

# MUSIC IN POSTSOCIALISM: THREE DECADES IN RETROSPECT

*Editors*

Biljana Milanović, Melita Milin and Danka Lajić Mihajlović

МУЗИКА У ПОСТСОЦИЈАЛИЗМУ:  
ТРИ ДЕЦЕНИЈЕ КАСНИЈЕ

*Уреднице*

Биљана Милановић, Мелита Милин и Данка Лајић Михајловић

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*Peer-reviewers of the book*

Dejan Despić, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts

Ranka Gašić, Institute of Contemporary History, Belgrade

Jelena Jovanović, Institute of Musicology SASA

*Translation from Serbian to English*

Zorica Simović

*English-language editing*

Dave Calcutt

Zorica Simović

Ivan Moody

Esther Helajzen

*Cover design and prepress*

Aleksandra Kapor

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## A Note on Transliteration

The names and titles originally written in Cyrillic scripts – Bulgarian, Russian and Ukrainian – are transliterated into Roman script by following the system used by the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, which is a reference edition for many instances of language standards in ethno/musicology. However, certain exceptions are made in those cases when a different usage has since been long established and accepted, as with Prokofiev or Tchaikovsky. For Serbian, we have used the standard Romanised version of the Cyrillic script. In the Georgian chapter, the Georgian national system of Romanisation, adopted in 2002, is employed, whereas the Kazakh chapter uses a combination of different standards accepted by local scholars.

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PART TWO

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Festivals and Institutions:  
Strategies of Existence and Survival

## On Missed Opportunities: The International Review of Composers in Belgrade and the “Postsocialist Condition”

Jelena Janković-Beguš and Ivana Medić (Belgrade)

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In this article we observe the history of the International Review of Composers in Belgrade,<sup>1</sup> the most enduring annual festival of contemporary art music in Serbia, founded in 1992. We have borrowed the syntagm ‘postsocialist condition’ from the title of the book edited by Aleš Erjavec (Erjavec 2003).<sup>2</sup>

1 The name of the festival in Serbian – Međunarodna tribina kompozitora – has been translated to English variously. We have opted to use the most common translation, the International Review of Composers, although in the existing literature alternative translations can be found, e.g. International Composers Review, or even International Tribune of Composers. Another correct translation would be the International Rostrum of Composers. The same applies to alternative translations of the name Udruženje kompozitora Srbije – The Composers’ Association of Serbia. In quotations, we used published English translations (cf. References) where they were available, which is why these alternative translations appear occasionally (resulting from the work of various translators).

It should also be noted that the first two editions of the festival, held in Novi Sad and Sremski Karlovci respectively, did not have the adjective ‘international’ in their title – the festival was called simply the Review of Composers – although they were actually international in character. The third Review, organised for the first time in Belgrade (where it has remained ever since) had the subtitle the International Review of Composers and this version of writing (with both title and subtitle) was preserved until the fifth edition. Since the sixth edition, the adjective is to be found in the title and it remains so until today. Nevertheless, the website of the Composers’ Association of Serbia still enlists it as the ‘Review of Composers’ [Tribina kompozitora], (see Online sources of the International Review of Composers 1992–2019). Colloquially, the festival is called ‘The Review’ [Tribina] and here the same abbreviated title will be used occasionally.

2 However, we do not use the syntagm ‘postsocialist condition’ in the same way as Erjavec, because he equates ‘postsocialism’ with ‘late socialism’ placing it in an earlier timeframe, i.e. the last two decades of the twentieth century (see Erjavec 2003: 3), when indeed the majority of European ‘Eastern Bloc’ countries entered – and most of them completed – their *transition*, the notion of which will be elaborated in this chapter. However, this was not the case with Serbia, for the reasons that will be clarified later.

It is a fact, indeed, that the International Review of Composers was founded during the period examined in that book (i.e. the last two decades of the twentieth century). There are important paragraphs in Erjavec's analysis which can serve as an explanation for the emergence of the International Review of Composers: speaking about the "importance of national sentiments and the significance ascribed to culture, especially to national culture" (ibid: 13) in the observed countries (including the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia /SFRY/), he claims that:

"[i]n this environment, nation and culture are inextricably linked. It is politics that links them and that has caused art and culture to play such a significant role in the 1980s and early 1990s, enabling writers to become heads of state; painters and poets, ambassadors; and sociology professors, city mayors and foreign ministers, just as in 1918–20 or in the years following 1945. Within this context, culture denotes 'high culture'—that is, what artists, writers, musicians, and scholars produce, sometimes for fairly narrow specialist audiences and sometimes for broader publics [cf. Verdery 1991: 12]. It is in this sense that the notion of culture is employed in this book, because in this transitional period of late socialism, culture still possessed this particular role and position" (Erjavec 2003: 14).

Certain remnants of that 'postsocialist condition' can still be felt in Serbia, nearly two decades later. Why is it so? In our previous analyses of the phenomenon of 'postsocialist transition' (Janković 2006; Janković 2008a; Janković 2008b; Medić and Janković-Beguš 2016) we argued that the ultimate goal of transition is European integration (i.e. EU membership); and since Serbia is yet to join the European Union, the country is still stuck in limbo, i.e. in a transitory 'nowhereland' where it has spent the last twenty years. It is unlikely that this situation will change anytime soon.

Having been involved personally with the Review in various professional capacities – beginning in the late 1990s when, as students of musicology, we both contributed to the Bulletin of the Review – we have witnessed its ups and downs first-hand. Most importantly, Jelena Janković-Beguš was a part of the production team for several years, while she was employed by the co-producer of the festival (Jugokonzert), between 2002 and 2008.<sup>3</sup> Janković-Beguš also included the analyses of the Review in her aforementioned papers written during the same period (Janković 2006; Janković 2008a; Janković 2008b). On the other hand, for the past three years (2018–2020) Ivana Medić has been a member of the Committee appointed by the Serbian Ministry of Culture and Information to select projects for funding in the field of music, where she has gained knowledge regarding the circumstances and restrictions surrounding the selection process, as well as the criteria employed by the Committee. Furthermore, over the past six years Medić has carried out thorough research of the Serbian composers' diaspora (Medić 2014a; 2014b; 2015; 2019; 2020a;

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Nevertheless, Erjavec's observation that postsocialism can be seen as "the proclamation of the end of socialism from within socialism itself" (ibid.) is very significant for the general understanding of this phenomenon.

3 The only exception was the year 2004, due to a sabbatical.



2020b), as a sort of ‘parallel history’ of Serbian contemporary music creativity, bringing to light the fact that, as an increasing number of Serbian composers have left the country during the past three decades (some of them leaving the profession of a composer of art music as well), this ‘brain drain’ has led to a decrease in the scope and quality of contemporary music production in ‘mainland’ Serbia. We will return to this issue towards the end of this chapter.

Because of this long-standing insiders’ experience with the Review, and in order to avoid a perspective which would be too personal, the methodology of research that we have chosen is based on the reception of the festival in specialised musicological and humanistics journals (most notably *New Sound*<sup>4</sup> and *Treći program*, from the 1990s onwards, *Muzički talas* occasionally and, only recently, the *INSAM Journal*). These particular periodicals were chosen because of the type of reviews published there, in which the entire yearly edition of the festival is analysed from the point of view of one author-musicologist (the reviewers, naturally, changed over time), often observing the festival in a wider socio-cultural context. Certain important ‘breaking points’ are also observed through the prism of journalists’ and music critics’ texts published in reputable Serbian daily newspapers, notably *Politika*, which has been recognised as exemplary for music criticism (e.g. Premate 2007: 136). The only book dedicated to the Review (that contains scholarly articles as well as reprints of reports, concert programmes and other primary sources) was published in 2007 to mark its fifteen-year jubilee (Mikić and Ilić 2007), perhaps also signalling the loss of interest in this festival in the next decade. This publication is also based on the reception of the Review in its first decade-and-a-half, and it remains a valuable collection of texts, as a testimony to a certain moment in the evolution of the festival.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the abundant online sources of the International Review of Composers (1992–2019) have served as a valuable data, especially concerning the latest crisis point in 2014 and the polemics surrounding it (including letters of support to the festival which are not published elsewhere).

