

A Political or a Cultural Project?

**Contemporary Discourses on
Central European Identity**

Impressum

A Political or a Cultural Project? Contemporary Discourses on Central European Identity

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Ivana Medić

Ex-centric Identities in Central Europe: The Curious Case of Snežana Nešić¹

Abstract

This study is part of my ongoing research on the Serbian art music diaspora. After the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and the ensuing wars, hundreds of thousands of people left the region and settled all over the world. This massive “brain drain” affected many areas; in respect to art music, around 50 composers left Serbia, which was an enormous loss for such a small country. Several composers continued their careers in the countries of Central Europe. The very term “Central Europe” is understood in various ways; some definitions exclude Serbia from this conceptual territory, while others include it, alongside Croatia and Slovenia; this discrepancy raises the issues of identity, placing, belonging, heritage, and inclusion, which are amplified by emigration and exile. After discussing the theoretical implications of these notions, I will focus on the professional odyssey of Snežana Nešić (1973), a female composer and accordionist of Serbian extraction, educated in Ukraine, who has lived in Hannover, Germany for two decades now.

Keywords: Snežana Nešić, contemporary music, Central Europe, identities, emigration, diaspora.

Introduction

This study constitutes a part of my ongoing research on the Serbian art music diaspora, which encompasses both a comprehensive overview of the state of Serbian music created in exile, and detailed accounts on individual artistic destinies.² Here I focus on the professional odyssey of Snežana Nešić (married

¹ The research presented in this article was financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

² My publications related to this project include: MEDIĆ, Ivana: *Music of the Lost Generation: Serbian Émigré Composers = Serbian Music: Yugoslav Contexts*. Eds. MILIN, Melita - SAMSON, Jim, Belgrade, Institute of Musicology SASA, 2014, 143-164; *ibid.*, “ArHai’s *Balkan Folktronica: Serbian Ethno Music Reimagined for British Market*” = *Muzikologija/Musicology* 17, 2014, 115-127; *ibid.*, “Amerika je drugi svet: razgovor sa Natašom Bogojević” [America is a Different World: A Conversation with Nataša Bogojević], *Muzički talas* 44 (XXI), 2015, 20-27; *ibid.*, “Muzika izgubljene generacije: američka priča Vuka Kulenovića” [Music of the Lost Generation: Vuk Kulenović’s American Story],

Davidović),³ born in 1973—a female composer and accordionist of Serbian extraction, educated in Ukraine, who has lived in Hannover, Germany for two decades now. I will begin by briefly giving an overview of the concept of the “Central European identity”, in order to provide the context for the ensuing discussion, but also to facilitate the geographical and conceptual positioning of Nešić’s oeuvre.

The issues of identity and of Central Europeanness are very complex and subject to different interpretations. The term “Central Europe” is understood in various ways and comprises continuous territories that are otherwise sometimes considered parts of Western, Eastern or Southern Europe; yet its exact frontiers are very difficult to determine. Does this region encompass territories that used to belong to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Holy Roman Empire, German Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy, the Kingdom of Hungary and the Crown of Bohemia? Or, is Central Europe merely the area of cultural heritage of the Habsburg Empire (later Austria-Hungary), i.e. present-day Austria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, and some parts of Serbia, Croatia, Romania, Poland and Ukraine? There are also interpretations of this concept that focus on the links with the West, especially from the nineteenth century onwards and the grand period of liberation and formation of nation-states; this idea is especially potent in the South-Eastern states, which favour the enlarged concept of the “East Centre”, because they seek to emphasise their links with Western culture(s).

