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Traditional Vocal Music as a Reference in Contemporary Serbian Art Song*

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Abstract

The article examines the relation between traditional vocal music and contemporary compositional poetics in Serbian art song, created in the last two decades. The special relationship between the “eastern” Balkans inheritance and “western” compositional practices which characterized Serbian music throughout the 20th century is considered in a contemporary, post-modern context and within a particular genre framework. The status of the reference itself, as well as of referential relationships, are examined through examples taken from three works: *Dve tužbalice* (1997) for soprano, viola and piano by Đuro Živković (1975), *Da su meni oči tvoje* (2008) for soprano, flute and piano by Ivan Brkljačić (1977) and *Rukoveti* (2000) for soprano and orchestra by Isidora Žebeljan (1967).

Keywords

Art song, traditional vocal music, reference, intertextuality, postmodernism

From its very beginnings in Serbian music, art song was in a kind of collusion with the patterns of traditional vocal music because of the nature of its genre field. That is why specific relations between eastern-Balkan heritage and western compositional practice have followed Serbian art song from its origins. Harmonizations of folk melodies by Kornelije Stanković (1831–1865)² represented, even by the middle of the 19th century, a joining together of traditional vocal music and the classical language of western harmony. Again, a characteristic Balkan genre of love song of oriental origin (*sevdalinka*) was already interwoven in early songs by Josif Marinković (1851–1931)³, built on the complex influences of western European variants of the genre and vocal styles: from German Lieder to Italian *bel canto*. However, a notable intertwining of these two languages/idioms was introduced by a generation of composers of art song who were active at the

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² The most important of Stanković's harmonizations of folk tunes for voice and piano are *Srbske narodne pesme* (*Serbian Folk Songs*), published in Vienna in 1859.

³ Marinković's earliest dated song is from 1880.

beginning of the 20th century – the generation of Miloje Milojević (1884–1946) and Petar Konjović (1883–1970) – who joined the texts of Serbian folk poetry, as well as melodies of traditional music or their elements, characteristic patterns, with the contemporary tendencies of western-European music: impressionistic and expressionistic. The dialogue and bond between two spheres of European creativity, the eastern and western ones, as a dialogue of heritage and contemporary currents of musical expression, followed Serbian art song throughout the 20th century.⁴ Although one can say that traditional vocal music was somewhat pushed aside in representative modernistic renderings of the genre, it nevertheless remained present. However, the last decades of the 20th century, especially the 1990s and postmodern stylistic ambience, naturally signified a new turning towards the vocal heritage, bringing a new stylistic and aesthetic quality to the bond of the two language spheres; all the more because the authors had at their disposal, in equal measure, the heritage hinterland of national music, on the one hand, and the holistic artistic experience of musical modernism, on the other hand. That is why the bonds which are discussed here, in the context of musical postmodernism, are, in fact, actualized as specific relations between different discursive models, equally traditional and contemporary, eastern and western, all of which, are historic. This change of status of the traditional vocal idiom in contemporary Serbian art song, in which it becomes a reference actualizing referential relations from the perspective of a “foreign”, “other” context, has provided Serbian art song with quite new expressive possibilities.

In the works of contemporary authors, twofold relationship with the older layers of Serbian music is crystallized, reflecting a duality of modern and postmodern ways of musical thinking. On the one hand, this relationship is established in a modernistic way, turning, as a rule, to ‘deeper’ tradition, primarily to folklore patterns which support the ritual or magical functions of music. In that case, its ‘evoked’ elements have a structural status within the work, a consequence of architextual bonds established in distant eras of musical history. On the other hand, when the folklore patterns from the recent past are evoked, they appear, in a post-modern way, as intertexts, more precisely, like stylistic quotations, reaching a certain incongruity with the contemporary context and becoming exposed to ludic, i.e. ironic reassessment. Understandably, in contemporary Serbian art song one can see the borderline status of the reference itself, various kinds of referential relationships, as well as a different degree of “foreignness” of present discursive models, which are often joined with the reference to the artistic history of music itself.

⁴ See my studies (2007; 2008; 2014) about the development of Serbian art song during the late 19th and 20th centuries, as well as about its connections with different cultural and stylistic contexts.

