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TIME TIME TIME: ¹ CONSIDERING THE PROBLEM OF MUSICAL TIME ON THE EXAMPLE OF VLASTIMIR TRAJKOVIĆ'S POETICS AND THOMAS CLIFTON'S AESTHETICS

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SUMMARY: In this paper, approach to the phenomenon of musical time within Vlastimir Trajković's poetics and phenomenological aesthetics of music by Thomas Clifton was comparatively considered, inspired by the composition *Arion. Le nuove musiche per chitarra ed archi* (1979), by Serbian composer Vlastimir Trajković. In it, the author is using some elements of minimalism, making the effect of "retained" time and thus encouraging the listener to question the flow of musical time. On the other hand, the same idea of extending that specific „now“ in the process of listening to music is found in the aesthetical writings of Thomas Clifton. For this theoretician, an implicit feature of time is that it combines all three modes – past, present and future – concomitantly, thus making them intertwined in the process of listening. Repetition has a specific role in this process, and the idea of repeating musical information the way Trajković does seems to underline that specific characteristic of musical time and the process of listening. Starting with the assumption that what Trajković shows through his music is similar to what Clifton states in his aesthetical writings, problem of musical time was analyzed having in mind one poetical and one aesthetical approach, with accent on the significance of chosen stylistic solutions.

KEY WORDS: musical time, *Arion*, Vlastimir Trajković, Thomas Clifton, phenomenology, (post)minimalism

The possibilities of considering one musicological problem (in this case musical time) from three points of view – aesthetic, poetic and stylistic are the

¹ The title refers to the segment of the "author's interpretation of his own ideo-compositional sphere" [Veselinović 1983: 397]. The first version of this paper was produced within the course *Aesthetics, Poetics, Stylistics of Contemporary Music 1*, as part of doctoral studies in Musicology at the Faculty of Musical Art in Belgrade, under the mentorship of Professor Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, PhD. This version is presented as part of the project *Serbian Musical Identities within Local and Global Frameworks: Traditions, Changes, Challenges*. No. 177004, funded by Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

central question of this paper. The work that inspired interest in this problem was the composition for string orchestra and guitar *Arion. Le nuove musiche per chitarra ed archi* (1979), by Serbian composer Vlastimir Trajković. This is a composer whose poetics are characterized by his interest in musical time², and the use of minimalist elements in the said composition makes it additionally interesting, due to the specific experience of musical time that accompanies minimalism in music. In examining Trajković's poetic method, I will analyze the way in which he approached the problem of time, which I will understand in the context of the aesthetic interpretation of time offered by Thomas Clifton in his study on applied phenomenology. Various phenomenological aspects of music that have been considered in writings of various theorists are concerned with the types and temporal dynamics of music listening [Veselinović-Hofman 2007a: 117], which is also the case with Clifton's study, in which the author, as the title of his study suggests, advocates the application of the theoretical postulates to which he arrived in elaborating the theses of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty [Veselinović-Hofman 2007a: 139].

Vlastimir Trajković's *Arion* is an example of a work that marked the appearance of the avant-garde in the Yugoslav, i.e., Serbian musical environment, in the local sense, due to its introduction of elements of minimalism, conceptualism and processuality, and which can also be viewed as one of the first postmodern compositions here [Veselinović1983: 393; Veselinović-Hofman 2007b: 277]³. Namely, as explained by musicologist Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, the postmodern elements are, before all, evident in the domain of program and meaning, due to the verbal dimension of the score, which is comprised of the verses of the Roman poet Publius Ovidius Naso, indicating a postmodern intertextuality [Veselinović-Hofman 2007b: 277]⁴. These verses, together with the "author's interpretation of his own ideo-compositional sphere," in the words of Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, "almost have the weight of a proclamation of his aesthetic views" [Veselinović-Hofman1983: 397]. On the other hand, if we follow the line of argument regarding the composition's postmodern qualities, we arrive at an interpretation that defines it as an example of post-minimalist postmodernism, as defined by the musicologist Marija Masnikosa [Masnikosa2010: 124]⁵, who views the work as a "synthesis of minimalist repetitiveness, slowed time, indicated postmodern referentiality and a new, 'classicist' orientation." [Masnikosa 2010: 227].

² As testified by the author's composition, his diploma work *Tempora retenta* [Veselinović 1983: 397].

³ Nevertheless, that was not the first minimalist composition here. That priority belongs to Vladan Radovanović's work, *Šest dvoglasnih korala* [*Six Two-Part Chorales*], dated in 1956 [Veselinović-Hofman 2002: 22]. For a time it was thought that there were only four chorales (which was reflected in the composition's original name), before the author discovered two more chorales that also belonged to the entire work.