For the present discussion, it is important to note that some of the existing definitions of Central Europe exclude Serbia from this conceptual Central European territory⁴, while others include it (or, at least, its northern province of Vojvodina). This discrepancy raises the issues of identity, placing, belonging, heritage, and inclusion, which are amplified by emigration and exile. How we are perceived by others (in this case, by historians, cultural theorists, writers of encyclopaedias and history textbooks) also influences how we perceive ourselves and vice versa. The (self)identification of countries belonging to this region was also inevitably influenced by historical and political shifts of allegiances, alignments and break-ups. The territory of present-day Serbia used to belong to two different empires: the northern parts of the country (the present-

Zbornik Matice srpske za scenske umetnosti i muziku 60, 2019, 139–156; *ibid.*, *Paralelne istorije: savremena srpska umetnička muzika u dijaspori* [Parallel Histories: Contemporary Serbian Art Music in the Diaspora], Belgrade, Institute of Musicology SASA, 2020.

³ Her name is also often spelled Snezana Nestic (without diacritics).

⁴ Cf. “Europe”, *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*. © 1994, 2000–2006 on Infoplease. © 2000–2017 Sandbox Networks, Inc., publishing as Infoplease, <<https://www.infoplease.com/encyclopedia/places/other/oceans-continents/europe>> (accessed 30.08.2019). This entry only includes the following countries in Central Europe: Germany, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary.

day Autonomous Province of Vojvodina) were historically part of the Habsburg Empire and Austria-Hungary, while the southern parts of present-day Serbia belonged to the Ottoman Empire for many centuries. This historical divide is still a part of our experience and allegiances; hence the northern parts of the country can be considered a part of the Central European cultural space, while the southern territories barely share this heritage.

Since I do not aspire to offer any defining answer to the persistent question of what a Central European identity is, I will only outline how I understand this term in the present study:

- a person who embodies a Central European identity must inhabit, or have once inhabited, this (imaginary) geographical and cultural space;
- in addition to self-identification, this person must also be recognised by others as a bearer of a Central European identity;
- furthermore, the two theses above are dependent on how one defines and interprets both Central Europeanness and the notion of identity.

I have chosen the life and career of the composer Snežana Nešić as my case study because, both through her education and professional allegiances, Nešić is ideally positioned to reinforce the Central Europeanness of Serbian culture; yet, although Nešić is located at the very centre of the Central European space, she is paradoxically regarded as eccentric, due to her Serbian passport, Ukrainian education and, last but not least, her gender.

Serbian Art Music Diaspora

As I discussed in my earlier writings, starting from the early 1990s—the period marked by the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the ensuing wars—hundreds of thousands (perhaps, even, millions) of professionals left the newly established countries that replaced the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Such a massive “brain drain” from relatively small countries such as Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina has had a devastating impact on many professional realms: in the field of classical/art music, at least fifty composers, of widely varying ages, left Serbia, never to return; and the trend has continued in the new millennium. In my chapter published in the book *Serbian Music: Yugoslav Contexts*, edited by Jim Samson and Melita Milin (2014), I attempted for the first time to track down these émigré composers and to re-incorporate them into the history of Serbian music.⁵ Of

⁵ A complete list of Serbian émigré composers is available in my chapter: MEDIĆ, Ivana: *Music of the Lost Generation: Serbian Émigré Composers*, 143–145.

course, composers are not the only musicians who have emigrated; hundreds of instrumentalists, conductors and other music professionals have also moved abroad; however, there is an important difference. Serbia maintains a system of state-funded music schools and music academies that produces a large number of music performers each year; moreover, since their profession involves foreign travel as a matter of course, the issue of where they are based is not relevant. In contrast, there are only three universities in Serbia that offer composition courses, and only a handful of composers graduate every year.⁶ One can now understand the extent of the loss to Serbian contemporary music. The most striking exodus was that of composers born in the 1960s, who were at the beginning of their professional careers at the outset of the war.⁷