It should be made clear that, unsurprisingly (and in a small country such as Serbia – inevitably), many reviewers whose texts are discussed in this article were not impartial in their observations of the Review – as a matter of fact,

4 The relationship between the Review and the journal *New Sound/Novi zvuk*, founded in 1993 i.e. one year after the festival, was supervised by Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, the long standing Editor-in-Chief of the journal. She was also Head of the Department of Musicology at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, and wife of the composer Srđan Hofman, who was Dean of the Faculty of Music and one of the founders of the Review. Veselinović-Hofman noted that the Review became the ‘topic of interest’ for the journal from its first edition, because they shared the same goal of a continuous and multidimensional presentation of Serbian contemporary music in the context of global music and musicology. She also stressed the importance of the texts published in the *New Sound* for the dissemination of Serbian contemporary musical creativity, including the pieces first performed within the Review (Veselinović-Hofman 2007: 95, 97).

5 More recently, the musicologist Adriana Sabo, herself the daughter of a female composer, Anica Sabo, wrote a master paper about the presence of female composers at the Review (Sabo 2012), which offers an interesting and unique scientific approach to this festival.

they expressed their personal and professional biases in a more or less obvious fashion. Regardless of their underlying motivation(s), these biased opinions and evaluations actually allow for a more vivid comparison and confrontation of various attitudes concerning the festival's desired concept and content.

The first part of the title of this chapter reflects the general hypothesis, which is that at the beginning of the twenty-first century – coinciding with the onset of the postsocialist transition in Serbia – the International Review of Composers missed out on several opportunities to become a *national* festival of contemporary music: not in the sense of being exclusively devoted to domestic music production, but in the sense of being recognised as a priority for funding by the Ministry of Culture (and other funding bodies) in Serbia, which would have enabled it to grow in size and reputation, both domestically and internationally. As we are about to show, the Review has not even become a *city festival* in the same sense of having stable structural funding by the local public administration. Instead, during the past two decades, the Review has been nothing but a *festival of a profession*, as defined by Milena Dragičević-Šešić: it is a festival organised by certain artistic unions or associations whose main purpose is the evaluation of artistic merits and professional development (Dragičević-Šešić 2008: 16). Of course, the Review has always been, first and foremost, the festival of the *profession of academic composers*, by virtue of being established by the Composers Association of Serbia, and more specifically, by its classical music section. However, the initial ambitions that shaped the first editions of the festival were much bigger, as the Review was intended to be a substitute for the earlier, Yugoslav, festivals held in Croatia, which were no longer welcoming composers from Serbia because of the wars that followed the break-up of Yugoslavia in 1991. Here we argue that the International Review of Composers' general focus on *musical compositions* i.e. *individual works* actually prevented the festival from fully embracing the complex changes (economical, cultural and social) brought about by the postsocialist transition in Serbia. In fact, this inner weakness of the festival was lucidly observed by musicologists such as Bojana Cvejić and Ksenija Stevanović at the outset of the period in question (e.g. Cvejić 2002; Stevanović 2002, 2003); yet, the general profile of the festival has never been changed – although there have been certain, relatively unsuccessful attempts. The early editions of the Review were shaped by the protagonists' desire to 'escape', at least metaphorically, into their creations, from the horrors of the worst decade in recent Serbian history (the 1990s). But even though this 'escapist' stance was no longer needed in the new political circumstances of the 2000s, the festival remained somewhat 'closed' in itself, in its elitist and 'academic' approach to the presentation of contemporary music and, as such, it failed to impose itself as a 'cultural force' on the new, transitional – i.e. *international* – positioning of the Serbian society.

The goal of this chapter is, thus, to examine the 'breaking points' in the history of the festival and to determine its 'phases' or 'stages' of development so far, leading to its present state and status in Serbia (and beyond). Since we are currently at the end of another decade, and the Review is approaching its

thirtieth anniversary, it seems that the time is right to observe its present 'state of affairs', to analyse its recent transformations and tribulations, and to make cautious predictions regarding the future of this festival. Also, we aim to answer the pressing question: what is the right measure of dependence and independence for a festival founded by a professional art association, but which survives almost exclusively by relying on public funds?

## A BIT OF HISTORY

The ensuing discussion serves to highlight the hypothesis that the International Review of Composers was envisioned to be a festival of national significance right from the outset, and that it was expected to draw substantial support from the Ministry of Culture, although its founder was a professional association whose members publicly expressed their critical attitude towards Slobodan Milošević's regime and its policies. In the Introduction to their 2007 monograph, Vesna Mikić and Ivana Ilić observed that:

“the last fifteen years bear a considerable specific weight in the historical, political, social and cultural sense, having in mind our joint wanderings, ascents, falls, departures, returns, searches, defeats and wins – including our move from a single party towards a multiparty system; our journey from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, via the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, to the Republic of Serbia; our transition from the socialist self-governing towards market oriented capitalism; our challenges embodied in wars, sanctions, isolation, bombing, protests; and our handling of extreme circumstances” (Mikić and Ilić 2007: 9).

The International Review of Composers thus came to life and began to develop at the most difficult and turbulent period in the recent history of Serbia. The festival was founded immediately after the 'beginning of the end' of the SFRY, and with a particular purpose: as a Serbian 'replacement' for the Music Biennale Zagreb [Muzički biennale Zagreb], founded in 1961, and the Review of Yugoslav Music [Jugoslovenska muzička tribina] in Opatija, founded in 1964 – both held in Croatia. Namely, the disintegration of Yugoslavia, which had begun in June 1991 with the declaration of independence of Slovenia, and the subsequent armed conflicts between former federal republics, left Serbian composers without the opportunity to measure their work against the creative outputs of their peers from other cultural settings. Thus, the Composers' Association of Serbia felt the need to establish a new festival of contemporary music, which would showcase and put into perspective the accomplishments of recent Serbian art music.<sup>6</sup>

6 A similar situation happened with the aforementioned journal *New Sound/Novi zvuk*, which was established as a successor of the Yugoslav music journal *Zvuk (Sound)*, whose headquarters had been in Zagreb prior to the breakup of the country. The founder and long-standing Editor-in-Chief of *New Sound/Novi zvuk*, Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, had previously been a member of the editorial board of the Zagreb-based *Zvuk*.

The creation of the Review was initiated by the distinguished Serbian composer Ivana Stefanović, who wrote the project proposal entitled “Sremski Karlovci – the Old and the New Center of Serbian Culture” on 18 September 1991. Interestingly, it was Ivana Stefanović’s father, the aesthetician and music writer Pavle Stefanović (1901–1985), who was one of the initiators of the Review of Yugoslav Music in Opatija (see Kotevska 2017: 209–215). Ivana Stefanović revealed in a text that she wrote in 2009, at a particularly vulnerable moment for the Belgrade-based festival, that she indeed saw the ‘Serbian’ Review as a continuation of the earlier, Yugoslav one,<sup>7</sup> citing the ‘nearly half-a-century tradition of the Review’ (Stefanović 2009).<sup>8</sup> The first paragraph of Ivana Stefanović’s 1991 proposal reads as follows:

“*In order to fill the void* once inhabited by the Review of Yugoslav Music in Opatija, I suggest the formation of a *festival of new Serbian music* [our italics]. The festival would present only the latest production, new pieces selected by the expert committees and individuals, thus enabling the highest quality and attractiveness of this event” (cf. Mikić and Ilić 2007: 13).

This clear purpose of the new festival was confirmed by the composer Milan Mihajlović, who was elected the first president of the festival council and who was also president of the Composers’ Association of Serbia at the time, in his opening address of the first Review:

“Had the times been different, at the moment of creation of a new festival of contemporary music, I would have told you that I was happy and proud to be given the honour to open the first Review of Composers Sremski Karlovci – Novi Sad. Tonight, however, I cannot say that, because I am not happy about the fact that for us there are no longer the other festivals where, in a manner similar to this, we used to gather together for decades. But since things are as they are, [...] I am happy that we have gathered here in the name of art which is, perhaps, the only one which can keep us together, in the dignity of living” (cf. *ibid.*: 23).

In the same speech, Mihajlović unambiguously speaks of the “festival which is expected to satisfy many of our unsatisfied creative needs.” In line with Ivana Stefanović’s initial proposal, the first two Reviews took place in Sremski Karlovci and Novi Sad, “envisaged as a music workshop or colony of a kind” according to Mihajlović (cf. *ibid.*: 23). However, since its third edition, the festival moved – permanently – to Belgrade, where the Composers’ Association of

7 For a thorough discussion of the final days of the ‘Yugoslav’ festival in Opatija and its ‘successor’ festivals established both in Croatia and Serbia, see Marinković 2018, esp. 830–859.

