

Shostakovich-Syndrome

**The Burdened Memories of Central European
Societies in the 20th Century**

Impressum

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Ivana Medić

Playing Catch-Up: Serbian Art Music against the Odds¹

This essay aims to answer the main question that this book deals with – namely, to what extent has contemporary culture been determined by multiple changes of identity forced against the will of the societies of the Central European region over the past century. I will focus on the example of Serbia, one of the countries which experienced a belated development of its cultural and, more specifically, musical life, due to unfavourable political circumstances. Ever since its modern-era (re)birth in the mid-nineteenth century, Serbian art music has been playing “catch-up” with the rest of Europe. At the same time, the country itself has undergone multiple changes of its borders, names, (con)federal organisations, constitutions and dominant ideologies, not to mention multiple wars, which have inevitably affected the development of Serbian musical life and its institutions. Due to the fact that this development was uneven, often interrupted by wars or stifled by political intervention, many composers suffered from the so-called “Shostakovich syndrome”. As defined by Jeff Simon, this phenomenon applies to composers from non-Western European countries, whose output was “too avant-garde for their native lands, but not advanced enough for the West”.² Shostakovich himself was a victim of the ideological pressures and prejudices that accompanied the post-WWII global divide. As observed by Gerard McBurney;

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“Any Western European like myself, brought up within the highbrow aesthetic consensus of the cold war period, will remember their teachers and mentors dismissing Shostakovich as more or less worthless. [...] Many thought him far worse than mediocre, angrily deriding him as a dreary and bombastic court-bard to Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev, a time-server, a purveyor of cheap and diluted film-music masquerading as art. It is extraordinary how vitriolic such discussions could become...”³

¹ This research was conducted within the scientific-research organisation The Institute of Musicology, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, supported by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia (RS-200176).

² SIMON, Jeff: *In Search of Poland's Musical Royalty* = *Buffalo News*, 11 May 1990, https://buffalo-news.com/news/in-search-of-polands-musical-royalty/article_9c9af9e5-7ad7-5cf2-b9f1-92274e382ce6.html (accessed on 5 January 2021).

³ MCBURNEY, Gerard: *In From the Cold* = *The Guardian – Classical Music*, 14 January 2006, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/jan/14/classicalmusicandopera> (accessed on 5 January 2021).

If such contempt was reserved for Shostakovich, one of the most remarkable art music composers of the twentieth century, was there any hope for artists coming from a small musical culture that had long been divided between the empires and whose protagonists faced countless obstacles? Furthermore, Serbian artists were often forced to choose between adhering to the European trends of that time (inevitably as mere followers or epigones, rather than frontrunners) and writing music that would satisfy the too-slowly developing cultural needs of their own society. As I aim to show, this situation affected both the composers who were educated outside of Serbia, in one of the large European centres of that time, and those who received their education domestically.

In the discussion that follows I will overview the lives and careers of several remarkable protagonists of Serbian musical culture from the past hundred years, whilst also highlighting the circumstances in which they worked and how they all ended up suffering from the “Shostakovich syndrome” to various degrees.

The first outstanding figure from the period under scrutiny is Milenko Paunović (1889–1924), the composer of the first Serbian musical drama, whose life was tragically cut short at the age of 35. Paunović was born in Újszentiván, a village in Csongrád County which had a considerable Serbian minority. Paunović was educated (1900–1908) in the Serbian Grammar School in Novi Sad (at that time the city was still a part of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy), where he had his first violin lessons. He completed his violin studies at the Conservatory in Prague in 1909, and subsequently enrolled at the Conservatory in Leipzig (1909–1911), where he studied composition under the supervision of Max Reger. He simultaneously attended Hugo Riemann’s classes at the University of Leipzig. After completing his studies he worked in Ruma, Novi Sad, Jagodina and Belgrade, before he was drafted into the army and sent to the front line at Thessalonica. After the war he became a conductor for the Orchestra of the Royal Guard and an officer of the Ministry of the Military, where he worked on improving the financial status of army musicians. According to Biljana Milanović, Paunović’s most important works include two musical dramas (*Divina tragoedia*, 1912 and *Čengić-aga*, 1923) and two *Yugoslav symphonies* (1914–1920; 1924).⁴ He also composed a number of instrumental and incidental scores, including *The Wedding March* dedicated to King Alexander Karadordević. His literary output consists of seven dramas (*People from Sentivan*,

⁴ MILANOVIĆ, Biljana: *Serbian Musical Theatre from the Mid-19th Century until World War II and Features of the Serbian Symphony in the First Half of the 20th Century* = ROMANOU, K. (ed.): *Serbian and Greek Art Music. A Patch to Western Music History*, Bristol-Chicago, Intellect Books & University of Chicago Press, 2009, 15–32.; 55–67.