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When discussing musical diasporas worldwide, Philip V. Bohlman identified “three very general forces that bring about the need to leave a place regarded as a people’s own. First, there are religious reasons leading to the expulsion from a place of origin. [...] Second, there are peoples and cultures with no place to call their own, thus making it necessary to move ceaselessly [...] Third, there are more modern diasporas spawned by socioeconomic reasons. The widespread emigrations and immigrations following from the breakup of empires and the conflicts of nationalism are among the chief causes for the third type of diaspora.”⁸ Whilst researching my 2014 chapter, I conducted a series of interviews (either in person or online) with a number Serbian émigré composers; the interviews focused on the reasons behind their decisions to leave the country and their experiences abroad. The obvious first question was about their reasons for leaving Serbia. A clear generational gap can be observed here. A majority of composers born in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s left the country in the early 1990s due to the third-economic reason, i.e. the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the ensuing wars, and the severe economic crisis, exacerbated by the economic sanctions imposed by the UN. Due to this political and economic crisis of the 1990s, it became impossible for composers to survive on their measly teachers’ salaries and rapidly declining commissions. On the other hand, the generations born in the 1970s and 1980s, i.e. those who were educated in Serbia during the war and afterwards, stated that the main reason for their leaving the country was the feeling that Serbia was too isolated and the composition courses too conservative.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 146.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁸ BOHLMAN, Philip V.: *A Very Short Introduction to World Music*. Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, 117.

As to the issue of the émigré composers' inclusion in (or exclusion from) both local (Serbian, former Yugoslav) and global (read: Western) histories of music, it is not just the musicologists who are undecided; the majority of the composers themselves no longer know where they belong. Melita Milin asserts that the issue of who gets included in histories of music is a political one.⁹ Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman observes that countries such as Serbia, which have built their professional cultures under the influence of a (western) "centre" or "centres" will forever be marginalized, due to the ever-present imbalance of power: "the (sub)conscious of that centre contains some psychological reminders of its professional-historical value, which always justified the centre's conviction that such an advantage gained it the natural right to the status of an arbitrator – in spite of the fact that the periphery was often musically more creative and innovative than the centre."¹⁰ On the other hand, Jim Samson observes that "composers of an older generation such as Xenakis and Ligeti would probably not have made the mark they did on the new music had they remained in Greece and Hungary respectively. There was a rather clear sense of centre and periphery in the 1960s, and for these composers the charismatic centres of new music in Europe and North America proved to be the gateways to international acclaim. [...] Arriving at the centres did not guarantee visibility, of course; they were nothing if not competitive arenas. But avoiding the centres all but guaranteed invisibility. For a later generation the conditions were rather different. [...] For this generation the major cultural centres are no longer quite the passport to fame they once were [...]. In the end, a clear local identity [...] may prove more valuable than an allegiance to cosmopolitan modernisms."¹¹ In this respect, Serbia has long shared the destiny of all small peripheral cultures that have not been "on the radar" of the major European cultural centres, due to the imbalance of power between the centre and the periphery, between the rich and the poor, the large and the small.

Snežana Nešić's Ex-centric Identities

Let's now focus on the protagonist of our case study. After completing her studies at the secondary music school in the central Serbian town of Kraguje-

⁹ MILIN, Melita: General Histories of Music and the Place of the European Periphery = *Muzikologija/Musicology*, 2001, 1, 142-145.

¹⁰ VESELINOVIĆ-HOFMAN, Mirjana: *Music at the Periphery Under Conditions of Degraded Hierarchy Between the Centre and the Margins in the Space of the Internet = Identities: The World of Music in Relation to Itself*. Eds. SEEBASS, Tilman - VESELINOVIĆ-HOFMAN, Mirjana - POPOVIĆ-MLAĐENOVIĆ, Tijana, Belgrade, Faculty of Music, 2012, 25.

¹¹ SAMSON, Jim: *Music in the Balkans*. Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2013, 568.