8 This desired ‘continuity’ was later confirmed by Ivan Brkljačić, composer and selector of the Review from 2007–2015: “The International Review of Composers demonstrates its significance on the basis of several quite important phenomena. In the first place, by virtue of being a natural continuation of the former Yugoslavia’s broadly conceived *Forum of Musical Creativity*, which was held every year, starting from the early 1960s, in Opatija (in what is now Croatia), the Review stands on quite firm foundations” (Brkljačić 2016: 131). It must be said that the Croatian Composers’ Society also observes the *Forum of Musical Creativity* in its uninterrupted continuity on *their home soil*, see e.g. *Međunarodna glazbena tribina. 40 godina. Opatija – Pula* (Krpan 2003).

Serbia is based. Also, the motivation behind the change of location could probably be found in the fact that the Sava Center, an important venue in Belgrade, was the co-organiser of the Review's early editions, therefore it made sense to use its infrastructural capacities as well – indeed, the Sava Center served as the 'parent hall' of the festival for several years (concluding with the fifth edition in 1996).

Since its inception, the Review became a 'hybrid' festival that merged the concepts of both the Opatija festival, which had previously served as a mere 'fair' or 'overview' of the recent production of Yugoslav composers (cf. Marinković 2018: 811–813), and of the Zagreb Biennale, which offered a carefully curated selection of 'the best' Yugoslav pieces, presented alongside the works of the most distinguished representatives of European and global avant-garde (cf. *ibid.*: 802–805). This 'hybrid' conception became 'the Achilles tendon' of the new festival, since it never managed to offer either a comprehensive overview of the recent output of Serbian composers or a truly world-class selection of global contemporary art music – let alone to enable a comparison between them. Yet, it is important to note that the Review was ambitiously conceived as a festival of *national relevance and importance*, both in the sense of a confirmation of national identity, and as a publicly supported festival, with the Ministry of Culture as its 'patron' and main funding body. This is revealed in the numerous expressions of gratitude directed towards the Ministry of Culture and other public funding bodies (such as the Secretariat for Culture of the City of Belgrade, as a local administration) in the opening addresses of the Review in the first decade of the festival. For instance, while opening the first Review of Composers, Milan Mihajlović stressed that "[t]he Ministry of Culture of Serbia, Belgrade City Secretariat for Culture and sponsors helped us to realise the Review of Composers within the boundaries of professional dignity" (cf. Mikić and Ilić 2007: 23). In his opening address for the fifth Review, Mihajlović emphasised that "[t]he Composers' Association of Serbia, as a founder and producer, could not have been successful in this endeavour without the support and understanding of important institutions – above all the Ministry of Culture, without whose five-year patronage the Review would not even exist" (cf. *ibid.*: 49).

In the same address, Mihajlović pointed out the "diligent and, in our circumstances, exhausting work on the creation and organization of the project which has, despite everything, persisted and even surpassed its initial boundaries", growing to become the "biggest festival of its kind in our country" (*ibid.*). Despite the eleven concerts of symphonic, chamber, soloist and electro-acoustic music that formed the programme of the fifth Review, Mihajlović was still unsatisfied because "this year's Review fulfilled the conditions to become *a large international festival of contemporary music* [our italics]. Unfortunately, because of the unenviable financial situation that we are all dealing with, no less than four attractive concerts had to be omitted and many other artists 'left' for some happier times" (*ibid.*). These paragraphs testify to the ambitions of the Composers' Association of Serbia, whose members set out to create, at

such unfavourable times, a big and important festival stage for the promotion of contemporary music creativity and performance.

At the same time, we should also observe that the Review was conceived as a 'place for escapism,' an 'oasis' of beauty and 'sanity' amidst the turmoil of the 1990s. This is clearly read from various interpretative texts which contributed to 'set' the programme concept and overall 'tone' of the festival in its first decade. Among them, the text written by Zorica Premate after the first Review<sup>9</sup> is the most illustrative, as it can be interpreted as a 'manifesto of escapism' of sorts, while, at the same time, it also affirms *the musical work* as the main focus of the first Review, which has had a lasting effect on the festival as a whole:

"At a time of disrupted communications, when we are grabbing the last remains of personality and wrapping ourselves into SELVES, out of fear that we would otherwise continue living in the only dimension of physical survival, fully aware of the fact that the highest products of spirituality no longer have any meaning and relevance in the time which surrounds and swallows us, namely at the time which is both 'post' Yugoslav and 'now' apocalyptic and 'before' who-knows-what – something wonderful is still happening. Something that defies the laws of spooky gravity which ghettoises, marginalises and annihilates the creative thought. [...] 'Music has happened' in the antimusical, cacophonous and deafened time, here and now.

The stylistical framework of the Composers' Review is marked by post-modernism, as a general sensibility of the time at which [...] various generations of Serbian composers have met. But, perhaps, one of the main characteristics of the pieces performed is their sound beauty, which is not devoid of critical strength, yet it bears the feelings of nostalgia, exhaustion, disappointment, ironic implications, rejection of the reality, focusing on the self.

Longing for beauty as a means of self-defence, they hurled towards establishing harmony of a higher order with their music [...], playing with the sound remnants of various cultures, even the popular and populist ones. Thus, they reaffirmed the notion of a work as a self-contained entity, a creative achievement which only secondarily corresponds to its time, turning its disgusted face away from it. [...] Even those pieces from the Review whose titles and precariously suggested contents demonstrate a mild interest in the reality, did so from the position of an 'arranged beauty,' 'beautified parallel reality,' the reality which, today, must be 'make-believe,' or fictional, or mechanically dismembered in order to enable the author to create anything at all.

Giving up on the idea that art could change the world, this music is realised predominantly through its aestheticism and exhibitionism of the compositional-technical supremacy, hardly needed even in its own time, which has created other fetishes, cults and myths for itself. The composers confronted the erosion of positive spiritual powers of their time with nobility, refinement and affirmation of the individual's humanity, of the creator

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9 Even though the issue of the *Treći program* journal is listed as being published in 1991, the text was indeed published after the first Review, which took place in spring 1992. This is due to the fact that, during the 1990s, the financing of the journal was irregular and uncertain; hence the publication of some issues was delayed.



who ‘measures all things’ and owns himself with superiority, thanks to his music” (Premate 1991: 32–35).

Apart from setting the tone for understanding the Review as a phenomenon firmly rooted in the ‘postsocialist condition’, the same text by Premate is valuable for a number of other observations. First of all, she points to the fact that Serbian music never had a chance in earlier Yugoslav and international festivals to “face itself so openly”, which is a pertinent conclusion given the fact that, for example, Serbian music had been largely underrepresented at the Music Biennial Zagreb throughout the decades of its existence.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, Premate claims that Serbian music reached “one of its peaks, the incandescence of its creative potentials embodied within the framework of the overwhelming postmodernity.” She rightfully observed that postmodernism, as a “mature art movement” is “perhaps already on the border of its own canonisation as a certain academism of style in a narrower sense” and she praised the high quality of music produced in Serbia within this stylistic framework. Finally, she noted that the Review affirmed the art of music performance in Serbia as well (cf. *ibid*: 35) – and indeed, in the years following its first edition, the Review demonstrated an increasing ambition and, in some editions, practically a shift of focus, from the composers and their oeuvres towards the performers, showcasing the best music ensembles not just from Serbia, but also from Europe and other parts of the world. However, as we are about to show, the financial means allocated to the festival were never abundant enough to fully satisfy the appetites of its producers and artistic directors.

The escapist stance of the Review’s editions during its first decade is confirmed by numerous other texts. For instance, concerning the second edition of the Review, Dragana Stojanović [Novičić] observed: “Generally speaking, quotations or at least certain reminders of the ‘old’ authors were very characteristic of the music that we heard at the Review. [...] Perhaps this movement towards the bright moments of the past represented an attempt to seek escape from the horrors of the moment” (Stojanović 1993: 131–132).

Opening the fourth Review in 1995, Milan Mihajlović called it “an oasis of peace, understanding, and friendship” (cf. Mikić and Ilić 2007: 24). Following the ill-fated year of 1999 when the Review had to be cancelled due to the ongoing bombing of Serbia by the NATO forces, the festival resumed in 2000.<sup>11</sup> Milena Medić noted that “[t]he last International Review of Composers in this decade, century and millennium [...] was in its sound structure marked by a specific ‘look back,’ both in the sense of the composers’ and the performers’ conceptions” (Medić 2000: 131), thus reaffirming its ‘postmodern’ and ‘postsocialist’ character. However, the words of the composer and academician Dejan

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10 See Milin 2018, especially p. 368 and further.