⁴ Intertextuality can also be recognized in the title, as the syntagma "Le nuove musiche" is the title of the collection of madrigals of Gulio Caccini, from 1602 [Masnikosa 2010: 226].

⁵ The author distinguishes between two different entities of musical postminimalism: postmodern minimalism and postminimalist postmodernism [Masnikosa 2010: 16–21]. While a characteristic of postmodern minimalism is the affirmation of minimalism as a dominant discourse to which others adapt, postminimalist postmodernism represents textual heterogeneity within which minimalistic segments occupy a significant place [Masnikosa 2010: 19].

When speaking about elements of minimalism, it should be noticed that we are not dealing with a work in which all parameters are absolutely reduced⁶, nor is it a matter of demonstrating some of the specific repetitive compositional techniques as being the work's dominant characteristics⁷. Instead, what we have is a reduction of some elements to a degree that was in accordance with Trajković's poetics. In other words, it is not a matter of following the line of radical modernistic minimalism⁸, but of an individual creative process that freely "chooses" the elements of the minimalist musical heritage. The *Arion's* sound image is drawn by the reduction of the string "base" to the persistence of a fund of eight chords in mutual medial relations that are repeated in their transpositions, along with eight characteristic groups of tones in the guitar segment, and the motive core of the middle portion of the (three-part) composition [Veselinović 1983: 397–399]. Repetitive and nonrepetitive parts alternate in the work, with a constantly present chord in the function of a drone being conspicuous in some of the sections⁹. These compositional-technical features represent a form of exploration of the slowing, „widening“ and stretching of musical time. Since Thomas Clifton's views pertain precisely to the „widening“ of musical time, i.e., the intertwining of the past, present and future in the process of listening, I will explore that segment of his aesthetics, starting with a consideration of his main thesis on music and the music phenomenon.

By music phenomenon Clifton means the relationship between a musical object and the human experience. Thus, in order to understand something as a phenomenon, there has to be an object that is being perceived and does not demand interpretation in only one, "proper" way, as well as a recipient, whose freedom of reception is limited by past experiences and environment (educational, social and cultural) [Clifton 1983: 11]. Consequently, the definition of music from a phenomenological viewpoint would be the following: "Music has been defined as a certain reciprocal relation between a person, his behavior and a sounding object." [Clifton 1983: 10]¹⁰. And the goal of the phenomenological approach is to discover and emphasize the essences that make the musical experience possible [Clifton 1983: 10]¹¹. Clifton identifies four essential backgrounds that are necessary so that a sound object can be experienced as music: time, space, play and feeling and understanding. Since my primary

⁶ That would entail the use of constant drone in the work of La Monte Young, i.e., the reduction of the composition's content to its duration and color [Masnikosa 1998: 37].

⁷ Such as Philip Glass' additive-repetitive technique or Steve Reich's technique of composition-building through gradual processes [Masnikosa 1998: 49–69].

⁸ On the characteristics of radical musical minimalism, see [Masnikosa 1998: 33–77]. On the relationship between minimalism and postminimalism, see: [Masnikosa 2010: 23–92].

⁹ For a detailed analysis of the composition, see: [Masnikosa 2010: 226–240].

¹⁰ Along those lines, it can be concluded that the meaning of a phenomenon stems from the object, but also demands the presence of a listener. In other words, music is not an empirical object; rather, its meaning is constituted in relation to a subject (it exists "for me" as a subject) [Clifton 1983: 79]. Withal, a single manifestation of a work is referential of an idea that is common to all the possible different manifestations [Clifton 1983: 9].

¹¹ When it comes to experience, it should be said that Clifton sees it in the sense of the German word *Erlebnis*, which refers to the individual experience of an event, as opposed to the term *Erfahrung*, which refers to experience in general [Clifton 1983: 7].

interest in this essay is Clifton's interpretation of time, I will not deal with the other segments¹². Besides, as pointed out by Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, Clifton's contribution to the phenomenological consideration of time is the most consistent part of his exposition [Veselinović-Hofman 2007a: 139].

In his exposition, Clifton criticizes the view of time as a flux. Namely, he thinks that there is no objective time in the sense of a continuum and the metaphor of "the famous river into which we cannot step twice" [Clifton 1983: 55]. Referring to that metaphor and to Merleau-Ponty, Clifton explains that we are not observers on the banks of that river, and that it is the human experience of certain events that is in flux, and provides meaning to the experienced events [Clifton 1983: 55]. Therefore, time does not exist independently from objects, events and the human consciousness, but represents the "experience of human consciousness in contact with change" [Clifton 1983: 56]. Clifton also holds that time is not undirected and irreversible, emphasizing that there are "rays" of consciousness that link the modi of time and the various relations between them that consciousness is capable of forming [Clifton 1983: 56]. In order to explain this claim, Clifton introduces the concept of the horizon and Husserl's concepts of retention and protention.