vac, Snežana Nešić studied the accordion and composition at the Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky conservatory in Kiev, Ukraine in the 1990s and completed her post-graduate studies in 2003 at the University for Music and Drama, Hannover, where she was mentored by Professor Johannes Schöllhorn (Composition) and Professor Elsbeth Moser (Accordion). Since 2007 she has worked as a university lecturer in musical composition and the interpretation of modern music at the Hanover University of Music, Drama and Media. As an accordion player she has won many international competitions (including the Internationaler Akkordeonwettbewerb Klingenthal and the Citta-Castelfidardo) and has received frequent invitations as a soloist with orchestras and ensembles including NDR Sinfonieorchester Hamburg, Staatstheater Hannover, Staatstheater Braunschweig and Das Neue Ensemble. She also directs ensembles Incontri and Ur.werk, specializing in contemporary music.¹² The list of her most important compositions includes: (1) Music theatre and opera: *Antigone*, dramatic scene for soprano, cello, accordion and percussion after a text by Sophocles (1999); *The Edelweiss Pirates*, Youth Opera for 8 soloists and ensemble, with libretto by Kerstin Weiß (2005/2006); *Time of Colour*, Light-Scene for soprano, 2-10 players and video projection, after a text by Niki de Saint Phalle (2011); *The Evening Song of Still Standing Times* for soprano, actor and five players, after a poem by Daniel Kharms (2012); *The Night Song of Still Standing Times* for Countertenor solo, after texts by Daniel Kharms, Saint John of the Cross and Snežana Nešić (2012); *Himmelsklavier* for prepared piano, composed for the musical theatre "Lea, Opa und das Himmelsklavier" (2014); *The Rain Passed Over*, opera for 2 sopranos, baritone, ensemble and electronics, with libretto by Snežana Nešić and Tobias Ribitzki (2012/2016); *Eternal Light*, musical theatre for soprano, baritone, ensemble, live electronic and video projection (2018); (2) Orchestral Works: *Two Fragments* for orchestra (1996); *Kyrios* for soprano, tenor, mixed choir and orchestra (1997); *Painting of Light* for cello, accordion, string quartet and two string groups (2003/2005); *Butterfly Valley - Requiem for Inger Christensen* for violin and orchestra (2008/2009); *Turquoise* (2010) for chamber orchestra; *Equilibrión I* for ensemble (2016); *Equilibrión II* for chamber orchestra (2016); (3) Electronic and mixed media: *Eolus*, electronic composition (2006); *Where is Abel? I* music for a short film (2008/2009); *Where is Abel? II* for video, sound installation and any wind instrument (2009); *Time of Colour II* (2009/2010) for any keyboard instrument, live electronics and video projection; *Etude for the Beginning of Time II* for accordion and live electronics (2012/17); *Mirabilia* sound installation in memoriam Umberto Eco (2017); etc. In addition, she has written numerous soloists, chamber and choral works. All of her works

¹² Nešić's full biography and list of awards is available on her official website: http://www.snezana-nesic.de/?page_id=9&lang=en (accessed 30.08.2019),

were commissioned and premiered by renowned soloists, ensembles, orchestras, radio stations and foundations.¹³

I interviewed Snežana Nešić about her professional odyssey on 5 February 2019 at her home in Hannover, during the festival *Quantum Music – Hannover Session*. We first talked about her decision to become a classical music composer, which is still a rather unusual career choice for any young woman in Central Europe (although not so much so in Serbia, where in recent decades women have dominated in this area, outnumbering men both as full-time composers and composition teachers, and winning the majority of accolades).

Originally from the small town of Smederevska Palanka, Nešić left her home early to train as an accordionist at the reputable music school “Dr Miloje Milojević” in Kragujevac. Yet, at the tender age of 12, Nešić had already made a decision that she would rather be writing her own music than playing someone else’s. In the early 1990s, she moved to Ukraine and graduated in composition and accordion in Kiev. Back in the 1990s it was not possible to study the accordion on the tertiary level in Serbia, so all prospective students had to go abroad (e.g. to Austria, Russia, Ukraine, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, etc.) Nešić admits that she chose Kiev because it was possible for her to study at two departments without paying any fees—back then, studying music in Ukraine was still available for free, even for foreign students (which is no longer the case); and due to the economic hardship caused by the political turmoil in her native country, she could not afford to pay high tuition fees elsewhere. In Kiev she met her future husband, a fellow Yugoslav expat—the conductor and harpsichordist Saša Davidović [Sascha Davidovic]. While in Kiev, Nešić received comprehensive and solid instruction in composition, orchestration, conducting, chamber music, traditional harmony, polyphony and musical forms. However, after graduating, she realised that she also needed to master more advanced contemporary compositional techniques and thus applied for a DAAD scholarship; upon winning it in 1998, she and her husband Saša ended up in Hannover, where she completed her postgraduate studies in composition. As the main difference in university studies of music in Kiev and Hannover, she singled out the fact that studies in Hannover are flexible and tailored to the needs of each individual student, in accordance with their interests and preferences, while in Kiev they are much more structured, at the expense of individual freedom—a sentiment shared by many expat composers who went westward in search of a greater freedom of artistic expression.