These relations will be discussed separately with examples from three works: *Two Sad Songs (Dve tužbalice)*, 1997) for soprano, viola and piano by Đuro Živković (1975), *Had I but your eyes (Da su meni oči tvoje)*, 2008) for soprano, flute and piano by Ivan Brkljačić (1977) and *Song-Wreaths (Rukoveti)*, 1998–2000) for soprano and orchestra by Isidora Žebeljan (1967).

In the diptych *Two Sad Songs* by Đuro Živković for soprano, viola and piano, composed following folk lyrics, the tradition of singing accompanied with the *gusle* is incorporated in a specific way into the genre field of Lieder; namely, it is a dirge of Montenegrin provenance, the first example of such a compound in the history of Serbian art song. The relation with traditional vocal music is established as a generic one in such a way that folk reference acquires a structural status within the stylistic framework of musical modernism. At the same time, the generic connection is indexed solely by the title of the work indicating a folk genre. The basis of this procedure is derived from the fact that Živković's diptych is not exhausted in the evocation of a specific folk genre, its vocal and instrumental procedure, but it stylizes it in the way that the poetic procedure of representative modernism is derived from it, and then returned to it. This is achieved thanks to the presence of its architext, of similar genre, thematic, modal and formal characteristics: thematically, the diptych is articulated as a lamentation and cry; as a genre it is a mono-dramatic whole i.e. a musical-dramatic monologue; modally it is a confession; and, finally, regarding musical expression, it derives its impulse from the folk-like interval of the (predominantly minor) second in the melodic line (in the Viola part, Example 1), as a source of the comprehensive foundation of musical texture. The expressionistic quality of Živković's songs is especially indebted to the choice of soprano and to the treatment of vocal part itself, which provides these songs with high degree of affectivity and exteriorization of affective contents (affective tension, but not necessarily and not always so). The traditional layer is contained in voice and viola parts, which carry stylistic matrices of singing with the *gusle*, the melodic motion of the voice is in patterns with small ambitus, with characteristic embellishments and of strict syllabic character, doubled in the low register of the viola. Additionally, it is identified in solo appearances of the viola between greater wholes of voice parts. A *quasi*- folk *gusle* chant, i.e. folk reference, is, according to Jean-Marie Schaeffer (1999: 92–103) not imitated so that it would produce a simulation or deception (it is not in the key of Platonic *mimesis*), but it is re-instanced and recreated in the Aristotelian sense of the word, in the folk manner itself. That is why it does not represent, as Genette would say, a simple reduplication

of a generic model, but it elaborates on it, sufficiently so as not to be identical, but insufficiently so as not to abandon it; to transform it generically, securing a dynamic, historic aspect of a generic relation. In such status of reference lies the basis of its structural integration into a new context, and coherence, the balance of assimilating and assimilated milieus. This is accomplished by the fact that *quasi* popular singing, monotonous and monochromatic, ‘ostinato’ circling of sorrow in the “sacred” time, is almost imperceptibly and gradually transformed into an expressionistic recitative of monodic origin, into a live – and “profane” outpouring of utter anxiety, despair and pain, achieved in time. By retaining the characteristics of a folk melodic particle, and fully using its inner chromatic potential as well as rests between melopoetic wholes, the composer constructs an uneven, developed curve of tension by using so-to-speak micro-interventions: transpositions, complete or partial repetitions of the units, variations, ‘irregular’ breaking of the musical flow, or, on the other hand, by long ‘procrastinations’, also gradually intensifying affective amplitude. Such status of reference bridges not only the great time distance, but also the East-West divide. This bridging is convincingly achieved in the piano part, which, as a counter balance to perspective of real time, is realized from the beginning as a background, as a great ‘ostinato’, as a continuous murmur. When meeting the melodic voice of the viola, it, in micro-polyphonic relations in the manner of Ligeti, derives from half-tone impulse of the folk pattern, articulated as an immobile ‘noise’ of eternity – as an indeterminate sound equivalent of its secret ties with death (see Example 1).