11 In fact, only one concert took place on 21 May 1999 at the *Kolarac* Hall at 4 PM. The programme was performed by the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Vladimir Milić, and it consisted of four pieces by Serbian female composers (see Osma tribina kompozitora /Osujećena/ 1999).

Despić, heard at the opening of the festival on 26 May 2000, point to another feeling which marked the later part of the 1990s in Serbia:

“The International Review of Composers was founded exactly eight years ago, at a time we do not like to remember, but we cannot, and should not, forget. The events which happened in the following years resulted in the fact that organizing and realizing this festival was always, more or less, under the shadow of a threat that it would be thwarted by something – until last spring it was indeed thwarted, in the cruellest manner – with bombs! [...] Mića Popović called art ‘the last defence of a nation.’ [...]”

Admittedly, it would be cosy, but only seemingly safe, to hide with it in our ‘ivory tower’, pretending (or fooling ourselves) that what is happening around us is none of our concern. This Review should not be seen as such a hideaway! On the contrary, it represents our active response of a kind to this surrounding – our resistance to its ugliness, greed and recklessness, to its false values and even more false idols [...]” (cf. Mikić and Ilić 2007: 25).

Despić, thus, emphasises the notion of *resistance* as an embedded quality of the Review, as the key word which reflected the dissatisfaction of the Serbs with a decade of isolation, poverty and conflicts under Slobodan Milošević’s autocratic rule. In other words, the Review could no longer be seen as a ‘hide-away’, as Despić rightfully observed. Instead, it had to assume a more active role at the end of the century which would lead Serbia into a profound and far-reaching political change and trigger the onset of the postsocialist transition.<sup>12</sup> However, as we will now show, the Review did not succeed in adapting to new socio-economic circumstances in the new millennium.

## THE YEAR 2001: THE NEW BEGINNING (OR NOT)

Following the civil uprising which led to the democratic changes in Serbia in October 2000, the future seemed bright for the country and its culture in the new millennium. A well-known Serbian actor Branislav Lečić was appointed Minister of Culture in January 2001, and the Secretariat for Culture of the City of Belgrade was to be led for four years by Tatjana Tanja Petrović (1967–2013), musicologist, music journalist and alumna of the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. Again, it was Milan Mihajlović who was given the honour, as the director of

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12 In an earlier article we defined (following Švob-Đokić 2004) *postsocialist transition* as a cluster of comprehensive political, economic and social changes characteristic for the postsocialist societies of Central, Eastern and South-eastern Europe, striving (with more or less success) towards capitalism. Two defining characteristics of postsocialist transition are (1) abandonment of the centralised, governmentally regulated and planned production in favour of the market-oriented mode, with public property privatised, and (2) striving towards a successful international integration. Since the processes of privatisation of public property and of changing foreign politics to align with the agenda to eventually join the European Union only began in earnest at the turn of the millennium i.e. after the Socialist Party of Serbia was removed from power, we consider that moment as the onset of the postsocialist transition in Serbia (Medić and Janković-Beguš 2016: 320–321).



the Review, to open its festive tenth edition in May 2001 – “the tenth altogether but the first in a free, democratic Serbia [...] Nine years passed before our wishes and dreams became a reality” (cf. Mikić and Ilić 2007: 25). His optimism for the future of the festival was unambiguously expressed on this occasion, including the observation that, compared to the previous decade in which the festival persisted despite the unfavourable circumstances, “today, the situation is very different. It can be observed, first of all, in full support of our patrons – the Ministry of Culture and City Secretariat for Culture, and then our co-organiser Jugokonzert and our sponsors, and especially the Polish Ministry of Culture” (ibid.). The changes on the political scene in Serbia created conditions for a huge impetus for the development of the art scene in Serbia, because the public authorities were no longer perceived by the majority of artists and their associations as ‘enemies’. However, the answer to the question of how the Review fared in this redistribution of power in Serbia is – surprisingly – *not too well*; and in the following years the festival would very soon face its biggest crisis yet (excluding the year 1999). What happened?

The impending crisis of the Review was already lucidly observed in the year of its jubilee by the young music critic, musicologist Bojana Cvejić; her words clearly support our previously expressed argument of the *international* character of the postsocialist transition:

“Even though the opening ceremony articulated once again the initial postulates of the festival ‘of music art which knows no boundaries’, which in the new political situation quite specifically implies the widening of space for communication and exchange between cultures, this Review presented much fewer works and authors from abroad than in the previous editions – only a handful of pieces, mostly chosen by the guest performers” (Cvejić 2001: 133).

Speaking about the newly introduced ‘audience awards’, Cvejić raised the important question of the *raison d’être* of this festival which, she felt, did not lie in the ‘popular vote’ but – elsewhere:

“If the awards are needed at all, then the informed opinion of a jury would be more relevant, at least as a counterbalance to the popular vote. The question of [the] wider popularity of contemporary music (compared to the *mainstream* classical and popular music) was not solved even by bigger music cultures with [a] longer tradition of contemporary music festivals, and [a] similar lack of mass interest for contemporary music is evident in other disciplinary practices as well.

Instead of ‘popularisation’, the question of [the] concept of the International Review of Composers, of its interests, goals and possibilities should be asked. [...] Or perhaps the only festival of contemporary music in Serbia and Vojvodina could and should, by virtue of its programme policy, assume the active role in the creation of a musical ‘landscape’? Should it not strive to move not only ‘beside’ the production, but ‘ahead’ of it, to *set the frameworks* by means of rethinking, on one hand, various concepts and cultures of music, and on the other, by establishing the connections with the world thanks to the import of fashions, trends, technologies *as tools* of

thinking – in other words, to act at least a little bit like a *trend-setter*? Even though material conditions still do not allow for a speedy networking into global maps, there are ways to create a more informative programme, of a better quality, smaller in scope and without the need to satisfy the formal ‘decor’ of a big festival. If there is still no chance to present the most prominent or, simply put, the most expensive actualities from all over the world, could these modest means be invested in thematically conceived retrospectives or in presenting the authors and ensembles of educational importance for young composers, musicologists, musicians et al.? [...]” (ibid: 135–136).

Cvejić’s observation that the ‘popularisation’ of the festival was less important than the question of its concept seems particularly pertinent and farsighted. The underrepresentation of foreign authors, unfortunately, carried on into the next, eleventh Review, held in 2002. The Academician Vlastimir Trajković (1947–2017), a member of the Artistic Council (i.e. selection board, which was reintroduced the previous year), tried to explain their decision in the following way:

“When, at the beginning of the year, the members of the Artistic Council were faced with the ‘mountain’ of two hundred and fifty scores, divided into two exact halves – 125 scores of Serbian and Montenegrin composers and the same number of foreign authors’ pieces – they were, at the same time, happy because of the response to the open call (especially from abroad) – but also aware [...] of the responsibility to make priorities from such an abundance to pick up what is ‘really best,’ regardless of whether it is ‘domestic’ or ‘foreign.’ [...]”

[...] the selection means, in a great number of cases, a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ referring to whether the piece will be performed at all, especially concerning the pieces of younger and, thus, less affirmed authors [...]. Therefore, the job of the Artistic Council was to create a list of ideal priorities. However, it does not always mean that all of it will be heard at the Review. Financial and technical-organisational circumstances put this other ‘pole’ (the pole of ‘reality’) – in the relation ‘from ideal to realistic’. However, it is still valuable to have a signpost to direct us to where we should spend more, and where less, of our energy and scarce resources” (cf. Mikić and Ilić 2007: 64).

Apparently, the ‘quality’ of music scores was postulated as the main criterion in the selection of pieces to be performed, guided by the knowledge and affinities of members of the Artistic Council.<sup>13</sup> However, as Vlastimir Trajković stressed in the address quoted above, the financial resources at the disposal of the Composers Association of Serbia were “ridiculously low” and he lamented that “[t]o organise the International Review of Composers in the circumstances where the money is not secured or allocated at least a year in advance borderlines a futile effort which cannot lead to ‘entry into the world’ – but not because [the] Serbian art of music composition is weak or provincially backward” (ibid.). In other words, the Artistic Council and the director of the Re-

13 The Artistic Council in 2001 and 2002 consisted of three composers, all of them professors at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade (Isidora Žebeljan, Milan Mihajlović and Vlastimir Trajković) and two musicologists (Ivana Trišić and Zorica Premate).

view decided to carry on the legacy of the Review's initial concept, completely ignoring other possibilities such as the one suggested by Cvejić the year before. They apparently decided to set their 'filters' in such a way to keep as many pieces of Serbian composers as possible (provided they satisfied the criterion of 'quality'), probably because they felt that the 'scarce resources' should best be spent on presenting Serbian composers with an opportunity to have their works performed for the audience. Moreover, in her opening address, Isidora Žebeljan (1967–1920) confirmed that the Artistic Council saw the music in the 'essentialist' manner as "the most abstract and most sublime of all arts", focusing on the "discovery of music pieces which will remain, even in the distant future, examples of one moment of exaltation of the human spirit" (cf. *ibid*: 26).

