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## COMPOSER SPEAKS

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### **A SKETCH OF THE (SELF-)PORTRAIT OF IVAN BRKLJAČIĆ\*\***



In the generation of composers who acquired their artistic skills and competences at the end of the 1990s and in the first years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, **Ivan Brkljačić** (1977) stands out not only for his deep devotion to composing and the attractive diversity of his works, but also for the brave, risky emergency work at articulating and affirming contemporary musical expression among our cultural public. Apart from many successful works and educational activity at the Department of Theory at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, what places Brkljačić among distinguished authors of contemporary Serbian music is certainly his position as selector of the *International Review of Composers*, which he

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has been holding since 2007. In his selectorial decisions, or rather in his role of the organizer, as an active participant on the cultural and artistic scene, which he bases upon Ardenne's 'organizational principle',<sup>1</sup> he is actually striving to preserve the normative function of this festival as a place for the exchange of everything that constitutes contemporary music, but also a place where other institutions will find their interests.

Since he graduated in composition with Professor Srđan Hofman in 2001, Ivan Brkljačić has been intensely productive and deepening his personal musical world, which is attested to by a rich opus that is diverse in genres. He incorporated into his musical vision those elements of tradition that were the closest to his creative personality. Thus, for instance, Brkljačić completely non-discriminately, in a 'Post-Modernistic vein', activates the codes of rock 'n' roll and uses the songs of The Beatles as the basis for the choral composition *Sun King* (2006–2007), while in the work *Mokranjac – varijacije na fragment iz Njest Svjata* [*Mokranjac – Variations on a Fragment from Njest Svjat*] for soprano and string quartet, he uses quotations from Mokranjac's *rukoveti* (choral song cycles) and *Opelo* [*Funeral Mass*]. He recently finished the doctoral studies in composition,<sup>2</sup> also with Professor Srđan Hofman, during which he mostly explored the concept of instrumental theatre, both in compositional practice and theoretical work. The most significant result of dealing with the presentational potential of music is instrumental theatre *Istar – ciklus nascentnih muzičkih karikatura za scensko izvođenje u pozorišnom dekoru* [*Istar – Cycle of Nascent Music Caricatures for the Performing in a Theater Scenery*] for chamber ensemble and electronics, his doctoral artistic project, that apparently is the closest so far to the stylistic and poetic dominants of the time. This music-stage work is actually the first piece in the genre of instrumental theater in the history of Serbian music, and its performance in the Kula Nebojša (Nebojša Tower) below the Belgrade Fortress within the first *Danubefest*, in September 2011, had all the makings of a music spectacle.

A considerable part of Brkljačić's opus is dedicated to 'lateral' music activities. By writing music for a large number of theatre productions he has become

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<sup>1</sup> 'Organizator je figura koja je istovremeno zaljubljenik u moderno društvo, njegov partner i vođa: figura nezamisliva bez akcije i intervencije koje je pokreću, definisana tim voluntarizmom i koja u principu deluje u smislu poboljšanja uslova javnog života.' ['As a figure, an organizer is an enthusiast of modern society, its partner and leader: a figure that cannot be imagined without action and intervention that propel, a figure defined by that voluntarism and, in principle, acting to improve the conditions of public life.'] Pol Arden [Paul Ardenne], *Kontekstualna umetnost* [Un art contextuel], trans. Bojana Janjušević, Novi Sad, Muzej savremene umetnosti Vojvodine, 2007, 204.

<sup>2</sup> Brkljačić's PhD thesis was the first doctoral dissertation in composition successfully defended at the Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade (in October 2012).

one of the most prolific theatre composers in Serbia (among other houses, he collaborated with the Atelje 212, Bitez Theatre, Duško Radović Theatre, Boško Buha Theatre, Zvezdara Theatre, and Belgrade Drama Theatre). His investigative spirit and affinity for rock music led to collaborating with the rock band Deca loših muzičara [Children of Bad Musicians], with whom he carried out a deconstructivist procedure in a musical performance. In other words, with his activities in applied music, as well as his ‘excursions’ outside of the ‘well-trodden academic paths’, Ivan Brkljačić tests the openness and absorptive power of the musical mainstream or ‘trunk road’.

