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## Zagreb Music Biennale 1987

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Visiting a foreign country for a contemporary music festival, especially for the first time, naturally arouses a curiosity about the new music of that country. When I first went to Yugoslavia in 1981, for the eleventh Zagreb Music Biennale, I not only heard much more music by Yugoslav composers than I'd ever done before but also acquired some scores, books and other material, interviewed several of the major figures and generally tried to immerse myself for the week, if not in 'Yugoslav culture' as a whole – for that is impossible in such a divided country – then at least in the Croatian culture of Zagreb itself. In particular, I returned from that first trip seven years ago bearing a heavy pile of recordings of some 60 pieces by Yugoslavs. I had decided that I should write not only about the Biennale but also about the development and current state of Yugoslav music. In the end, I composed a long review which discussed both the festival itself and the local composition scene, promising that we would in the future come up with something more extensive on new music in Yugoslavia.<sup>1</sup>

Since then I've returned twice to Zagreb and, as a result of these visits, I have been able to expand my understanding of both the festival and the Yugoslav new-music scene more generally. It is, though, far from easy to obtain the basic research material for any thorough assessment of this country's music since 1945, or even since 1961, the year of the first Zagreb Biennale which, like the advent of Poland's Warsaw Autumn festival in 1956, signalled the effective beginning of the local modern movement. Besides, the Biennale is not, despite its importance, the best place to set about such research, at least as far as the programmes themselves are concerned. The festival is not designed to perform quite the same function for Yugoslav music as the annual Warsaw Autumn week does for contemporary Polish composition. For a real immersion in the local product, I'm told, one needs to go to the festival of new Yugoslav music, much of it by younger composers, that is held each autumn in Opatija. I visited this beautiful and famous seaside resort in what is commonly called Istria, quite close to Italy, on holiday in 1986, but I have yet to get to the Opatija festival itself. Zagreb's Biennale is deliberately international, or at any rate as international as Yugoslavia's parlous economy can make it these days. It is really more a 'window out' than a 'window in', and it is perhaps this which chiefly justifies its place on the international contemporary music festival circuit, less prestigious though that place may be nowadays.

Like all festivals, the Zagreb Biennale has had its ups and downs. Even in 1981 I was being told by festival veterans that there were now fewer events and simply less excitement than in previous years, and I attempted to deal with the outsider's possible responses to such an assertion when I wrote my earlier review. In 1983 I made unsuccessful efforts to find out when the festival was on and what it contained and, having dismally failed, didn't go. This illustrates the problems of communication involved: though it is always difficult

for foreign festivals without a sizeable promotion budget to reach those who might be interested, it did seem odd that the Yugoslav embassy in London, for instance, simply couldn't help me. But in any case the 1983 event appears to have been poorly planned and executed, and this led to the decision to pull all the stops out for 1985, when no fewer than four major international composers – Berio, Cage, Penderecki and Xenakis – were invited as well as many less prestigious ones, and an academic conference was attached to the festival for, I think, the first time.

Three things about the thirteenth Biennale in 1985 still seem worth saying now. First, it was in many respects a good festival, bringing together more major figures from the fast-ageing avant garde than even much richer festivals are usually able to do these days, even if it didn't do enough, in my opinion, to provide a good international conspectus of work by younger composers, especially those under 40. Second, the three-day symposium, entitled 'Compositional Syntheses of the Eighties', which was run in conjunction with the festival offered one of the rare opportunities to discuss contemporary composition at the sort of length and depth taken for granted by our academic colleagues in more historical fields; the fact that it set out to talk about the present situation – rather than, say, the sixties or some other such recent period already vaguely dignified by the passage of time – is remarkable if not unique. The results – published the following year in both Croatian and the mixture of other languages used on the occasion (much of the publication is in English) – are not especially illuminating, neither do they make very coherent reading; much of the transcription and translation work, from spoken as well as written source material, is understandably error-ridden. But the book does at least provide some record of an all too rare attempt to create an international academic dialogue on the subject of new music.<sup>2</sup> Third, the 1985 Biennale helped to broaden and deepen my knowledge of both Croatian and other Yugoslav music; I'll include some comment on this below.