The song *Had I but Your Eyes* for soprano, flute and piano by Ivan Brkljačić, indicates to an equal degree a different reference and change of status in the field of solo song. Here is, namely, the question of double referential relations: in parallel with urban vocal tradition (a “younger” folk layer) – a love song of oriental style with Bosnian-Herzegovinian origins – a reference in the song by Ivan Brkljačić is represented also by its artistic equivalent in a Serbian song from the beginning of the 20th century. It was composed after the same poetic text, a love poem by Jovan Ilić, which was, almost a century earlier, the textual basis for the homonymous song by Stanislav Binički.⁵ That is why Ivan Brkljačić reaches to both the poetic convention of romantic Lied and its sentimental variant in Serbian music in the first decades of the 20th century. In it we find one after another, general, pronounced features of the sentimental art song:

⁵ Published in the collection *Zejnabi*, Leipzig: Breitkopf&Härtel, s.a; Beograd: M. Stajić, s. a; and in the collection: *Spava moma, Po polju je kiša, Zejnabi*, Beograd: Geca Kon, 1924. All songs by Stanislav Binički were published in the third decade of the 20th century.

abrupt dynamic gradations, *rubatos* in tempo, chromatic descending or ascending movements of quasi-leading tones, long sustained tones on one syllable, and the texture of compact chords in the piano part. This concentration of stylistic constants of sentimental vocal lyricism also acquires, from time to time, the tone of an ‘oriental love song’ – primarily owing to the phonetic characteristics of the Serbian language, as well as the melismatic movement of voice on a descending augmented second. The quantity of marked, “surface elements” of evoked corpus, in Schaeffer’s terms (Schaeffer 1999), is here not a result of “reinstanced imitation”, but of constructing a *feintise*, a simulation, in such a way that the ontological status of hypertext is changed in its relation with hypotext, which subsequently appears as a non-structural element in a new context. However, the very quantity of these features, which, in Serbian art song of sentimental tone (to which also belongs art song of the so-called Belgrade school, i.e. Binički) suspended the primacy of an aesthetic function in favour of a social one, makes possible such a deflection in Brkljačić’s song, realized through ludic gestures, such as sudden *parlando* or the effect of repeated sounds on a single tone. Owing to this, a postmodern ironic distance towards evoked pattern and inter-textual segments is formed. This distance between context and reference is diminished, however, by western compositional poetics from the first decades of the 20th century, i.e. the poetics of French *mélodies*, which, strangely, coincides historically with Serbian art song by Binički and his contemporaries. Brkljačić’s song indicates the above-mentioned French genre corpus, relying on its characteristic features: harmonic solutions – constant multiple (mostly seventh-chord) third structures, a pronounced static quality of the flow with repetitive segments in piano and voice parts, trill effects in piano and flute, *arpeggios*, short as well as multiple *appogiaturas*, as well as elements which indicate the influence of jazz and other popular genres. In that way, owing to the similarity of affective tones of two stylistic fields indicated, their continuity and mutual assimilation are made possible, and their discursive difference is thus neutralized. The multiple referentiality of Brkljačić’s song (in which not even the actual context doesn’t escape the referential relation), from the perspective of French musical tradition, enables us to understand this composition as an *homage* to Serbian musical tradition, as an ironic, but not unfavourable view of it.

Song-Wreaths by Isidora Žebeljan, a cycle of five songs for soprano and symphony orchestra, treats the Serbian poetic and musical heritage in a special way, inspired by folk and urban poetry from Vojvodina dating from the end of the 18th and beginning of 19th centuries. Textual parts of songs: *A Cradle Song*; *A Rose-Tree I planted*; *All the Yawl Men*; *Whether a True Love, or a Joke*; *Oh*,

My Sweetie, Oh..., required evocation of the original musical milieu, so the composer resorted to imitation of stylistic patterns carrying this segment of Serbian folklore of a more recent tradition. This procedure is particularly relevant regarding the way of conceiving the voice part and its melodic direction and rhythmic configuration, which are, in their tonal framework, determined by characteristic folk, particularly cadence turns. However, this stylistic layer is placed within a language framework of musical modernism and joined with orchestral *biting*, dissonant harmonies in a generally atonal context. This harmonic context is joined with textural solutions, long rhythmic, pregnantly profiled Stravinskian ostinatos, which are bordered and mixed with repetitiveness of minimalist provenance. Embedded into a generally high tension level, naturally created by this procedure and supported by great dynamic ascents, they result in generally tense expressionistic discourse.