1908; *Divina tragoedia*, 1910; *Coastal People*, 1911; *Devil's Tragedy*, 1912; *Model*, 1917; *Čengić-aga*, 1918; *Court of Srdja Zlopogledja*, 1919), two of which were adapted as librettos for his musical dramas, following Richard Wagner's model. As discussed by Biljana Milanović, Paunović's musical dramas and symphonies "mark a sudden professional and creative leap in relation to previous compositional practice in Serbian music".⁵ Moreover, Milanović illustrates that Paunović's first musical drama, the single-act *Divina tragoedia*, incorporated a blasphemous treatment of Christ's resurrection, thus showcasing a specific avant-garde dimension.⁶ On the other hand, Paunović wrote two symphonies, at a time when Serbian symphonic tradition was virtually non-existent; hence, he did not have any role models locally, and the chances of these works being performed and finding enthusiastic audiences were slim to none – considering the fact that the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra was only established in 1923. Both Paunović's symphonies were related to the topics linked to the Yugoslav ideology, which was particularly important after the end of the Great War, when the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) was founded. Thus, as observed by Milanović, "the genre stands as a signifier of current national identity construction in the context of the newly formed state".⁷ In spite of Paunović's pioneering work in the domains of both symphonic and operatic music in the Serbia of that time, his most important works have remained unperformed until the present day. While his late Romantic style, nurtured by Max Reger, was somewhat belated in European coordinates, it was still too advanced for the local context. Namely, at the time when his symphonies and musical dramas, scored for the exuberant orchestra of Wagnerian proportions, were written, Serbian musical culture did not possess the institutional infrastructure and the protagonists necessary for its production and performance. The composer's premature death certainly contributed to his subsequent neglect; and it is only in the last two decades that his works have been rediscovered and have become subjects of scholarly study.

⁵ MILANOVIĆ, Biljana: *Umetnost Milenka Paunovića od identifikacije sa Vagnerovim dostignućima do sopstvenog umetničkog izraza* (The Art of Milenko Paunović from the Identification with Wagner's Achievements to His Own Creative Expression) = MARINKOVIĆ, Sonja (ed.): *Wagner's Writing "Opera and Drama" = Today*, Novi Sad, Matica srpska, 2006, 137–146.

⁶ MILANOVIĆ, Biljana: *Kontekstualizacija ranog modernizma u srpskoj muzici na primeru dva ostvarenja iz 1912. "godine"* (Contextualization of Early Modernism in Serbian music: Case Studies of Two Works from 1912) *Muzikologija/Musicology* 6, 2006, 251–266.

⁷ MILANOVIĆ, Biljana: *Recepcija "Prve jugoslovenske simfonije" Milenka Paunovića (1889–1924)* (Reception of the *First Yugoslav Symphony* by Milenko Paunović [1889–1924]) = PERKOVIĆ-RADAK, Ivana – STOJANOVIĆ-NOVIČIĆ, Dragana – LAJIĆ-MIHAILOVIĆ, Danka (eds.): *History and Mystery of Music*. Belgrade, Faculty of Music, 337–346.

Josip (Štolcer) Slavenski (1896–1955) was a highly original figure in the Serbian and Yugoslav interwar music scene, which was undergoing a slow process of modernization. In his comprehensive investigation of music in the Balkans, Jim Samson describes Slavenski as “one of a very small handful of truly major composers from South East Europe in the first half of the twentieth century”;⁸ moreover, he was the only Belgrade-based composer who had an exclusive contract with the publishing house Schott of Mainz.