By 1987 annual inflation in Yugoslavia had reached the horrendous level of around 75% or worse, causing both practical and psychological problems which are very hard for us to comprehend. It was my understanding that the 1987 Biennale only managed to exist at all, or at least to mount the range of events it did, because of a happy accident. That summer the International Student Games were being held in Zagreb; half the city seemed to have been reduced to a building site as a result, since sufficient city and republic government funds had been found to do some extensive renovation for such a prestigious international occasion. (I was glad I'd been to Zagreb before, or I'd have been dreadfully disappointed by what I saw.) It appeared that the Biennale had somehow been able to acquire some kind of spin-off funding from this major effort of local cultural flag-waving. All the same, there was obviously no prospect of repeating the scale of the 1985 event, and when I last heard, the fate of the 1989 Biennale looked pretty grim.

The fourteenth Biennale had the same artistic director (the composer Stanko Horvat) and programme secretary (the musicologist Nikša Gligo) as the previous festival; only the third member of the executive committee had changed (Marija Božić rather than Eva Sedak, who in 1985 was also responsible for the symposium). The broad layout remained the same as in previous years, with two main events each

evening preceded by a five o'clock presentation, usually of films. (There was also a Sunday morning recital which, like all the events of the opening weekend, I missed, not being able to arrive before Monday.) The main venue was, as before, the Lisinski concert-hall building, a short walk from the railway station but in the new part of Zagreb; its Concert Hall and Chamber Hall, and even on occasion its foyers, have provided adequate, if occasionally ill-suited, spaces for many of the concerts in the years I've been attending the festival. Most of the other events took place, again as usual, in the old town, though not in the official 'old town' that is to be found a steep climb or funicular ride away above the main area of the present city, and whose medieval and baroque churches and other buildings are still Zagreb's leading tourist attraction. There is the splendid if rather resonant recital-hall of the old Croatian Music Institute, the Gavella Theatre (the latter mainly used for late-night events) and, for the rare evenings of opera or ballet, the beautifully restored Croatian National Theatre; the Students' Centre in the new part of Zagreb is used for the films and occasionally for other events. Audiences, often young, never filled the large Lisinski hall but were sometimes vigorously enthusiastic.

While the 1985 Biennale had been dominated by the quartet of famous names already mentioned, the festival of 1987 had to be content with just one senior avantgardist: Mauricio Kagel. I admit to being ambivalent both about the representation of such major figures in contemporary music festivals and about Kagel himself these days. Taking the former first: on the one hand, I am worried by the extent to which so many festivals rely on these famous names – there can't be more than twenty of them, and their numbers will necessarily dwindle with the passage of time. Their presence, which leads naturally to their dominance, not only emphasises the extent to which most such festivals still foster the aesthetic ideals of a modernism that many now regard as dated; it also means that the work of younger composers gets less attention, both in the sense that fewer of their works actually get performed (as I've already said was the case in 1985) and in the way that the music of anyone under 50 or even under 60 can easily find itself perceived these days as something automatically less important. (Think of how the works of Kagel or Boulez or Cage were perceived when *they* were in their thirties or even twenties.) On the other hand, I would miss the excitement that can be engendered by a 'major presence' and the chance to think again about, as well as simply catch up on, the music and ideas of people one has respected from afar for a long time and in truth probably still encounters all too seldom in the flesh. Presumably quite a lot of others feel this too; the likelihood that these famous names will attract more of an audience must be a factor in the decision to have them, and no festival planner can be blamed for this. All the same, the merry-go-round has been going round for a long time now with the same figures on it; and metaphors of the fairground or circus, by no means new to the new-music scene anyway, don't get more palatable with age.