Attesting to the quality of Brkljačić’s compositions are the awards he has received and the warm reception in our cultural community. The work *Kada se SEDAM puta digne zavesa* [After the Curtain Has Been Raised SEVEN Times] (2001–2002) for symphony orchestra was awarded with the coveted Mokranjac Prize (2005), and this year, at the 41<sup>st</sup> Sofest Festival, he won acclaim for his soundtrack for the film *Ustanička ulica* [Ustanička Street]. Brkljačić wrote some of his works as commissions of distinguished ensembles: the Belgrade Philharmonic – *Otkucaji davno zaboravljenog sata* [The Ticking of a Long Forgotten Clock] (2005–2006), Timbre Trio from Belgrade – *Tri mala apsurdna* [Three Little Absurdities] (2007), Osterc Trio – *Cutting Edge* (2004), and also the Collegium Musicum Choir, the Mokranjac String Quartet... His compositions have been performed at international festivals in France, Romania, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Austria, the Czech Republic, the FYR Macedonia, while in April 2010, the work *Jinx* (2003–2004), performed by the Australian ensemble *Modern Music*, opened the ISCM World New Music Days in Sydney.

*What are your first recollections of pursuing music as a ‘life practice’, outside of the institutional education system? Since you are occupied with representative aspects and with the stage quality in music, were the visual media that ‘first source’ that brought you closer to music?*

I took my first steps in music in my family, where I created my musical ground. At that time, music came to my ears from the radio, an old gramophone, the television set, my father’s whistling... Also, in those early days, probably I had a genetic pre-disposition for it since my father in his youth played the trumpet, and very successfully too, while my older brother learned to play the piano and the clarinet. Given that we had a piano in the house even before I was born, it is a big question as to whether I first learned how to walk or played a note or two on that piano. However, I first started learning music seriously with Professor Olivera Bulat at the Dr. Vojislav Vučković Music School, where I finished

my elementary music education. Contact with contemporary music, especially stage music, happened later, when as a high-school student I began to frequent the Kolarac Hall and Belgrade theatres.

*As a composer, you eclectically amalgamate various stylistic and musical codes, dealing with diverse musical genres that are today completely equal in their cultural status. Among the rest, within the series 'I want to be a rock 'n' roll star' at the Belef Festival in 2005, you wrote the piece Gde je DLM? [Where are the DLM?]\*. Thereby, it appears that the connection you establish between popular and artistic music is actually a testimony of your love of music in general. What is the meaning of these dialogues, i.e. steps outside into the world of popular culture, for you?*

Popular genres and popular culture is also something I have had contact with from earliest childhood. First, I listened to excellent LPs of bands from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, and then I got acquainted with the values of film. Later my interests expanded to other arts, and contact with popular genres, in the broadest possible sense, became a part of my everyday life, i.e. a certain inevitability. When my affirmation as a composer began, it came naturally to me to draw part of my inspiration from something that I had contact with for so long. Of course, in time your attitude towards the popular genre fine-tunes and you carefully weigh to what extent you can flirt with it, when to paraphrase, quote, etc. Also, you have to be ready for situations when you simply cannot have to do anything with it because it is all too easy to slip into banality.

*You have written music for a great number of theatre productions, and recently you tried your hand at writing a film soundtrack. Explain to us the nature of the creative process in these genres. In spite of the firm bond between the musical content and dramatic text, do you manage to create a certain inter-textual space within which the sound moves freely?*

Composing in the classical genre, then for theatre and recently for film, I had the privilege of experiencing three completely different approaches to the creative process. In all three cases, making your own decisions is in the foreground, and the inter-textual space for music has to exist. However, when you compose for an instrumental or vocal ensemble, the compromises and responsibility are yours and yours alone. When you are a part of a theatre team, when you have a textual model you have to adhere to, when you have other elements on the stage (the actors, mise-en-scène, lighting, set decoration etc.), the main

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\* DLM = Deca loših muzičara.

challenge is to find a balance between the personal for the greater good and an objective in the scope of which you can place your own personal expression. That kind of permeation is all the more pronounced when working on a film. In that process, as it happened, it was exactly the music that drew together the director and the producer's opposing standpoints. Thanks to that, I came closer and closer to the correct musical interpretation of the action and overall atmosphere of the film, and thus managed to successfully express a personal attitude towards the image that cannot be changed. In that sense, film is a very specific medium because by the time the music is being edited, interventions on the image are no longer possible. The other two types of composing nevertheless allow for more flexibility.