As to her involvement with the organisation of musical life and her leadership of contemporary music ensembles in Hannover, Nešić has asserted that,

¹³ Sound recordings of a number of her works are available on the Soundcloud platform: <https://soundcloud.com/nesic> (accessed 30.08.2019).

at least since Richard Wagner's time, German and Austrian composers have established their own music societies—*vereins*, thus becoming responsible for their own artistic policies and repertoires, promoting their own creative ideologies and achieving immediate contact with their audiences. On the other hand, Nešić observes that musical life in Ukraine is still dependent on state-funded institutions; as expected, she very much prefers the German system because it offers more creative freedom.

Upon completion of her studies in Hannover, Nešić immediately became the leader of the university's new music ensemble *Incontri*, while her husband became an assistant conductor at Hannover Radio. Their professional careers were somewhat hindered by the fact that, being Serbian citizens, they had to fulfil conditions to constantly reapply for work permits, which had to be renewed every few years; and only after more than a decade in Hannover did they finally receive permanent residence permits (although they still hold Serbian passports and citizenship). Aside from *Incontri*, Nešić has also founded another new music ensemble *Ur: Werk*—a wordplay on German words for “premiere” and “mechanism”. As of 2019 she has been involved in teaching, artistic leadership, concert performances and managerial duties to an equal degree. As a university lecturer on temporary contracts [*Dozent* in German], Nešić receives a salary about seven times smaller than that of a full professor, which is why she has to work on numerous projects simultaneously as well as juggle multiple jobs.

As to Nešić's role models, although she lives in Germany, she cites French “spectralists” Tristan Murail (b. 1947) and Gérard Grisey (1946–1998), as well as the Greek-French composer Georges Aperghis (b. 1945) as her main influences. Among her peers, Nešić has discovered a kinship with the work of the Montreal-based, Serbian-born, naturalised Canadian composer Ana Sokolović (b. 1968).

The next question was: should we consider Snežana Nešić a “Serbian” composer at all? Since she did not study composition in Serbia, and she neither joined the Serbian Composers' Union nor submitted her works to be performed at the annual International Review of Composers in Belgrade, her output has remained largely unknown in her homeland—unlike, for example, that of the aforementioned Ana Sokolović, who was “discovered” in Serbia in 2012, after a very successful premiere of her opera for six female voices; a cappella *Svadba - Wedding*. There is no one to blame for this situation: Nešić admits that she has not actively pursued performances in Serbia; yet she has not received invitations either. She would be happy to have her works performed in Serbia and to collaborate with her friends who have remained in the country; but, due to her numerous professional commitments, she does not have the time to put in sufficient effort to make it happen just yet. Hence, it would not

be inaccurate to nominate Nešić as the most successful contemporary Serbian composer who is yet to be discovered by Serbian audiences.

When asked about how she is perceived by the Germans, bowing to her national and professional allegiances Nešić is uncertain how to answer. She believes that, if she lived in a traditionally immigrant country such as Canada, she would probably be regarded as a Canadian composer of Serbian extraction. However, in present-day Germany, the issue of where someone was born is still quite important, at least for musicologists—i.e. the people who write histories of music, encyclopaedia articles, concert and CD/DVD reviews and, basically, create the entire discursive environment for the new music. Hence, in Germany, Nešić is regarded as a Serbian composer who happens to live in Germany—although her works have never actually been performed in Serbia. The best she can hope for, when it comes to her acceptance in the German contemporary music scene, can be observed in a recent interview with the Goethe Institute, where she was identified by a journalist as “The Serbian-German accordionist and composer Snežana Nešić”.¹⁴ She jokes that her birth certificate and passport take precedence over the fact that she has lived and worked in Germany for over two decades.