Kagel on his own was obviously far less dominating at Zagreb in 1987 than the four had been in 1985; his compositions and his ideas in any case encourage thoughtful appraisal rather than subjugation. My ambivalence here – mulled over during a week which offered half-a-dozen pieces in live performances plus, crucially, Kagel films almost every day at five o'clock

and an interview with the composer – centred on the changes in his work in recent years. On the positive side, for me, there is the composer's continuing ability to question received cultural notions and to work those notions subversively into his own compositions in ways which will disturb. He continues for this reason to take the music of the past as starting points for compositions; and whether it is Bach or Beethoven – as with some famous earlier pieces such as *Ludwig Van* – or Borodin and Stravinsky – as with the strangely titled *Fürst Igor*, *Strawinsky*, premiered in Venice in 1982 – the results always cause the listener to reassess his or her own position towards the past and its present use. In these post-modern times, Kagel seems fresher, a lot more relevant, than many of his erstwhile avant-garde colleagues, whose status he was always calling into question anyway. The confusion one has, in *Fürst Igor*, *Strawinsky*, over what is Stravinsky and what is Kagel – to say nothing of how to deal with the composer's own programme note's reference to Borodin's *Prince Igor* (it turns out that the Russian text is actually taken from the opera) – is actually a nice illustration of the post-modern dilemma. The two programmes devoted entirely to Kagel, one conducted by the composer, also offered *10 Märsche*, *Variété* and *Finale mit Kammerensemble* and were performed by both Italian and Yugoslav musicians, including the bass Boris Carmelli; it was a pity that the local string quartet did not manage to offer the Second Quartet as well as the First, but at least these compositions are now quite old, if not exactly familiar.

On the negative side, there is Kagel's own institutionalised status: something which one can easily argue he can't do anything about (except stop writing, possibly), but which compromises his position. The subverter is himself subverted, I suppose. Perhaps he is the joker, or the wise fool, on the avant-garde festival merry-go-round that I mentioned earlier, but since these days it's no longer clear, despite the 'famous names' syndrome, just who the real kings are, jokers can ascend the throne quietly when one isn't looking. And there's also another sense in which one isn't *looking* any more, or at least not as much as one used to. Kagel hasn't entirely deserted either theatre or film, the media which have made him so much what he is and which made those five o'clock retrospective sessions in Zagreb so essential. He has, for example, fairly recently written music, or perhaps more accurately a sound-track, for Buñuel's famous *Un chien andalou*; music whose inclusion of the sound of a real dog is but one illustration of how the composer once again challenges our ideas – in this case, of the nature of symbolism as well as what constitutes incidental music. Zagreb didn't offer either much *very* recent work or much hard information on what the composer is doing now. But there seems to be a move away from theatrical concerns and a return to concert pieces without a strong theatrical element: to pieces, indeed, that deal with pitches and rhythms in a way which invites an almost old-fashioned response. But no doubt this is the subverter getting his revenge for being subverted; we shall see.

Kagel's *Rrrrrrr...* for organ (1980-81) – another work focusing on the dislocation of familiar styles, in this case an especially delightful discourse largely on popular forms the names of which begin with the letter 'r' – provided the link between the Biennale's Kagel theme and the festival's other interesting project. The organist and composer Zsigmond Szathmáry, Hungarian by birth and now resident in Freiburg,

played the Kagel piece in a recital on the Lisinski Concert Hall organ. In addition, he had been invited to make a *Work in Progress* of his own during the festival, building up the layers of his piece by taping public performances of various versions of it during three earlier festival events on three different organs (one actually in Ljubljana) before he got to the final mix in his Lisinski recital. I only heard the final version. The effect was less impossibly dense than I'd feared it would be, despite Szathmáry's rather unimaginative use of the spatial possibilities provided by the six loudspeakers ranged around the hall. *Work in Progress (final version)* used gongs played by a perambulating assistant as well as a wide range of organ sounds, and it was both effectively varied and formally coherent as a whole. It felt, though, like what I suppose it was doomed to be: an occasional piece that for those involved with it must have been simultaneously a nightmare and fun to do.