The horizon represents the temporal border of the field of presence filled with various contents. Within that field of the horizon, the temporal modi of the past, present and future intermix, and that is what distinguishes this field from the factual present – it is possible precisely thanks to the phenomenological present. Warning that the horizon might be wrongly understood as the equivalent of context, Clifton explains that the key difference between them lies in the fact that context requires another object that is affected by the changes in that context, while the "content of any temporal horizon is determined by the particular object" [Clifton 1983: 58]. In other words, the object is the horizon. In that sense, it can be said, for example, that the boundaries of a melody also represent the boundaries of the horizon, since the melody is not listened to in only one moment, but with a consciousness about what came before and what comes after [Clifton 1983: 58]. Thus is achieved the whole of the heard melody, as opposed to fragments of heard moments, which would be impossible to link into a continuing flow. This linking of temporal modi is achieved thanks to retention and protention. According to Clifton, retention is a "wider, phenomenal now", i.e., primary memory articulated by the present [Clifton 1983: 59]. On the other hand, recollection is secondary memory. While

¹² Instead, I will briefly present the other essential backgrounds here. When it comes to the experience of space, Clifton points to two aspects. One has to do with the phenomenology of the body as the "general instrument of comprehension", which allows the connection of all the senses due to the centralized self which synthesizes various perceptions (not only listening). The second aspect relates to the experience of music in space by way of its texture, thanks to whose almost tactile quality it is possible to feel the quality of the sound line and surface, as well as the movement of the sound mass. As for the element of play, Clifton says that in play as a musical essence, there occurs a "fusion between experiencing self and the experienced music", except that music does not represent play – it is play. When it comes to feeling and understanding, which Clifton claims are different but inseparable, he notes the "constant interplay between the synthetic activity of feeling and the analytic activity of reflection." For more on this, see: [Clifton 1983: 65–77].

recollection is representative, because it represents the memory of a melody we heard and its revival in the consciousness after it has ended, retention is presentative, because it refers to the immediate past, one that “has been (*ist gewesen*), but has not gone by (*ist vergangen*),” [Clifton 1983: 60] i.e., to the melody itself in the consciousness. Such a past is meaningful because it gives color to the present and allows the following of the links within the composition that confirm its identity. Protention in relation to the future is the same as retention in relation to the past. In that sense, there is a difference between the future that we anticipate and which is, thus, built into the present, analogously to retention, and the future that we expect, which is equivalent to memory. Still, Clifton stresses that the important difference between retention and protention is that protention is still largely undetermined. He notes that three viewpoints can be held regarding the future, of which repetition will be specifically discussed¹³. Clifton identifies the specificities pertaining to repetition, emphasizing that, when something is repeated, it is already familiar and, thus, part of our past, but is at the same time being renewed as the future. In that case, the power to anticipate becomes important because, if we just expect something, we reduce the possibility of establishing the link between ourselves and the composition. In the case of repetition, if we get used to constant repetition, “our own being becomes diminished as the composition loses some of its future” [Clifton 1983: 64].

Clifton is writing about repeated performances of already familiar compositions and the performer’s ability to stress the moment of anticipation, even though it is known what follows in the specific musical flux. However, his discourse on repetition can also be placed in the context of minimalist music, i.e., compositions that contain minimalist elements. In that case, the role of repetition is considered in relation to the repetition of musical material in the course of the composition itself. As Marija Masnikosa explains, referencing Dahlhaus and Sabe, listening to minimalist music “demands neither ‘retention’ nor ‘protention,’ while the ‘automatism’ of its occurrence implies a feeling of ‘timelessness’ with the listener. Thus, the minimalist composition becomes an almost infinite extension of a moment, an uninterrupted, monotonic ‘presentation’... [Masnikosa 1998: 25]. Having in mind Clifton’s explanation of the horizon, such an experience of minimalist music might be called into question. Namely, it has already been said that, in Clifton’s interpretation, the horizon and the musical object have been equalized. It is understood that, within the field of presence that a composition produces – and it was not stressed that this refers exclusively to a traditional, closed work of artistic music¹⁴, which may, thus, also be minimalist – the present, the past and the future are intertwined

¹³ The first view refers to the true indeterminacy as a condition of the future, with the note that it is still planned and, in that sense, is never totally unexpected; the second refers to certainty of the future, specifically meaning inevitable events such as death; the third refers to the role of repetition [Clifton 1983: 62–63].