Slavenski was born Josip Štolcer into a working class family from the small town of Čakovec, in the region of Međimurje (present-day Croatia), which was then under Hungarian rule. While both his parents were amateur musicians, Josip did not receive any musical lessons until he was 16 years old, and he was denied entry to the Music School of the Croatian Music Institute in Varaždin, due to his humble background (his father was a baker, his mother a maid) and a lack of formal training.⁹ However, thanks to the support of private patrons, in 1913 the young autodidact composer was admitted to the Budapest Conservatory, where his teachers included Zoltán Kodály, Albert Siklós, and Béla Bartók. His studies were interrupted in 1916 when he was drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army. After the war ended, he returned to his native Međimurje; this region became a part of the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Whilst working at his father’s bakery in Čakovec, Josip aspired to continue his musical education, and in 1920, again thanks to the support of private sponsors, he went to study with Vitezslav Novak at the Prague Conservatory. Upon the completion of his studies in 1923 he returned to Croatia and taught for a year at the Zagreb Music Academy. This is also the time when he adopted an alias surname Slavenski [meaning Slavic], avoiding his family surname Štolcer [Stoltzer], because he did not want other people to think that he was a German;¹⁰ he legally changed his surname in 1932. However, soon after coming to Zagreb, the free-spirited Slavenski clashed with the conservative administrative director of the Croatian Music Institute, Vjekoslav Rosenberg-Ružič – the same man who had refused to admit him to the Varaždin music school – and the young composer was dismissed from his teaching post in 1924. He promptly moved to Belgrade, the capital city of the new Kingdom, and remained there for the rest of his life,

⁸ SAMSON, Jim: *Music in the Balkans*. Leiden, Brill, 2013, 390.

⁹ HRUSTEK-SOBOČAN, Maša: *Josip Štolcer Slavenski – Čakovečki skladateljski genij s beogradskom adresom i suvjetskim glasom* (Josip Štolcer Slavenski – A genius composer from Čakovec, with Belgrade address and worldwide reputation) = MEDIĆ, Ivana (ed.): *Josip Štolcer Slavenski (1896–1955). Povodom 120. godišnjice kompozitorovog rođenja*. Belgrade, Institute of Musicology SASA, 2017, 30.

¹⁰ Ibid, 34.

teaching at Belgrade music schools and then at the Music Academy (which itself was only established in 1937).

Slavenski first gained international recognition in 1924, when his First String Quartet was successfully performed at the Donaueschingen Festival; this led to a contract with Schott. Slavenski then produced a series of outstanding orchestral and chamber works, most notably the symphonies *Balkanophonía* (1927) and *Religiophonía [Symphony of the Orient]* (1934), which were performed all over Europe and the USA by the most prominent conductors and orchestras of that time. However, in Belgrade, his increasingly experimental and unconventional works such as *Prasymphony*, a symphonic vision of the creation of the universe (the score of which has unfortunately been lost), or *Heliophony*, a cosmic vision for a mixed choir, electronic instruments and symphonic orchestra (of which only a single movement, *Chaos*, has been completed), as well as *Music in the Natural Tone System* for the Bosanquet enharmonium with 53 tones in an octave, four trautioniums and timpani, were met with increasing misunderstanding and hostility and remained unperformed. As an artist, Slavenski was developing at a much faster pace than the culture in which he lived and worked; he had no predecessors in Yugoslav music, and very few of his students can be regarded as his successors – most notably Ludmila Frajt (1919–2000),¹¹ herself a somewhat obscure figure, although she was a descendant of a notable Czech musical family which had lived in Belgrade since the turn of the twentieth century. In Frajt's case, it is likely that the fact that she was only the second academically educated female composer in Serbia played a crucial role in the general neglect of her oeuvre.¹²

Slavenski was also an adherent of the ideas of the so-called “Zenitist” movement in Serbian avant-garde art and theory of the 1920s and 1930s, led by the Micić brothers (Ljubomir and Branko). Influenced by their ideas, Slavenski came to believe that the people of the Balkans had a special role to play in the “rebirth” of the decadent, stale European culture and that a Balkan-born “barbarogenius” (a variant of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Übermensch*) would lead this artistic and cultural revolution.¹³ Such ideas were met with bafflement in the musicological and educational circles of that time.