There was quite a lot else to hear, and even to see, in Zagreb's fourteenth Biennale week, particularly from countries of the Eastern bloc with which, though itself non-aligned, Yugoslavia has strong cultural connections. A late-night presentation by the Czech 'laser optophonic group' Via Crucis, for example, was quite awful, I thought, in its crudity and datedness; but it at least demonstrated that some kind of experimental work is going on in a country from which we still tend to hear only symphonies and tone poems of impeccably Socialist-Realist unexceptionability. The Hungarian Amadinda Percussion Quartet, on the other hand, brought a lively programme of Cage, Reich and their own works. And its better-known Russian counterpart, the Mark Pekarsky Percussion Ensemble, brought an even more entertaining and slickly presented programme mixing pieces from the USSR and the USA, which functioned as a live follow-up to the presentations of an interesting and commendably wide range of Soviet compositions on audio tape and video which a delegation from the Union of Soviet Composers mounted on three mornings during the festival. On the final evening, our own Elgar Howarth conducted the Zagreb Philharmonic Orchestra in a programme of Yugoslav works and pieces by Marius Constant and Harrison Birtwistle; *The Triumph of Time* came over somewhat diffidently as the festival's grand finale, some late-night jazz aside, and seemed to be more respected than really enjoyed by the local audience.

A few words, finally, about the local *mušic* itself. At the 1985 Biennale I actually heard a smaller number of works by Yugoslav composers than I did four years earlier. The range of styles and aesthetics they displayed was, however, wider than it was in 1981; or at least the pieces on offer broadened my own knowledge and experience of what Yugoslav composers are up to these days. Space prevents a comprehensive account of what I heard, both in 1985 and 1987, so I'll once again confine myself to a few examples.

In 1981, I had met a young Serbian composer of minimal music called Miša Savić, but had not been able to hear any of the music of the Belgrade-based group, Opus 4, with which he was associated. Repetitive music of some kind or other appears still to be flourishing in Yugoslavia's capital city, though I have found no evidence of it in Zagreb. I was therefore particularly pleased in 1985 to be able to hear a piece by another member of Opus 4, Vladimir Tošić, born in 1949, who was described in the programme book as 'the only consistent minimalist in Yugoslavia'. His

*Hromoserije* (Chromoserries) for four different keyboard instruments concerns itself entirely with the pitch C in various registers and moves fairly predictably but very attractively from a spare and offbeat pointillism to a dense and regular rhythmic chatter, returning finally to the manner of the opening. I was sorry to miss another Tošić première at Zagreb at the 1987 festival, due to my late arrival; and for the same reason I also failed to catch a piece by another Serbian composer working in the same territory, Miloš Raičković, born in 1956. In the latter's case I was, though, lucky, since Raičković – who had only recently returned from a six-year stay in Los Angeles and has since moved to Hawaii – was around for the whole week and played me tapes of several of his compositions, including the one I'd missed; I have also since received a record of his music.<sup>3</sup> Raičković, with disarming candour, describes his works since about 1980 as being in a 'New Classical Style', defined by him as 'a blend of musical Minimalism and the styles of Viennese Classical and early Romantic music (Mozart, Schubert)'. That's actually a pretty accurate description of the pieces I've heard – such as *Dream House* for string trio and piano, premièred at the 1987 festival – which retain many of the characteristics of his models while destroying their directional tonality by reducing the number of pitch classes available to just five or so. The composer feels that this reduction 'gives tonal music a new quality, a new energy', but I'm not sure I can entirely share his view. What he's doing is, though, an undeniably new departure in what many would call the field of New Romanticism.