*However, an impression is left that your works always have some particular narration, or symbolism, as if the music, by its own expressive means, depicts the dramatic action. When you compose, where does that initial stimulus come from?*

Undoubtedly, music contains a very specific musical language. If there is a language, then there is also the meaning of that language. When composing music, I think a lot about what the meanings of the musical language are, and in what ways the music can convey certain meanings that the audience can understand. Also, I do not think that my initial stimulus is solely extramusical. It can be that, too, depending on the context of the current moment when I am composing, but certainly not only that. The impulse that arises directly from the nature of the musical language is extremely important for the creative process and I stick to it.

*Lately you have been pursuing the concept of the musical theatre that was established in the seventies, but did not have much of a response in our music, and recently you presented a theoretical paper on the works of Mauricio Kagel, the originator of this genre. What was in the musical theatre that you found attractive?*

I became interested in musical theatre as a form after I attended a live performance of Heiner Goebbels's production *Stifters Dinge* at the Bitef Festival in 2008. I have pursued alternative and physical theatre ever since my university days, but the fact that Goebbels's production was created without a single living person on the stage, with pianos as actors, and that it worked perfectly left me deeply fascinated. After that, I began to research what the possibilities were within the genre itself and naturally came to Kagel. However, all the while I was interested in what the anticipations were of instrumental theatre that ap-

peared through history. When I went through the literature, I began to search for my own expression in this genre. That was how the composition *Istar* came into being.

*Istar is a work that has to be carefully watched so that its 'compositional key' can be heard and understood. In this act of moving a concert outside the padded walls of a concert hall to a setting that was not specially equipped, yet was open for diverse artistic interventions and accessible to a wide audience, was your intention to show that concerts are obsolete as an institution? Is it possibly one of the reasons why contemporary compositions, unfortunately, 'do not live' on concert stages, and how do you see the future of concert practice?*

Although *Istar* with its content and genre is on the line of breaking away from the classical concert stage, the honest answer to this question would in fact reveal a personal dilemma. I most certainly do not oppose the usual context of standard concert halls, but I think one should always insist that the quality of the content offered in those halls should be of the highest possible level. The same goes for the content presented outside of them. If the content is inspiring, fresh, animated, complex, yet communicative, it is quite irrelevant in what surroundings it is presented. Sometimes all that is necessary are just slight adjustments of a work of art to the performance conditions. Like when a theatre production is being moved from the parent to a guest stage, or when a picture exhibition is moved from one gallery to another. After all, my *Istar* is conceived in two potential versions: an integral performance in a theatrical set, and a concert performance.

*The performance efficiency of the participants is crucial for this work. You took part as the conductor, and the instrumentalists' roles were very demanding, given that they had to extend their professions to acting, gesture, and stage movement. Describe that experience for us.*

I was fortunate that the members of the *Gudači sv. Đorđa* [*St. George Strings*], as well as the soloists of the *Istar Ensemble* unanimously embraced the extension of their artistic roles to the domain of the theatrical stage and perceived such an engagement as a personal challenge. That arose from the enormous trust that all the instrumentalists placed in me. All of them believed in my idea, concept and realization in the special setting of the Kula Nebojša. In such an atmosphere, where the story about the Danube and its significance was placed on the bank of the river itself, my conducting from the water, in a white lab coat with a stethoscope around my neck, seemed very pleasant and natural to me.

*Considering your activities in applied music and experiences with instrumental theatre, can we expect an opera from you any time soon?*

Although opera is the genre most intricately connected with the stage, at present, it does not attract me. However, I am sure that it is a question of a certain degree of maturity and that in the future I will find a libretto that will be inspiring enough for me to set it to music.

*At present, we can state that a whole range of artistic practices and their theoretizations exist that indicate the emergence of new modernisms – Second Modernism, Pseudo-Modernism or Digi-Modernism, Alter-Modernism, Meta-Modernism... We are interested in an answer from a composer's point of view – do you think that Post-Modernism in music has led to the negation of modernistic principles or, on the other hand, that its new creative practices are in fact a continuation of Modernism with certain differences?*

Recently, I spoke to a very mature and established composer who completely denies the existence of Post-Modernism. He believes we are still living Modernism and expecting a reaction to it that will finally steer not only art but the whole of civilization to some new goals. This observation is supported by the host of prefixes appearing before the word 'Modernism' (pseudo-, digi-, alter-, post- etc.) that seem to be extending (and maintaining) it. Personally, as a composer I do not feel compelled to take a position with respect to Modernism and Post-Modernism. I leave that to those who want to deal with my music in any way. On the other hand, I know that we are currently quite far away from what was connected with art in the period between the two world wars. There is also an ever increasing distance to the 1960s and the 1970s and to all the artistic formulas that were offered at that time as the new artistic reality.