¹¹ On the professional relationship between Josip Slavenski and Ludmila Frajt, see: MEDIĆ, Ivana: *Posvete Josipu Slavenskom [Dedications to Josip Slavenski]* = ŽIVKOVIĆ, Mirjana (ed.): *Josip Slavenski i njegovo doba [Josip Slavenski and his Time]*, Belgrade, Faculty of Music / Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts /Serbian Composers/ Association, 2007, 121–129.

¹² See MEDIĆ, Ivana: *Ludmila Frajt – druga srpska kompozitorka [Ludmila Frajt – The Other Serbian Female Composer]*, *Sveske* 77, 2005, 208–214.

¹³ On Slavenski's connection with the Zenitist movement and his concept of “barbarogenius” see: Sanja Grujić, “Veze Josipa Slavenskog sa zenitističkim pokretom dvadesetih godina” [Josip Slavenski's ties with the Zenitist movement in the 1920s], *Međimurje – časopis za društvena pitanja i kulturu* 4, 1983, 54.

Slavenski's music became better known and more frequently performed only after his death; by that time, it was already too late for it to exercise a direct influence upon Yugoslav composers. On the other hand, his international career suffered an irreparable blow with the rise of Nazism in Europe, when his works such as *Religiophonia* (which contains movements dedicated to various religions and peoples, including *Jews [Jevreji]* as the second movement of the symphony) and others, which showcased his affinity for Balkan folklore and mythology, were banned, and his contract with the publishing house terminated.

48 — Vojislav Vučković (1910–1942) is another remarkable figure of an artist born in the wrong place at the wrong time, whose political activities led to his premature and tragic demise. He was a composer, conductor and one of the first musicologists in Serbia who wrote from a Marxist standpoint. Vučković studied at the Prague Conservatory and the Meister School with acclaimed professors of that time: Josef Suk and Alois Hába (composition), Nikolai Malko (conducting), Zdenek Neyedli (musicology) and others. In Prague, Vučković was a member of the peer group of Serbian music students, the so-called “Prague group”, which included Predrag Milošević (1904–1987), Dragutin Čolić (1907–1987), Ljubica Marić (1909–2003), Stanojlo Rajičić (1910–2000) and Milan Ristić (1908–1982). As a young man Vučković became infatuated with the ideas of the revolutionary communist youth, and he joined the Yugoslav Communist Party in 1933. Vučković defended his PhD at the Karlovy University in Prague with a dissertation “Music as a Means of Propaganda” in 1934. After the invasion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia by the Nazis and their allies in April 1941, he joined the National Liberation Movement. Vučković and his Jewish wife Fani Politeo were arrested in December 1942 by the Special Police for their illegal activities and tortured to death.

During his career, which only spanned about a decade, Vučković wrote one ballet, three symphonies, three symphonic poems and several chamber pieces. His most famous work is a symphonic poem *Burevestnik [Stormy Petrel]* after Maxim Gorky, dealing with the revolutionary theme. Whilst studying in Prague, Vučković and his peer group discovered expressionism, atonality, athetmaticism, quarter-tone music and other modernist and avant-garde tendencies of that time. Vučković's works written during his studies in Prague exhibit the tendencies of the left-wing of European interwar modernism, characterized by a predominantly expressionist, atonal, anti-romantic character, mostly influenced by Arnold Schönberg's school and Hába's own experiments, but also by Paul Hindemith's “objectivist” neoclassicism. At that point Vučković believed that leftist ideology was best expressed by the most advanced modernist art.

