversation is the particular success of his Croatian Glagolitic Requiem and the future release and public presentation of the cd containing the recording of the premiere.

Mr Kuljerić, the premiere of your work is approaching, the rehearsals are almost over, tell us please about your composing process for this piece.

— In the history of music, certain forms have followed the evolution of instruments (concertos for piano, violin or cello) and have reached completeness and perfection. The notion of a violin concerto is a very clear one. In every such piece there is a substantial display of instrumental virtuosity through some suitable music material. When writing this piece, I had a few things on my mind. My daughter is a marimbist and it was, first of all, a family debt, and I was somewhat anxious about it. For some time the instrument had intrigued me and I wanted to write for it. I should also say that I haven't written many concertos, not even for piano which is my favorite, the source of my musical persona. I have worked on it for a long time, since writing for some instrument implies a deeper knowledge and feeling. From that prospective the cooperation with my daughter was important. Marimba is the instrument of the new era. Its origins can be traced in various directions. The Gamelan orchestra is known for its tradition of rhythmical polyphony on various melodic and non-melodic percussion instruments. Their sound echoes the colors and textures of brass, water, glass, wood...The other source was the Afro-Cuban music, with extreme rhythmic vitality and richness of colorful instruments. I wanted to merge the non-European traditions with the historical concerto form and experience the marimba as a kind of a particular piano with strong percussive sound from one side and the singing quality of the piano on the other, reminding me of the concertos from the romantic period. In the relation between the marimba and the orchestra it was very important to find the adequate orchestration to put a spotlight on the instrument. The strings, for instance, are given a more percussive role and the structure in itself is rather complex. The transitions between different sections are fast, the work is in three movements, in just one flow. The continuity is obtained through the associative dimension of the musical language. The musical material is made of various melodic and harmonic cells which develop in different directions, the main goal was to make the marimba both a percussive and a singing instrument. I am no slave to some particular practice, and for me it is not important which material to use, but how. And, the most important of all, to remain true to the main idea of the piece...

You are mentioning the singing quality which is rather obvious in your work although you were once a radically experimental avant-garde music enthusiast.

— Exactly, I considered prof Šulek as a father, but I felt the urge to try something else, I didn't want to become a scholar. But soon enough I have discovered the glory and the misery of the avant-garde, its reach and limitations. While working in the Electronic Studio of RAI in Milano I realized how important it was to look for your individual voice. It is the basis for creativity. And I started to look back, into the colors, scents and rhythms of my own heritage, with the sound as one eternal state, also as a movement looking for a resonance, answer, relationship. For me it is a song, a bird love song turned toward others, it is a dialogue I am always trying to open. In the beginning there was the sound, which means that I don't accept any traditional preconceived principles about the music harmony. In this concerto for example some things happen on just one chord, but always changing like kaleidoscope. The situations are created from one given yet free principle.

Are you often using pastiche technique and quotations?

— It is a kind of a technical procedure to link the present to the past. For me the crucial piece for that was Ommaggio a Lukačić – Quam pulchra es, from which I took eight bars of melody by Lukačić and gave every singer to sing one, two or three tones until those disappear. So that the melody, determined by the beginning, development and number, turns into an endless melody, an ever lasting sound. Still the source was always Lukacic. One could ask if those could have been any tones. No, because those were responsible for that kind of sound.

What you just said confirms your determination opposed to the impression of undefined and open liberties in your work. You opposed to the possibility to perform parts of Glagolitic Requiem on the occasion of its cd presentation. You said that we know what the requiem is and in which venues it should be performed. It means you respect the hierarchy and order of things just as your references to the past.

— Exactly, and that is what has led me in my exploration into ancient singing and special rhythmic patterns. That way I came to the Glagolitic roots of our music, and I looked for a text. Actually that was more in my mind. When Antun Dolički brought me the text (from the St. Michael Church in Zadar) I knew that was it.

I must say that Boris Papandopulo has already advised me I should look into the rich tradition of the Croatian literature, even if I already had composed on ancient texts. But, the Croatian Glagolitic Requiem is special because it was created almost by itself. It is known that I am a fast writing composer,

but this piece is a result of the layers that I had accumulated in long time, together with the Glagolitic tradition that I have kept in my memory. Still, I can say that Requiem is a new creation and it existed before just as a hypothesis. It is an artefact, since every art work is created based on concepts and assumptions, and not literally on a particular piece.

I think it is more about the spiritual legacy that I have materialized, and it would be difficult to build something on it otherwise. No musical language was developed, since what can be found in the Requiem is not the result of a big musical river, but of many smaller streams and different sources collected in one place.

Interviewed by Dodi Komanov