Not surprisingly, the critical overviews of the eleventh edition of the festival once again stressed the weakness of the 'international' dimension of the Review, while they also criticised the 'rejection of ideology' and the supposed 'autonomy' of music presented at the Review, with its single-minded focus on a *musical work*. As observed by Ksenija Stevanović (who, at the time, was a member of the youngest generation of Serbian musicologists and music critics):

"The Review should fulfil its educative, informative and propaganda role – show the present-day trend, provide information and present domestic creative output to the audience. The expectations of the Review are, therefore, too high, and so is the disappointment in this event. Simply speaking, for those interested in contemporary music trends, the Review is neither sufficiently informative, nor up-to-date [...]"

[...] this year's 11<sup>th</sup> International Review of Composers was a self-centred, self-satisfied and solitary event. Why? The foreign production was extremely under-represented and of little relevance for one to gain an impression about the endeavours, directions and 'vogues' in the world. That is why domestic production and its achievements were highlighted. Domestic production, thus, presented itself in full scope [...].

Let us focus then on domestic production, [...] the real measure of academism here and its presumptions. [...] where is the ideology of these works and, if it exists, what kind of ideology is it? It exists precisely in [...] their authors' position that this is music without references, that at issue are works of the most elevated and most formal art, which fascinates, but leaves no room for explanation. Our Academism/Neoclassicism, which, at this year's Review, could be placed in a broader time perspective [...]

[...] the festival was auto-reflexive [...]. There was no opportunity for comparison, for looking at a broader context, for re-evaluation. [...] Our music production has shown itself to be insufficiently interested in what is happening in the outside world, but, nevertheless, stable, consistent, and value-wise sure in its look toward the Parnassian heights of often distant musical styles" (Stevanović 2002: 72–74, 78).

In our opinion, Stevanović rightfully observed that even recent creative output of the 'postmodern' Serbian composers (such as Zoran Erić) was nothing else but 'academism of the highest level' (*ibid*: 74) because it assumed the same 'l'art pour l'art' stance, characterised by self-adoration and withdrawal from the

understanding of music as a social practice. Although this poetic approach was, perhaps, justified during the previous decade of wars, sanctions and civil conflicts, it no longer made sense at the time of the proclaimed 'victory' of the Review's political ideals. This 'defeatist' position of the Composers' Association of Serbia was, again, lucidly observed (and criticised) by Bojana Cvejić:

This year too, the International Review of Composers followed the paved road in presenting contemporary music by focusing *on a chosen composition – a musical work* [...] since concept, as a criterion of choice, was missing. [...] The lack of programme guidelines in presenting tendencies of the contemporary music today, both here and globally [...] is an expression of the lack of awareness that [the] criteria, contexts or environment of a musical piece are precisely factors that condition the understanding of contemporary or new music (Cvejić 2002: 14–15).

Even though in later years there were attempts to create some sort of a more solid 'framework' or concept, notably by the selector Ivan Brkljačić (between 2007 and 2015), they did not succeed in changing the focal topic of the festival, i.e. the musical work *per se*. In 2002, Cvejić singled out certain concerts as "successful steps towards profiling the programme politics of the festival" – namely, the concerts of two foreign pianists, Véronique Péliisséro and Joanna MacGregor, as well as the portrait-concert of Zoran Erić, as "the place where both the programme idea and criteria that the International Review of Composers should pursue, finally overlapped" (ibid: 16, 18). She continued:

"[The] deservedly raucous response of the audience at Erić's concert denied the initial assumptions with which Isidora Žebeljan opened the eleventh Review. Highlighting the composers' mission to 'sacrifice the usual way of life to the idea of being a composer', Žebeljan placed herself among the supporters of the traditionalist–modernist autonomy, who are trying in vain to prove the particularity and exceptionality of music ('the most abstract and most sublime of all arts,' Žebeljan claims). At the time when even in the music production itself the binary divide high–popular is being overcome, any composer's withdrawal into a narrow closedness of a guild, failing to acknowledge the sociality of all guests – including the guest of exclusion from the society – is reactionary and it contributes even more to the marginalisation of contemporary music in our country. It is the stance which Boulez described as a mechanism of enjoying one's own irrelevance, the glee of a victim who has willingly abdicated, given up on a challenge to fight for its place within the culture. [...] Thus, it is even more crucial to rethink the responsibility of choice, the concept of the festival and the need to redefine its programme policy [...]"

Within festivals of new music, the selection of contemporary sound is created and, what is even more important, contemporary music is 'placed' and, therefore, enabled in the society. Therefore, perhaps it would be the most 'objective' to give up on the judgement of a composition as a piece of art without the context from which it originated [...]. The festival could represent a map, with a focus on currently relevant and instructive tendencies and trends of contemporary music *practice*, instead of a catalogue of works without any context or interpretation. Thus, the creator of the

festival, the listener from the audience, and the composer as an author, would all meet, united in the same role – that of listening to the differences between musics as cultures of the world” (ibid: 19).

The criticism of the Review was not unjust because the very next year – 2003 – brought the first crisis in the new millennium, with the so-called ‘zip’ edition of the festival, organised despite many difficulties with the aim to fulfil “the imperative of continuity of the only festival of contemporary music in Belgrade”, according to the Artistic Council (cf. Mikić and Ilić 2007: 72). It must be said that the spring of 2003 in Serbia was, once again, tragic because of the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić (on 12 March), immediately followed by the declaration of a state of emergency in the country. However, these events should not be seen as the main reason behind the crisis of the Review, because the available funds and framework for its twelfth edition were known at least several months earlier, as it was confirmed by the Artistic Council whose members, nevertheless, proceeded to fulfil their task:

“The initial plan was to have seven concerts, which included guest performances of three foreign ensembles and four concerts of selected pieces; however, the restricted budget only allowed us the arrival of one ensemble, as well as two concerts with only 26 works.

Realistically reflecting the financial capacities and the social and cultural interest in contemporary music in this country, this year’s Review.zip is tiny, but its conception is such that two programme modalities are separated. One, that favours the concept of promoting actual tendencies in global contemporary music and performance, and the second one, which institutionalises the principle of [the] selection of received recent foreign and domestic musical works. Therefore, it seems that this Review is really the key one, because it asks the question of the future identity of this manifestation, and not just the conditions of its organisation. It points to the necessity of separating two vital, yet different interests of the wider music and cultural public: the stimulation and promotion of contemporary domestic creation (rostrum) and [the] presentation of selected trends and concepts of art music in the world (festival). Hence, rostrum and festival. Within the same manifestation or not? We would like to use [the] twelfth Review.zip to initiate the institutional resolution of this issue” (cf. ibid: 72–73).

In her critical overview of the twelfth Review.zip, musicologist Marija Masnikosa (also serving as a member of the Artistic Council) twice referred to that edition of the festival as a ‘breaking point’, stressing several important ‘novelties’: notably the prevalence of the young(est) generation of Serbian composers in the programme (“This was the Review of composers in their twenties and thirties!”),<sup>14</sup> and, more importantly, its ‘truly international’ character (“what we wished for in its previous editions finally happened – more interna-

14 Interestingly, this edition of the Review also had the youngest Artistic Council thus far, with the average age of its members being thirty-two years! Bojana Cvejić, as its youngest member, was only twenty-seven years old at the time, while the other members were musicologists Marija Masnikosa (forty-one) and Jelena Novak (twenty-nine), and composer Svetlana Savić (thirty-two).

tional than domestic compositions were performed at the Review”). However, she also pointed out the ‘lack of atmosphere’ surrounding the festival, i.e. the lack of interest and a certain ambivalence of the audience concerning the festival’s ‘survival’ and its possible acquiring of a novel identity (all cf. Masnikosa 2003: 93). The positives and negatives of the ‘new’ programme concept were, once again, aptly summed up by Ksenija Stevanović in her critical overview:

“The Twelfth International Review of Composers flew faster than in previous years, but it was also a more coherent event, possibly due to its density and the selection of events, I hope that the ensuing Reviews will continue to move the possibilities of the domestic music scene and that they will foster an even better acquaintance of our public with global currents. Of course, the uncertainty and an increasing marginalization of such events is obvious in this case. This Review was more than aware of that” (Stevanović 2003: 28).