However, upon his return to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Vučković realized that it would be impossible to win over listeners to his left-wing beliefs if he

continued to write hermetic, radical works, which would be neither understood nor accepted in a country with a still underdeveloped musical culture. As pointed out by Katarina Tomašević, the output of the Prague Group marked the first time that Serbian and Yugoslav music had caught up with modernist developments in Europe; however, when these composers returned to Belgrade with portfolios of modernist works, they were greeted with a chorus of hostility from audiences and performers alike.¹⁴ Vučković's artistic ideology then took a U-turn, and he became one of the early advocates of socialist realism in Yugoslav music, as exhibited in the symphonic poem *Ozareni put* [*Enlightened Road*]. Vučković's turnover was not an isolated phenomenon, as noted by Jim Samson:

"The obvious lack of comprehension must have been a motivating factor in the retreat from modernism that became apparent in the late 1930s. But the wider climate of ideas was also shifting during these years. [...] there was a treacherous course to steer between the Scylla and Charybdis of the Soviet Union and the German Reich [...] A new conformity began to appear in Yugoslavia, a 'back to the roots' movement that responded to Soviet aesthetics, though it was already in place before 1945 and thus before it could be officially prescribed by the Communist state."¹⁵

Nevertheless, Vučković's case is the most poignant one, because he was the most outspoken and politically active member of the Prague Group, but also because he was the only group member who perished during the war and did not live to see the establishment of the "second", communist Yugoslavia after the end of WWII.

The final illustrative example is that of Vladan Radovanović (born in 1932), the only consistently avant-garde Serbian composer in the second half of the twentieth century, who occupies a unique position in our history of music. Born in Belgrade in 1932, Radovanović is the most erudite Serbian composer and multimedia artist of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He is the sole Serbian composer who, as asserted by Jim Samson, "committed himself to a remarkably radical position right from the start".¹⁶ As I wrote in an article of 2019 dedicated to Radovanović:

"His prolific career has spanned almost seven decades, during which he has worked in the realms of instrumental, vocal-instrumental and electro-acoustic music, metamusic, visual and tactile arts, artful projects, literature, recordings

¹⁴ TOMAŠEVIĆ, Katarina: *Conflict and Dialogue of the Old and the New in Serbian Music between the Two World Wars* = CHEW, Geoffrey (ed.), *New Music in the 'New' Europe 1918-1938: Ideology, Theory and Practice*. Prague, Koniasch Latin Press, 2007, 162-171.

¹⁵ SAMSON: *Music in the Balkans*, 367.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 488.

and drawings of his dreams, polymedial and vocovisual projects, as well as art theory. The key features of Radovanović's art are: first of all, his self-proclaimed goal to express himself by doing what no one else has done before, thus embodying the avant-garde urge for innovation and originality; second, his autoreflexivity and a constant dialogue with himself, as exhibited both in his individual artistic and theoretical works and in their interrelations within his entire output; and finally, an incredible complexity and wealth of symbolism in his music, writings and multimedia works – seemingly abstract, yet embroidered with Radovanović's immense erudition and a quirky sense of verbal and visual humour.¹⁷

It is remarkable that Radovanović developed his interdisciplinary avant-garde artistic identity in the conservative environment of post-WWII Serbia. As we have seen, the composers of the "Prague group" failed to establish an avant-garde musical scene upon their return to Belgrade in the mid-1930s, due to the general underdevelopment of Serbian musical life and its institutions. As observed by Melita Milin, "The negation of tradition, which is one of [avant-garde's] main positions, [...] was too radical for a young musical culture which had been trying to establish its own tradition during the last century with a lot of enthusiasm and effort".¹⁸ After the war ended, the doctrine of socialist realism became – albeit only for a brief period of time – the official cultural norm in the newly established Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (later Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia). Although Yugoslav artists escaped the harsh denunciations that their peers in the countries of the Eastern Bloc were subjected to, the composers were still expected to write accessible, tonal music, loosely based upon "national" musical premises. The late 1940s and early 1950s saw the emergence of the first generation of composers educated at the Belgrade Music Academy (nowadays Faculty of Music), which had only been established in 1937. Radovanović used the term *academic classicism* in his writings to describe the rigid canon that the young composers were subjected to.¹⁹ The dogma of socialist realism was abandoned as soon as Yugoslavia parted ways with the USSR and Eastern Bloc in 1948, after which this simplified neoclassicism easily transformed into slightly more advanced *moderated modernism*.²⁰

¹⁷ MEDIĆ, Ivana: *The Impossible Avant-garde of Vladan Radovanović* = *Musicological Annual*, 2019, 55/1., 157–176.

¹⁸ MILIN, Melita: *Tradicionalno i novo u srpskoj muzici posle Drugog svetskog rata (1945–1965)* (Beograd: Muzikološki institut SANU, 1998), 84.