¹⁴ After all, as Carl Dahlhaus pointed out, the listener’s perception experiences even an open work as a closed one, in the sense of a sound entity that has a beginning and an end [Veselinović-Hofman 2007a:114].

within it, but are not present in equal intensity. Therefore, the above-mentioned “present-action” does not have to be understood as a monotonous extension of a moment that evokes a feeling of timelessness. On the contrary, it is as though the extension of a moment through the repetition of musical information emphasizes the implicit characteristic of time – its “composition” out of all three *modi* simultaneously. The repetition of musical material does not necessarily mean that retention and protention are not included in the listening process. In fact, it seems that they must exist if the composition is to be experienced as a whole, while it seems as though the act of repetition lays bare the mechanism of retention and protention, in the sense that it makes them evident. In addition, the automatism of the occurrence of minimalist music is, from a phenomenological standpoint, also questionable. Namely, as was already stressed, the object itself is not sufficient for interpretation, which also requires the experience of listening. In that sense, even if automatization of repetition in the sound object exists, it does not have to be understood as such, because the entirety of the music phenomenon also includes the experience of the listener. The listener’s experience of time is, according to Clifton, a lived-through experience of the occurrence of certain events, which forms a continuing flow. Thus, time is not static, but flows in the way that the subject reacts in relation to the sequence of certain events (i.e., to their repetition!).

Because of this, (post)minimalist musical practices (with all their branchings) represent a challenge for the phenomenological interpretation of the experience of time. Still, it should be said that various compositional poetics are in play within these practices, in which the minimalist method is represented in different proportions and in relation to differing parameters. Trajković’s composition is an example of a work in which elements of minimalism are reflections of the author’s personal poetic conception related to the study of the phenomenon of musical time. However, it should be noted that we are dealing with an author who avoids theoretical interpretations of his work, even though he was inclined to them at one point of his working life, insisting that “his process of composition is not based on any *principles* whatsoever” [Veselinović 1983: 405].

In that sense, when speaking about Trajković’s approach to time, we are not referring to potential theoretical bases of his work on this problem. Rather, any comparison between Clifton’s phenomenological interpretation and Trajković’s poetics leads to one of possible interpretations. According to it, the very way in which Trajković uses the means and elements of minimalist musical language represents a poetical way of problematizing the topic which Clifton approaches as a phenomenologically oriented aesthetician. Nevertheless, in retaining a clear, conditionally speaking traditional macroform and not avoiding associations to already familiar elements of musical language¹⁵,

¹⁵ In the case of Trajković’s composition, the eight chord base is reminiscent of elements of jazz modality, which is, in turn, indicative of the strong influence of Olivier Messiaen and the composer’s French Impressionism, which is characteristic for his work. The simple melodic-rhythmic forms of the composition are of a basically Debussiesque origin [Veselinović 1983: 398–400].

Trajković maintains a sufficiently recognizable “field” for the listener, who is not faced with a radically new sound experience. As Marija Masnikosa points out, the “new perception” that radically minimalist music demands is primarily dependent on the form of the compositions in which traces of inherited functionality in the organization of musical parameters have been removed [Masnikosa 1998: 30]¹⁶. It is in that context that the discourse about the automatization of the listening process took place, about which objections from a phenomenological standpoint have already been presented, before all because phenomenology requires that the listener face the object itself and the rejection of established habits. Still, precisely thanks to the fact that Trajković maintains a recognizable form, his composition represents a balance between elements familiar to the listener and those that represent a sort of challenge for him. Within that framework, by stretching the duration of musical material, repeating certain segments, slowing the flow of time through numerous caesuras and forming repetitive models so that they “already include repetitiveness” [Masnikosa 2010: 236], Trajković seems to emphasize the nature of the experience of time in the listener’s consciousness, reminding of the importance of all time modi and their constant intertwining. That is the level at which the conceptual intervention that Trajković brings to Serbian music in the local avant-garde sense can be recognized, which Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman recognizes precisely due to the composition’s extensive musical time. It can be said the Vlastimir Trajković’s musical language carries listeners to their own experiences and apprehensions of time. From that side, he stimulates the recipient’s need to reexamine his relationship with the sound object, conceived so as to emphasize the relativity of the experience that is occurring at the moment that we are listening to it, and reminding us that it is concomitantly composed of both what immediately preceded it and what will follow it. In this way, Trajković’s compositional poetics, in which instruments of minimalism are in the function of demonstrating the complex phenomenon of musical time, can also be directly linked, in terms of theoretical interpretation, to Clifton’s aesthetic interpretation of the same problem. At the same time, such an interpretation offers the possibility of examining a musicological problem such as musical time from its aesthetic, poetic and stylistic perspective.

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¹⁶ “New Perception” is Philip Glass’s term. Still, authors of a post-minimalist orientation have distanced themselves from these radical trends.

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