In the cycle of Isidora Žebeljan, as well as in Brkljačić's song, evoking the matrix of folk song acquires the meaning of stylistic quotation, i.e. the function of intertext. However, here, the stylistic scope between quoting and quoted milieu is far greater: urban poetry and expressionistic, tragic impulse, so that their mutual assimilation is *a priori* practically excluded, in the measure in which both stylistic fields retain their autonomy. This condition is then significantly spread into the discursive, i.e. narrative, plane of the work, owing to the procedure which Francoise Escal calls "enchassement" (embeddedness), rather than "enchainement" (stringing; Escal 1984: 106–107). This is particularly interesting in the synchronic axes of the work, as well as on its diachronic plane, where the two discursive flows are mutually related as "foreign" to each other. Lawrence Kramer speaks of this procedure in a postmodern context in terms of *other-voicedness* (Kramer 1990: 177 ff.). One could say that one currently dominant discourse is "dislocated" by another discursive voice. In the first song, after their synchronic presence, in the way that "crumbs" of modernistic expression are packed onto stylistic quotations of a folk melody, gradual abandoning of a *quasi*-folk song in favour of a developed, highly-strung, expressionistic recitative follows, increasingly covering the domain of high register. This change of discursive registers, or playing with level of their mutual dissimilarity/closeness, is reflected on the disposition of cycles and their dramaturgy, constructed into two lines which cross at the end. Namely, the beginning of the cycle is marked by a pronounced contrast, fixing two stylistic fields: songs of moderate tempo and lyrically coloured emotionality, as is the case with the previous one, and highly-strung, affectively distant Intermezzos, which affirm Stravinskian sound (the first diptych is *A Cradle song – Furioso*).

At the end of the cycle, however, this contrast is diminished, and the two expressive and discursive models are completely merged, in a two-sided assimilation in the last song. In it, the longing folk melodic *floculea* in: *Oh, My Sweetie, Oh*, in a wide range from the beginning to the end of the song, acquire the meaning of a scream, resulting in one ostinato *tour de force* of the orchestra, in an expressionistic as well as folkloric, tragic and transcendent meaning of Eros. Owing to this, the postmodern stylistic framework of *rukoveti* becomes highly functionalized semantically.

Overcoming spatial/geographic divides in eastern and western music, in the multiplicity of worlds of Serbian contemporary *Lieder*, and from the perspective of the current status of music, means, at the same time, overcoming divides on “past” and “present” music. Equality of discursive possibilities signifies, at the same time, equality of writing. Nowadays, Serbian *Lieder* are positioned, fundamentally, in the space between the (eastern) past, “torn” by time, and (western) historical writing.

Example 1. Đuro Živković, *Two Sad Songs*, I, bars 1–19

The musical score is arranged in three systems, each with a Viola (V-la) and Piano part. The tempo is marked *Larghetto* with a quarter note equal to 60 (♩ = 60). The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The score includes various dynamics such as *pp*, *mf*, *sf*, *ppp cresc.*, *sf*, *pp*, *ppp*, *sempre secco*, and *come trillo*. Performance instructions include *mesto*, *legato*, *uguale*, and *sempre secco*. The score features numerous triplets, sixteenth-note patterns, and slurs. The V-la part includes *tr* (trills) and *dr* (double trills). The Piano part includes *Sub-* (sub-octave) markings and *legato* markings. The score is numbered 4, 6, and 10 at the beginning of the systems.

The image displays a musical score for a vocal instrument (V-Ia) and piano accompaniment. The score is divided into two systems, measures 14-17 and 17-19. The first system (measures 14-17) features a vocal line with a melodic line and a piano accompaniment with a steady bass line and a more active treble line. The second system (measures 17-19) shows a vocal line with a melodic line and a piano accompaniment with a steady bass line and a more active treble line. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *non cresc.* and *sfz*.

This musical example has been taken
from: Stefanović. A. (ed.) (2014)
Anthology of Serbian Art Song VI,
Beograd: UKS.