¹⁹ See MEDIĆ: *op. cit.* (2019), 161–162.

²⁰ On various implications of moderated modernism in Serbian post-WWII music and musicology, see: MEDIĆ, Ivana: *The Ideology of Moderated Modernism in Serbian Music and Musicology* = *Muzikologija/ Musicology* 7, 2007, 279–294; MEDIĆ, Ivana: *In the Orbit of Shostakovich: Vasilije Mokranjac's Symphonies* = *Music and Society in Eastern Europe* 8, 2013, 1–22.

In post-war Yugoslavia, Radovanović's truly innovative oeuvre was at complete odds with the surrounding social and cultural environment in a country that did not yet possess the institutional or discursive tools necessary to acknowledge and validate his poetics; moreover, his avant-garde output was "too abstract" and could not express the desired socialist ideological values. On the other hand, having spent his entire career in a country that was on the "wrong" side of the centre-periphery divide in post-WWII Europe, Radovanović could not make his mark in a way that the composers and other artists who lived and worked in the great European centres did.²¹ However, these are not the only reasons why his avant-garde remained unrecognised, invisible and irrelevant both in the local and global contexts. As observed by Serbian philosopher Milorad Belančić:

"In Vladan Radovanović's oeuvre one finds some entirely unexpected, never-before-seen artistic innovation, not only in local, but in wider, European and global coordinates (*visions, voco-visual, tactile art, minimalist music, meta-music* etc.) In the 1950s their originality must have been so surprising, that they could not be understood, therefore they were not taken seriously. These works were 'untimely', 'un-contemporary' in Nietzschean sense, because they presented such an unforeseen broadening of an artistic field. His avant-garde appeared *too early*, both in the local and global artistic scenes. Yet, this *undestined* avant-garde (or: undestined *signpost*) played a truly liberating role, although it was completely confusing and incomprehensible for the conventional understanding of art."²²

In other words, as I discussed previously, "Radovanović's avant-garde was so *ahead* of its time and place, that it could not immediately anticipate, or precede any artistic movement or school, thus remaining isolated, 'infertile', without direct successors, only to be retroactively recognised as a forerunner of many artistic movements that appeared much later."²³

Since the late 1950s, Yugoslav composers and critics started to have regular contacts with the West, and it was chiefly after the Biennial of Contemporary Music was founded in Zagreb in 1961 that the composers were encouraged to assimilate at least some of the latest avant-garde techniques; however, by that time, Radovanović had already made far more advanced breakthroughs, including proto-minimalist works, *meta-musical projects, hyperpolyphony, synthetic art* etc. All of these innovations are yet to be recognized by writers of global histories of music. Although Radovanović is still alive (he is 88 years old),

²¹ MEDIĆ: *op. cit.* (2019), 160.

²² BELANČIĆ: *Jedan osobeni pluralizam*, 192.

²³ MEDIĆ: *op. cit.* (2019), 160.

it is very unlikely that his oeuvre will receive international recognition during his lifetime. In his case, the “Shostakovich syndrome” has taken an unexpected twist because, whilst his creations were definitely too avant-garde in the local, Serbian and Yugoslav context, we can not say that they were “not sufficiently advanced for the West”; rather, it was the overall “invisibility” of the peripheral Yugoslav (and within it, Serbian) art and the lack of access to Western art markets, galleries and festivals that caused the neglect of Radovanović’s oeuvre. While Yugoslavia did not belong to the Eastern bloc, it was still a peripheral, communist country, thus its artists inevitably suffered from ideological prejudices during the decades of the Cold War.

All of the composers discussed in this brief overview might have made a greater impact on European and global art music scenes, had they lived in countries with well-developed music institutions and advanced cultural infrastructure. However, having lived in a country which suffered a belated development of its musical life, which was often interrupted by wars and abrupt changes of political circumstances, they constantly had to choose between two diametrically opposed artistic positions: either trying to “catch up” with European trends and novelties, or adapting to the requirements of their cultural environment (which itself was constantly changing, and sometimes drastically). Obviously, their careers and artistic identities suffered in the process, and the question of “what might have been if...” remains looming.