It was clear that something had to change, in order to ensure the continuation of the festival. In 2004, it was decided that, for the first time, the festival would be moved from mid-May to the end of October, most likely in order to give the Composers’ Association of Serbia more ‘manoeuvre space’. The Review has subsequently continued to take place in autumn (alternating between September, October and November), pushing itself into one of the busiest periods in the cultural calendar of Belgrade, which has, for decades, been occupied by several big art festivals, founded (and *funded*) by the City – the Belgrade Music Festival (BEMUS), October Salon, Belgrade Book Fair, Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF), Belgrade Jazz Festival, and in recent years also many more independent art events of varying size. Add to the equation the beginning of the concert and theatre seasons, and it becomes clear that for a small, independent festival such as the Review it was increasingly difficult to make an impact.

Speaking of the crisis of the Review at the beginning of the new millennium, certain other circumstances must be pointed out as well. First of all, Ivana Stefanović, as the initiator of the Review, was appointed President of the Artistic Council of the BEMUS, arguably the biggest and the oldest art music festival in Serbia (founded in 1969), and she remained in that position until 2006. During her mandate, the BEMUS reached its peak both in terms of programme scope and annual budget in its recent history. The executive producer of the BEMUS, the Jugokonzert agency, which was at the time also the co-producer of the Review, had its priorities clearly set, in favour of the BEMUS; and the same can be said of the City of Belgrade’s Secretariat for Culture as the public funding body behind the majority of festivals. It is interesting to observe how Ivana Stefanović’s affinity with contemporary art music shaped the Belgrade Music Festival’s programme, with a number of commissions and premieres of new Serbian compositions (see Janković 2003: 61–64; Medić and Janković–Beguš 2016: 317–329).

Furthermore, Stefanović carried out the largest part of her mandate from afar because she lived in Ankara from 2001–2005, being the wife of Zoran



Popović, the Ambassador of Serbia and Montenegro to Turkey. Coincidentally, another influential member of the ‘initiative board’ of the Review, composer Srđan Hofman, was appointed the Ambassador to the South African Republic (serving there from 2002–2006), while another doyen of the Review’s various governing bodies, musicologist Ana Kotevska, spent the years 2000–2004 in Paris as the wife of Radomir Diklić, the Ambassador to France.<sup>15</sup> The evidence of the Review’s decline during their absence from Serbia could be only circumstantial; however, it is important to observe the real political and personal influence that these professionals had in Serbia post-2000. Today, the observed absence (perhaps even *abstinence*) from the Review of its highly positioned ‘pioneers’ in the years following the democratic changes in Serbia can be assessed as a heavy loss.

Thus, at the beginning of the millennium, the Review was left in the hands of undoubtedly well-meaning and motivated, but less influential composers and musicologists, to guide it through the ever-changing political and economic circumstances. In her assessments of three consecutive festival editions (between 2004 and 2006), musicologist Ivana Stamatović [Ilić] expressed growing concerns over its future: the tone of her texts gradually shifts from defensive and frustrated (in 2004 and 2005) to disappointed, resigned and somewhat withdrawn in 2006. She begins her text about the thirteenth Review (held in 2004) in the following way:

“In the past several years, organising the International Review of Composers, as the, until recently, only festival of contemporary art music in our country, has proven in many ways to be a mission impossible and a challenge which no longer refers merely to issues of profession, but also walking the tightrope of a scandalously small budget that is uncertain almost to the last moment. Financial limitations not only influence the content, concept and duration of the Review, but also call into question the very holding of this festival. [...] With numerous compromises that were non-artistic in character, it fulfilled the imperative of its own continuity, which now seems to be even more seriously threatened” (Stamatović 2005: 76).

Stamatović did observe the “truly international character” of the festival’s thirteenth edition as a positive thing (almost twice as many foreign compositions as domestic ones were performed); but she rightfully pointed out that “it was still not enough to get an adequate impression of current trends in global music. The question is whether the received works represented an appropriate sample in terms of number and quality to provide the Art Council with greater and freer ‘manoeuvring space,’” highlighting that “the works of certain foreign composers [...] appear to have become regulars of the Review’s programme” (*ibid.*). She was also alarmed by the absence of older, more prominent Serbian composers, from the Review’s programme – a trend already observed during the previous, twelfth Review – and she wondered about the reasons for their low productivity:

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15 From 2008 to 2012 Diklić was also appointed the Ambassador of Serbia to Belgium.

“[It] can also point to the vicious circle in which domestic production has found itself: if there are not enough opportunities for (good) performances, if there are no appropriate institutional incentives and support, what then is the fate of contemporary Serbian music? The Art Council of the Review provided a partial solution for encouraging domestic production by re-establishing the institution of commission, this time intended for the Slavko Osterc trio. Ivan Brkljačić was entrusted with the task and it was the right choice” (ibid: 77).

Unfortunately, the commissioning of new pieces by Serbian composers would last only for another year. Stamatović’s final lament that “All these observations [...] are overarched by a concern that is least of all professional, yet it seems crucial – the fate of this festival on the sidelines of the cultural policy” (ibid: 78) carried on into the next year, where she assessed the fourteenth Review in a similar, albeit even harsher, tone:

“[I]t seems that the production of most of those [Serbian composers] whose work is primarily oriented towards our country is at a low ebb. There is no doubt that such a situation is influenced by completely understandable external factors such as the low financial profitability of compositional work, rare opportunities for performing or inadequate performances. Refusing to search for the reasons behind the – for some authors partial, for others complete – withdrawal from the contemporary music scene in our country ‘only’ in those external factors, we wonder: what is the minimal incentive for creative work for a composer in Serbia today? How can we create conditions that would make composing what we believe it has always been: an act motivated by strong internal personal motives and needs? Has the time come – despite the indisputable dedication and creative efforts of all those who founded the Review, inherited it with all its positive and negative heritage and developed it up to the present – to rethink the festival itself in accordance with the said facts? [...]

[T]his year’s International Review of Composers is not very different from its several previous editions. This [...] is exactly where we perceive one of the greatest crisis points of this festival. [...] The exacerbated financial and organizational circumstances of its existence are inevitably also reflected on the qualitative factors of its status and reputation not only in the wider national culture, but also in the narrower circle of the music profession, leaving it very little possibility for ‘manoeuvre’. [...] The very fact that this year it was held for the first time in the acoustically inadequately insulated cinema auditorium of the Belgrade Cultural Centre – which was clearly a compromise made for financial reasons – with a regular counter-subject consisting of the clamour of the audience and on a stage that was often too small to accommodate all the musicians, which undoubtedly had a negative effect on their performing achievements, is a symbolic testimony to the difficulties, interruptions, noises and inadequacies on the very scene of contemporary art music in our country” (Stamatović 2006: 107–110).

The culmination of this period of acute crisis and survival, which we can, from a present point of view, identify as the first missed opportunity for the



Review to become a part of the ‘festival establishment’ – is highlighted by Stamatović’s ‘loss of illusions’ and the following conclusion:

“It seems a good deal of time will pass until a recognizable, specific and autonomous profile of the International Tribune of Composers is developed. In a set of circumstances which in the history of this festival were most frequently neither of [an] artistic nor of [a] professional nature, we are aware of the fact that is to be a difficult process” (Stamatović 2007: 130).

### THE NEW PHASE: IVAN BRKLJAČIĆ’S YEARS (2007–2015)

In 2007, composer Ivan Brkljačić, a former student of Srđan Hofman, took over as the new Selector of the Review. Only thirty years old at the time and without significant professional and personal gravitas and influence, Brkljačić still attempted to address some of the criticism directed at the Review in previous years, and offered a clear thematic concept for each edition of the festival that he supervised (TABLE 8.1):

Table 8.1 Thematic concepts of the International Review of Composers during the period of Ivan Brkljačić’s artistic direction

YEAR	EDITION	TITLE (ENGLISH)	TITLE (SERBIAN)
2007	16 <sup>th</sup>	No title (Retrospective of the first 15 years of the Review)	Bez naslova (Retrospektiva prvih 15 godina Tribine)
2008	17 <sup>th</sup>	New Miniatures	Nove minijature
2009	18 <sup>th</sup>	The Echoes of Space	Odjeci prostora
2010	19 <sup>th</sup>	Music and Theatre	Muzika i pozorište
2011	20 <sup>th</sup>	Splendour of the Voice	U slavu glasa
2012	21 <sup>st</sup>	Musical Construction Site	Muzičko gradilište
2013	22 <sup>nd</sup>	Step into the Unusual	Iskorak u neobično
2014	23 <sup>rd</sup>	In the light of the Mokranjac Award Jubilee	U znaku jubileja nagrade Mokranjac
2015	24 <sup>th</sup>	Music Box	Muzička kutija

Reflecting on his years as the selector, Brkljačić admitted that he had seen it as a challenge (and a moral duty) to accept the difficult task of ‘saving’ the Review from further deterioration:

“I realised that if we allowed the Review to expire, establishing a new one would cost us much more and would be much more difficult than preserving the existing Review, whatever its condition at the time. [...] I knew that destroying something in an instant was always a possibility, whereas building entailed willpower, time, good organisation, and, inevitably, money. I realised that someone had to step up for the common good, [...]. I decided to take on collective responsibility myself and agreed to act

from then on as the Review's artistic programme selector. I immediately sketched out the next Review, to be held six months from that moment" (Brkljačić 2016: 134).