Example 2a. Stanislav Binički, *Da su meni oči tvoje*, bars 1–28

The musical score consists of six systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo markings are: *Vivo.*, *rit.*, *a tempo*, *rall.*, *a tempo*, and *rall.*. The lyrics are: Да су ме.ни о.чи тво.је! Са.меб' мо.ре ар.бро.да.о. У.ми.ма би.с' у.то.ни.о. да су ме.ни о.чи тво.је! Да су ме.ни о.чи тво.је! О.ла.ја. Зе.ја.би.о! Са.јет би.ма ха.ди би.о. да су ме.ни о.чи тво.је.

About publications where this musical example has been taken see the Footnote 5 (*Editor's note*).

The image displays a musical score for three parts: Soprano (Sopr.), Flute (Fl.), and Piano (Piano). The score is divided into three systems, corresponding to measures 15-17, 18-20, and 21.

- System 1 (Measures 15-17):**
 - Soprano:** Melody with lyrics "o - - - ci, tvo - je,,". Dynamics: *p* (measures 15-16), *mf* (measure 17).
 - Flute:** Rapid sixteenth-note passages. Dynamics: *pp* (measures 15-16), *f* (measure 17). Performance markings: *legato* (measures 15-16), *non legato* (measure 17).
 - Piano:** Accompanying chords. Dynamics: *p* (measures 15-16), *f* (measure 17).
- System 2 (Measures 18-20):**
 - Soprano:** Melody with lyrics "o - - - ci, tvo - je, tvo - je". Dynamics: *mf* (measures 18-19), *p* (measure 20).
 - Flute:** Rapid sixteenth-note passages. Dynamics: *pp* (measures 18-19), *f* (measure 20). Performance markings: *legato* (measures 18-19), *non legato* (measure 20).
 - Piano:** Accompanying chords. Dynamics: *p* (measures 18-19), *f* (measure 20).
- System 3 (Measure 21):**
 - Soprano:** Melody with lyrics "o - - - ci, o - o". Dynamics: *mp* (measures 21), *p* (measure 21). Performance marking: *accel.* (measure 21).
 - Flute:** Rapid sixteenth-note passages. Dynamics: *pp* (measures 21), *mf* (measure 21), *p* (measure 21). Performance marking: *legato* (measures 21).
 - Piano:** Accompanying chords. Dynamics: *mf* (measures 21), *mp* (measure 21), *mf* (measure 21).

----- rit. **a tempo** *mp* *parlato amaramente f*

Sopr. zve - - - - - zda - ma bih

Fl. *legato p*

25 *ff* *p*

Sopr. *mp*
prrrrrr - - - ko - si - la to bih zve - - - - - zda -

Fl. *p*

29 *f* *p*

Sopr. *mp*
ma nit' bi Sun - - - - - ce po-

Fl. *p*

32 *p*

Sopr. ze - - - - - le - - - - - la da su me - ni

Fl. *non legato*
cresc. poco a poco

36 *p* *f* *p*

Sopr. o - či, da su me - ni o - či tvo - je

Fl. *f* *p*

40 *mf* *f* *p*

Fl. *mf* *p*

45 *mp* *8va*

This musical example has been taken
from: Stefanović. A. (ed.) (2014)
Anthology of Serbian Art Song VI,
Beograd: UKS.

Example 3a. Isidora Žebeljan, *Song-Wreaths*, “A Cradle Song”

Largamente ♩ = 50 (Tempo giusto)

mf rubato dolce e molto delicato

Ta - vna noć je pa - la
Dark, the night is dark;

rubato (mf) (Tempo giusto)

sve je ti - jo i da - vno već spa - va,
still an' si - lent eve - ry - thing's a - sleep,

mp rubato *f*

sa - mo mo - je ma - lo, lu - će be - - - lo,
But my sweet bon - ny, my sweet dear - - - one,

mf *mp* rall. ----- //

još - te ni - je za - spa - lo, my sne - no maj - - ki - no,
But my sweet dear - one, oh, my de - ar slee - - py one.