With respect to her adherence to certain traditions it is important to note that, unlike many Serbian émigré composers, Snežana Nešić has never used Serbian or Balkan folklore, or Orthodox church chants, or any other musical “markers” of her ethnic origin as sources of inspiration—although she has admitted to being inspired by fresco paintings from the Monastery of Sopoćani when composing her work *Painting of Light* for cello, accordion, string quartet and two string groups.¹⁵ Her approach to music creation is (self)consciously cosmopolitan, but actually Central European and decisively shaped by her German professional training. She has consistently avoided any national signifiers in her music due to her fear that they might sound “cheap” and “kitsch”, or simply distract the listener from everything else. Yet, she keeps several newspaper reviews in which German critics allegedly recognised some “oriental” elements in her music—although she claims that this is merely due to their pre-conceptions in regard to South-East European composers who, in their view, must always sound at least a little “exotic”, “different” or “other”.

Another layer of her identity is that of her gender. In stark contrast to the former Eastern bloc where women were encouraged to discard the centuries-

¹⁴ KRELL, Michael: *A Conversation with Snežana Nešić: Positive Traces – Goethe-Institut Kanada*, s.a., <https://www.goethe.de/ins/ca/en/kul/mag/21180352.html> (accessed 30.08.2019).

¹⁵ UNSELD, Melanie: *Im Blickpunkt: Snežana Nešić = Nina Noeske und Melanie Unsel, Jahrbuch Musik und Gender, Band 2 – Blickwechsel Ost | West Gender-Topographien*, Hildesheim, Georg Olms Verlag AD, 2009, 63–65.

long divide into male and female occupations and to pursue formerly male-dominated careers (including that of a composer of art music), which has resulted in the fact that nowadays women outnumber men in music composition and many other professional realms—in present-day Germany, female composers are still a minority. Nešić has identified this negative gender bias just by observing the number of students at composition departments across Germany and Austria, or the number of works by female composers performed at important festivals of new music—although she admits that things are slightly improving, compared to what the situation was like some twenty years ago. She draws attention to artistic directors of festivals, who habitually shun women composers. Nešić has also confessed to being shocked a few years ago when she attended a major contemporary music festival; the Wittener Tage für neue Kammermusik, and realised that there were no female composers on the programme.

Conclusion

In the final analysis of Snežana Nešić's Central European identity (or the lack of it), one would expect that an artist who left Serbia more than twenty years ago, before making any sort of impact there, and who has won major accolades in her adoptive country, would logically be regarded as a naturalised German composer or, at least, a Serbian-born German composer. Yet, this is not the case and, in Germany, Nešić is still stuck with her, essentially wrong, identity of a Serbian composer—based only on her birthplace and citizenship as the sole criteria for their inclusion into a certain social and cultural identity. Living "in the centre" of Central Europe did not centralize her, but quite the opposite—it emphasised the difference. On the other hand, the protagonists of the contemporary music scene in Serbia are yet to take notice of her work and introduce her to Serbian audiences. Because of this, Nešić is likely to remain "unclassifiable" for the time being, herself unsure whether or not she belongs to her homeland, and yet not fully integrated in her adoptive country. Were the funds for performances of contemporary music in Serbia more than minimal, it would have been possible to organise regular performances of substantial new works by Serbian composers in exile and to reinforce the feeling that they "still belong". Unlike some other, larger émigré groups, Serbian composers have been unable to establish diaspora communities abroad, mainly because they are so scattered across the five continents. Because of this, everyone is ultimately left to their own devices and, moreover, only they can decide whether they will strive to fully immerse themselves in their new environments, or remain émigré composers *ad infinitum*.

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