It is interesting to see that in the first year of his tenure, when he was expected to offer an innovative and rejuvenated concept of the Review, the thirty-year old selector instead opted for a retrospective of the previous fifteen editions – obviously unwilling (or unable) to make a break with the past. In the foreword to the Programme Bulletin of the sixteenth Review, held from 23–27 November 2007, he justified such a conception in the following terms:

"[...] Over the past fifteen years the Review has survived a lot – several wars, governments, one cancellation, and even one revolution. There have been different approaches to the program concept of the festival. [...] However, all this time it has remained true to its original concept, and that is the gathering of the best composers from the country and from abroad and presenting their best pieces composed within the three-year framework. [...]"

Putting together the program of this year's retrospective Review, I wanted to draw attention back to the local creative potential. Also, I wanted to remind us about the wonderful colleagues who – for various reasons – do not work in our country anymore, but whose music should be perceived as our own. [...] (Brkljačić 2007).

The next year's edition of the festival, held between 19 and 25 November 2008, was apparently more ambitious, and it was dedicated solely to miniatures for various performing ensembles. A total of one hundred and eight works were performed: ninety-two in the official programme and an additional sixteen in the 'bonus' programme; among those, sixty-three pieces were by foreign composers (cf. Nikolić 2009: 86). The critics' reviews of such a programme were largely negative: for example, Marija Nikolić remarked:

"[...] In spite of the very good organization by the Composers' Association of Serbia and Jugokonzert, this year, as well as in a few previous ones, there were no accompanying programmes in the form of round tables, interviews with the artists, bulletins or workshops. [...] Guided by the thought that quantity does not necessarily turn into quality, we cannot shake the impression that, for an event of relatively modest financial and organizational capacities, the programme was too extensive, and that some works did not meet the basic quality standards assumed by a review of this kind. Adding the fact that within spacious programme concepts some miniatures lasted even as long as 15 minutes, the basic idea of the Review occasionally seemed betrayed" (Nikolić 2009: 91).

Biljana Srećković [Leković] was similarly unimpressed:

"The achieved effect is opposite to the original one, aimed at conceptual unification, because such an understanding of miniatures resulted in confrontations of mutually incompatible, distant and divergent models, genres

and poetics, which in turn complicated their reception, hence the attempt to strengthen the programme orientation was not successful [...]

Based on the presentation of works by Serbian composers and their comparison with foreign works one might say that our music production develops in line with global music academism [...]

[...] did we witness core conceptual and programmatic changes in comparison to previous Reviews? If we expected a departure, an insight into the practice of contemporary music that erases the boundaries between the composers' blueprint and the performers' active participation, or those works that open new realms of sound, then the Review did not fully fulfil the goals that it had set for itself" (Srećković 2008: 513, 517, 518).

It should be stressed that such unfavourable assessments were not reserved only for the International Review of Composers; namely, in her thorough 2008 analysis of the festival offer of the Serbian capital city, Milena Dragičević-Šešić explicitly stated that "Belgrade does not have an authentic festival offer that would make it stand out in the cultural and tourist map of Europe and the world. Although festivals such as FEST or BITEF have long traditions and reputations, they cannot match similar events in the rest of the world. Such a situation is a consequence of the long-standing isolation of the city, the poor image of the entire country and the dissolution of the cultural market" (Dragičević-Šešić 2008: 18). Still, Jelena Janković [Beguš] stressed certain positives of the Review's attempts at transformation, such as establishing new partnerships (notably with the National Bank of Serbia whose new building in Slavija Square in Belgrade was to be used as a 'parent concert hall' of the festival for several years) and efforts at the dissemination of the Review's results abroad (Janković 2008: 36).

Unfortunately, a new crisis for the Review loomed just around the corner; namely, in 2009, the City of Belgrade decided to withdraw its support, opting to directly (co)finance only those festivals founded by the city itself (such as BEMUS, BITEF or FEST), while the majority of independent events were relegated to the jurisdiction of the city municipalities – hence, the Review was to be 'fostered' by the municipality of Stari Grad [Old Town]. In her impassioned protest article published in the daily paper *Politika* (quoted in the introduction of this chapter), Ivana Stefanović emphasised that:

"[t]he International Review of Composers is an event of great cultural importance for the reputation and image of the country of Serbia, and its relevance, therefore, greatly surpasses the jurisdiction of any city municipality. [...] Really the 'right moment' for Ivana Avžner, the city manager for culture, to sign the aforementioned thank you note for the successful collaboration thus far and despatch the Review to the care of the municipality. And yet, it was the right moment for the Review to truly change its position, but in the opposite direction: to evolve, from a renowned city manifestation, into a national one, under the patronage of the Republic" (Stefanović 2009).

So, by 2009 it was already obvious that the Review had missed its chance(s) to become a festival of national (and international) importance; as a matter of fact, it even lost stable support from the City of Belgrade, and the damage was irreparable. In her conclusion, Stefanović correctly observed that “Serbia is not ready for European cultural criteria, standards and, consequently, integrations, because European Serbia is unthinkable without contemporary culture and art, including music. If this is the case, then I am afraid that the best and the most talented ones will again have to leave the country and become a part of a different cultural identity” (ibid.). The ensuing years have proved her assessment to be correct: namely, as of 2020, Serbia has neither completed its postsocialist transition, nor joined the European Union, and the ‘brain drain’ has continued, resulting in a fact that nowadays over sixty Serbian composers live and work abroad – a startling number for such a small country (cf. Medić 2020a). While one can easily put the blame for the low status of the Review on the short-sightedness of the Serbian cultural masterminds at that time, we should recall that, throughout Brkljačić’s years, the festival remained unambitious in scope, firmly focused inwards, and reliant on members of its own guild, as testified by the selector’s words from the openings of the nineteenth and twentieth editions of the Review:

“Reduced in regard of the size of instrumental ensembles, focused on small groups of performers (solo, duo, trio, quartet), this year’s Review concentrates – much more than was previously the case – on the composer and the work itself, and then on the soloist who instils life in that work. The fact that there are relatively fewer foreign composers than before indicates the existence of a filter, whose purpose is to secure that out of a large number of the scores received, only the very best are performed” (Brkljačić 2010).

“In regard to its continuity, the Review remains faithful to its original concept, which is to gather our best composers and present their best pieces” (Brkljačić 2011).

The main novelty of the twenty-first edition of the festival, held in 2012, was the introduction of a new resident ensemble for new music, *Gradilište* [Construction Site], founded by Neda Hofman-Sretenović and Srđan Sretenović – the daughter and son-in-law of Srđan Hofman and Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman. This novelty did little to obscure “the complete absence of foreign performers and ensembles” (Miladinović Prica 2012: 222). The critic Ivana Miladinović Prica also observed “the conspicuous absence of the mature post-modernist poetics of Serbian authors” (ibid.), thus, strongly suggesting that the Review was no longer relevant or stimulating to the established composers, but only to the younger and middle generations.