3 Andante ♩ = 60
sub. poco a poco accel. cresc. poco a poco ma sempre delicato Più mosso ♩ = 66

mi - lo mo - - je, je - di - no dra - go mi - le - no, ti
Dar - ling, dar - - ling, the on - ly be - loved one, lit - tle one; Oh my

pp poco cresc. e animando *mf*

4 Ancora più mosso ♩ = 69

zla - to mo - je, bla - go ljub - - je - - no, če - do ne bu - di se
pre - cious li'l one, pre - cious sweet - heart, my ba - by. Dar - ling, dear one.

mf *fp* *mf* *mf*

5

du - šo mi - li naj - dra - ži, ej, la - ne - - mo - je u - snu - lo tvo - ja te ma - ti
fall a - sleep! my heart, my heart; My lamb, oh, my child, my child. Your mo - ther, li'l one;

f *poco pesante* *molto f*

spa - vaj moj mi - - li tvo - ja ma - ti du - njo spa - vaj
Do sleep ho - ney; Your mo - ther, li'l one; Dar - ling, ho - ney,

f

p

6

Ba, ba - ji, ba, ba, ba,
Bye, bye - byes, Bye, bye, bye

pp sub

ba, ba - ji.
bye - - - - byes.

This musical example has been published with the permission of the author, Isidora Žebeljan (*Editor's note*).

Example 3b. Isidora Žebeljan, *Song-Wreaths, Oh, my sweetie, Oh*, bars 25–70

49 *ff* *rit.*
vo - - - - le - - - - la, al, vo - le - la bi
I'd - - - - - ra - - - - - ther die than mar - ry

50 *s*
se u - bi - ti - - - - ne - - - - go - - - - li - - - -
some - one else, I'd, - - - - I'd - - - - ra - - - - ther

51 *p sub.* *molto* *f*
dru - gog lju - bi - ti lju - bi - ti la - - - - ko - - - - aj,
die, kill my - self, die, die, die

ff *rit.*
vo - - - - le - - - - la, aj, vo - le - la bi
than - - - - mar - - - - ry some - bo - dy else; Oh,

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Ана Стефановић

ТРАДИЦИОНАЛНА ВОКАЛНА МУЗИКА КАО РЕФЕРЕНЦА У САВРЕМЕНОЈ СРПСКОЈ СОЛО ПЕСМИ

(Резиме)

Српска соло песма, у широком временском опсегу музичког модернизма, на различите начине *привла* ослободила традиционалних вокалних форми. Соло песма савремених аутора карактеристична је и по томе што се захваљујући двојком односу према фолклорном вокалном наслеђу на њој прелама и двојство модернистичког и постмодернистичког начина музичког мишљења, па самим тим, и двојство референцијалног односа према старијим слојевима српске музике. С једне стране, овај се однос модернистички успоставља на генерички начин, и по правилу се окреће ‘дубљој’ традицији, пре свега оним фолклорним обрасцима који подржавају ритуалну или магијску функције музике. У том случају, њени ‘призвани’ делови имају структурни статус у оквиру дела, и последица су архитектуралних веза успостављених на далеким крајевима музичке повести. С друге стране, када је реч о евоцираним фолклорним матрицама из ближе прошлости, оне се на постмодернистички начин јављају у виду интертекста, прецизније, на начин стилистичког цитата, где долазе у несугласност с актуалним контекстом и бивају изложени лудичком, односно, иронијском превредновању. Разуме се, у савременом српском лиду се може уочити како гранични статус саме референце, тако и врста референцијалног односа. Ова је проблематика посебно размотрена на примерима из три дела: *Две њубалице* (1997) за сопран, виолу и клавир Ђура Живковића (1975), *Руковети* (2000) за сопран и оркестар Исидоре Жебељан (1967) и *Да су мени очи твоје* (2008) за сопран, флауту и клавир Ивана Брклјачића (1977). У првом делу се као референца јавља народна тужбалица црногорске провенијенције, у другом војвођанска градска песма XIX века, а у трећем, како народна севдалинка босанскохерцеговачког порекла, тако њен уметнички еквивалент у српској соло песми с почетка XX века. Традиционалне музичке референце, формулисане на овај начин, успостављају сложене односе са широким спектром поетика у опсежном историјском луку западне музичке историје, која, из постмодернистичког угла гледано, и сама задобија статус референце.

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