*What is the place of technology in your works?*

Among other things, I saw *Istar*, my doctoral artistic project, as an opportunity for improving my personal creativity in the electronic i.e. electroacoustic medium. Also, working on the film *Ustanička ulica* I used electronics pretty much, and that contributed to a very specific organization of the music material, as a kind of comment and support to the action taking place on the screen. However, I admit that I still perceive modern technology as a rather wide field that still remains to be explored in all of its inner particulars and qualities.

*You wrote some of your works as commissions from distinguished ensembles and festivals (for instance, commissions by the International Review of Composers – the compositions *Cutting Edge* and *Fliza*), which is a kind of acknowl-*

*edgement, which not only secures the position of those works in the world of art, but in a way guarantees their subsequent concert life. Also, modern composers often write for certain performers, their performers. So far, have you achieved any direct, close collaboration with particular artists?*

It has been my great pleasure to collaborate very successfully in the last few years with various performers who were interested in playing my music. Many of them ask me to write specially for them. Among others, I'd like to mention *Pokret* Trio and *Timbre* Trio, the violin duo Madlen Stokić – Marija Misita, clarinetist Veljko Klenkovski, the Slovenian ensembles *Asaxess* and *Slavko Osterc*, Belgrade Philharmonic, *Collegium Musicum* Choir, *Mokranjac* String Quartet, *Singidunum* Trio, and the *Donne di Belgrado* Trio... I also find great satisfaction in the fact that my music was performed by foreign ensembles, such as *Alternance* from France, the *Ostravská banda* from Czech Republic, *Modern Music Ensemble* from Australia or *L'ensemble portmantô* from Canada.

*We have been following your activities on the promotion of contemporary music in our midst every November, since in 2007 you accepted the position of selector of the International Review of Composers, our main forum for the dissemination of information about current compositional tendencies at home and in the world. Certain novelties in your selectorial decisions effected a change in the profile and programme of the festival compared to the previous period, i.e. a kind of conceptual and thematic unification, and it seems that that selectorial imprint was most prominent at the 19<sup>th</sup> Review, in the choice of the theme Music and Theatre. What difficulties did you experience in organizing that festival, as well as the jubilee 20<sup>th</sup> edition of the Review, and how do you see the future of the festival that is now reaching a 'mature age'?*

Speaking about the process of composing for theatre, I mentioned that it is very important to strike a balance between the need for personal and what should work for *the greater good*. Naturally, as the selector I leave a personal imprint on the Review every year. But after assuming the position of the selector in 2007, when that position was neither popular nor easy, I felt that it was very important to take responsibility for certain things that are so important for all of us who deal with contemporary music. First of all, that was the importance of the *Review's* continuity, with clearly defined themes each year, the return of a great number of domestic composers and the constant need to invite composers from abroad. Besides, it was very important to activate all the available performance resources, i.e. domestic soloists, ensembles, conductors, choirs and orchestras, and finally, to attract the audience back to the festival. After five years, I could summarize my work in that period at last year's *Review*, and it seems

to me that I manage to carry out my intentions, naturally with the help of Ivana Trišić and Katarina Lazarević from the Composers' Association of Serbia. But one should always strive for more, and I think that the *Review* has the potential for that, which, hopefully, will be proven by *Musical Construction Yard* as the theme of this year's *Review*.

*Given your selectorial experience, as well as the fact that you had the opportunity to participate in many foreign festivals, what, in your opinion, is important for our art to be recognized in a wider perspective? Does networking and the inclusion of our contemporary music in international streams rely on the politics of integration, i.e. the politics of identity, or something else...?*

When I received the Mokranjac Award in 2005, for the work *Kada se SEDAM puta digne zavesa*, I said, among other things, that I hoped that all the curtains drawn between us would be lifted as soon as possible and that all together we would work towards the world promotion of our undoubtedly valuable music. This is the primary mission of composers, but everyone else can also contribute: soloists, ensembles, orchestras, conductors, and institutions. I think our only chance is to be united in this cause, because all local conflicts and disputes among us can harm no one but us. And the world waits for nobody, it goes on relentlessly. Institutions, naturally, must support these things that are very important for the national culture. Also, although we live in a world where the chief measure of value is a quick profit, one must be aware that cultural values function differently. They work in the long run, they emerge and are cultivated so as to give a nation and a state an identity, and it is very well known that identity is not a quantifiable category.

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