In many ways the most exciting discovery in new Yugoslav composition which I made in 1985 and was able to follow up in 1987 was the work of Davorin Kempf. Born in 1947, Kempf is the third member of a trio of Croatians often seen by the Yugoslavs themselves as the leading composers of their generation. In my 1981 review I drew attention to the other two – Marko Ruždjak (b.1946) and Frano Parać (b.1948) – since both had works performed in the festival that year. Kempf did not; indeed, I was only vaguely aware of him then, whereas I talked at some length to Ruždjak and more briefly to Parać. In the 1987 Biennale Ruždjak had a piece performed during the opening weekend, which I missed; as with Tošić's new piece, a promised tape never materialised. Parać, who has been Dean of the Croatian Music Institute since 1985, had no piece played at the 1987 festival, but a new double-album retrospective set of records, originally prepared in 1983,<sup>4</sup> finally came out in time to be distributed free-of-charge, causing the reception which was held in Parać's honour to degenerate into a scrum. There is some good music on these records, charting a familiar progression from a more-or-less avant-garde approach to a much more traditional one involving both folk and baroque elements. But nothing I've heard by either of these two other composers has impressed me as much as the two substantial works by Kempf that I have heard in Zagreb.

In 1985 I heard Kempf's *Spectrum* for large orchestra and electronic tape, written in 1984-5 while the composer was a student at Iowa University in the USA. (He seems to have developed a little later than Ruždjak and Parać, which may account for my coming to him last.) The tape part bubbles and glistens most beguilingly, and the orchestra achieves some grandiose climaxes that recall Brahms and Tchaikovsky. Yet somehow the piece as a whole makes glorious, persuasive sense.

In 1987 I had a similar experience with Kempf's first string quartet, entitled *Contrapunctus I*, which he finished in 1986. The Arditti Quartet played the work in a festival programme with which it dazzled the Zagreb audience with its Ferneyhough, Ligeti, Xenakis and so on – as it regularly dazzles contemporary music festival audiences all over the world. The title of this one-movement piece gives adequate warning of its symmetrical structural rigours, 'Fuga stretta', 'Fuga inversa' and all. As before, though, Kempf makes much play with a romantic soundscape: consonant sonorities are lovingly dwelt upon, dramatic crescendos on single chords are indulged, fast fugal writing acquires an exciting and harmonically-directed momentum. In both works he seems to avoid the problems often associated with such an ostensibly derivative approach, although one hearing of each of these pieces was insufficient to work out just how he does it. Kempf is, I feel, one of those rare composers who can genuinely make familiar materials his own. If any Yugoslav composer's music deserves a hearing in Britain right now, then Kempf would, I'm sure, prove a rewarding choice. I hope, at least, that the Ardittis retain *Contrapunctus I* in their repertoire. A recording of some of Kempf's compositions would be an immediate and practical step towards making the largely unknown, woefully under-promoted but far from negligible, contemporary music of Yugoslavia more widely available. Some readers of *Contact* would, I think, be pleasantly surprised.

<sup>1</sup> Keith Potter, '11th Zagreb Music Biennale', *Contact* 23 (Winter 1981), pp.36-40.

<sup>2</sup> Marija Božić and Eva Sedak, eds. *Skladateliske sinteze osamdesetih godina/Compositional Syntheses of the Eighties* (Zagreb: Zagreb Music Biennale/Music Information Centre of the Zagreb Concert Management, 1986). (The festival management's address is Trnjanska b.b., 41000 Zagreb.)

<sup>3</sup> Radio-televizije Beograd RTB 2131013. The two works on this record are *Flying Trio* for piano trio and *Dream Quartet* for piano quartet. (RTB's address is Beograd [Belgrade], Makedonska 21.)

<sup>4</sup> Frano Parać, *Suvremeni hrvatski skladatelji/Contemporary Croatian Composers Series*, Jugoton LSY 65069-70. The nine works on these records are *Music for Strings and Harpsichord*; *Sarabande* for symphony orchestra; *Music for Strings*; *Collegium Vocale* for six singers; *String Trio*; *Composition for Two Choirs a cappella*; *Ed è subito sera* for three groups of singers and symphony orchestra; *Oboè sommerso* for mezzo-soprano, oboe and chamber orchestra; and *Thèmes* for piano.