Despite the efforts of the Composers Association of Serbia and Ivan Brkljačić, it was not long until the Review received another nearly fatal blow in 2014, when the organisers of the Festival went into an ‘open war’ with the Ministry of Culture, i.e. the minister Ivan Tasovac (who, be it said in passing, was a promising pianist in his youth).<sup>16</sup> Namely, the festival failed to gain any

<sup>16</sup> The website of the Composers’ Association of Serbia displays a number of original docu-

financial support from the independent Committee appointed by the Ministry of Culture to select projects for funding based on an open call. The Composers Association of Serbia tried to mobilise the cultural establishment, which initiated the polemic in the daily newspaper *Politika* in March 2014. The most ‘notorious’ was the article penned by Aleksandra Anja Đorđević (Trišić et. al 2014), a renowned freelance composer and member of the Committee of the Ministry, who tried to justify this decision based on the Committee’s dissatisfaction with the proposed concept of the festival. The Committee apparently saw it as yet another retrospective – this time of all works by Serbian composers who had received the *Stevan Mokranjac* Award. From the Association’s point of view, it seemed logical that in the year of the centenary of Stevan Mokranjac’s death they would centre the Review around the recognition which bears the name of the ‘father’ of Serbian art music, and which had been established twenty years earlier by the Composers’ Association of Serbia with the financial support of the Ministry of Culture.<sup>17</sup> However, this supposedly ‘fail-safe’ approach to programming did not fare well with the Committee, who, according to Đorđević, felt that the Review was simply not contemporary (or not relevant) enough:

“Are you certain that the Review is the only place where we have an overview of the contemporary creation?! I am not, and I know why. Academic [music] is not the only contemporary music! [...] what about the festivals Ring Ring, Interzone, Resonate, etc.? These festivals deal with contemporary music in a much more innovative way.

Did our contemporary composers establish themselves thanks to the Review, or are the ‘roads to success’ entirely different?

I say that they are different” (ibid.).

Đorđević’s criticism of the inherent *academism* of the Review as its greatest weakness does not seem unjust. It must be said that the *Stevan Mokranjac* Award recognises only the works of *academic* composers from Serbia; also, the inquest into the recipients of this award reveals that there were multiple winners among the most prominent members of the festival’s governing bodies (the same can be said of the awards which were presented in the first decade of the Review, until 1998). In any case, the Composers’ Association of Serbia received many letters of support written by prominent Serbian and foreign composers and their associations, as well as the performers and ensembles who had had a long history of collaboration with the Review. Some of the commentators directed their criticism at the Minister Tasovac himself; for example, the doyen of Serbian avant-garde music Vladan Radovanović was directly critical of the Minister Tasovac (ibid.),

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ments related to this polemic, including the letters of support of Serbian and foreign individuals and institutions, several articles published in the media, etc. The polemic is entitled “This year’s Review written off by the Ministry of Culture” (Trišić et. al 2014).

17 Anja Đorđević was also the recipient of the *Stevan Mokranjac* Award in 2003, for her chamber opera *Narcis i Ebo* [Narcissus and Echo]. This piece was indeed included in the proposed programme of the Review, but only as a reproduction from a DVD (as well as the other two operas which had received the award: *Zora D.* by Isidora Žebeljan and *Mileva* by Aleksandra Vrebalov).

‘adding oil to the fire’<sup>18</sup>, but there were also more pragmatic ones such as Dušan Bavdek, the composer and influential cultural worker from Slovenia, who observed that:

“As a consequence of the economic crisis in several European countries, we are dealing with great difficulty with the budget cuts intended for cultural projects. However, to cut entirely the support to a festival such as the Review of Composers is beyond my comprehension. Why did the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia estimate that the festival which has successfully and efficiently served its mission, which has established its audience and a solid international reputation, does not deserve any support? Why close one of its important cultural windows into the world? I believe that the said decision, which may have as a consequence the end of the festival, is tragically short-sighted and damaging” (ibid.).

Even more illustrative is the comparison made by the members of the Composers’ Association of (North) Macedonia (SOCOM), another former Yugoslav country which is still dealing with the postsocialist transition. They noted that the Macedonian president was the patron of the Review’s Macedonian ‘equivalent’ – the Days of Macedonian Music – and that their festival was financed for the most part by the Macedonian Ministry of Culture. They continued:

“Even in economically stronger countries and the most developed cultural environments, the form of music creativity which is presented by the Review of Composers, Days of Macedonian Music, Warsaw Autumn, Gaudeamus and many other festivals across Europe and the world necessitates the country’s support.

Withdrawal of this support does not reflect only the lack of basic sensitivity for the importance of a particular segment of music culture without which a cultural map of a certain people would not be complete, but it also has as a consequence crippling not only of the present, but also of the future of the same people” (ibid.).

These international letters of support actually highlighted the perception of the Review’s profile, of its *differentia specifica* which was, apparently, equally well perceptible from abroad as well as in the country: as a *festival of a profession* it has clearly established itself both domestically and internationally; yet, beyond the profession, it has apparently failed to prove its relevance for Serbian culture and society in general.

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18 Interestingly, the Ministry of Culture did allocate funds for the *Stevan Mokranjac* Award in 2014 – awarded to none other than Vladan Radovanović, for his piece *Sideral*.

## EPILOGUE

The Review of Composers and its founder have so far proven their persistency, and the festival has continued with its annual editions. Ivan Brkljačić co-selected the twenty-third Review (in 2015) with the composer and musicologist Branka Popović, who has subsequently taken over as the selector of the festival programme. Stepping away from Brkljačić's more or less successful attempts to 'solidify' the programme concept of the festival, Popović has opted for a much vaguer and less defined content, and her 'opening addresses' reflect this rather 'withdrawn' curatorial stance. It can be observed that the authors of recent critical overviews, belonging to the youngest generation of Serbian musicologists, demonstrate the same lack of concern for the programme concept, accepting the eclectic plurality of the Review's yearly editions as a 'given' and apparently being more interested in 'quantitative' than 'qualitative' aspects of the festival:

"Overall, the 27<sup>th</sup> International Review of Composers can be considered a successful one thanks to its repertoire, which was comprised from pieces written by composers of diverse generations and stylistic orientations, allowing the Belgrade audience to hear the latest achievements of Serbian and foreign contemporary music" (Spaić 2018: 100).

However, certain more 'seasoned' music writers such as Smiljka Isaković, notorious for her unapologetic style and quarrelsome tone, observed that the Review has become increasingly – or perhaps that *it has always been* – a 'family affair,' i.e. a festival of a small, privileged 'clique' of composers who have, for years, benefited from various opportunities presented to them thanks to their personal and political influence (Isaković 2018).<sup>19</sup>

If we now reassess the entire history of the International Review of Composers, it can be segmented into three periods. The first one, dubbed 'the war years' (1992–2000), introduced the Review as a national festival, both in the sense of showcasing national art music production, and in relying on the support of the national funding bodies. Due to the fact that, at the time, Serbia was not an independent country, but still a part of the confederal union with Montenegro (Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), the Review (rightfully?) aspired to the status of a successor of the earlier Yugoslav festival in Opatija. Yet, even at the moment of its inception, the Review missed the first chance to establish itself either as a comprehensive overview of the entire recent (Serbian, Yugoslav) production, or as a relevant European festival, opting instead for a 'hybrid' concept – neither here nor there.

The second 'transitional' phase (2001–2006) coincided with the onset of the economic transition in the post-Milošević Serbia (Yugoslavia), but also set the stage for the first major crisis of the festival, and its second missed chance. Namely, despite the initial sweep and support in 2001, the Review did

<sup>19</sup> The 'tacit knowledge' of close familial ties between a number of renowned Serbian academic composers and musicologists has been humorously 're-enacted' in the text written by Jelena Janković-Beguš and devoted to the study of her identical twin sister Ivana Medić's musicological and performing practice (cf. Janković-Beguš 2016).



not succeed in becoming a festival relevant for the broader public, failing to develop a new audience, whether local or international. This was mainly due to its restrictive and insufficiently attractive concept, but also due to the fact that some of its key protagonists (Stefanović, Hofman, Veselinović-Hofman and Kotevska) spent those decisive years abroad; and, in the case of Stefanović, they also put their professional and political experience and influence in the service of another, 'more important' festival – BEMUS.

The third, 'stagnant' phase (from 2007 to the present) has witnessed some attempts at rejuvenating the Review; yet these efforts were undermined by a progressive loss of support, first from the City of Belgrade (from 2009 onwards), and then also from the Ministry of Culture (2014), resulting in the second, almost fatal crisis. Although the organisers managed to overcome the challenges (and even regain the support of the Ministry of Culture), the Review missed yet another chance to establish itself as anything but *the festival of the profession* of academic composers. While Ivan Brkljačić, during his tenure as a selector (2007–2015), at least tried to envision certain main themes for annual editions of the festival that he supervised, his successor Branka Popović seems to have accepted the 'mixed-bag' concept of the Review as a given. Unless some major changes are introduced in the near future, it is likely that the International Review of Composers will continue to survive as a mere festival of the profession, without aspirations to catch up with the Zagreb Biennale, or any other European festivals that it had initially aimed to emulate – or even surpass.

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