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## **RADIO ART AS A PLACE OF FREEDOM: Interview with Svetlana Maraš<sup>1</sup>**

For Svetlana Maraš, composer who works at the intersection of experimental music and sound art, radio is one of the crucial references in her creative work and career.<sup>2</sup> From 2016 to 2021 she was composer in residence and artistic director at Radio Belgrade Electronic studio. During this time, EMSs Synthi 100 was restored. This historically important synthesizer has a crucial role in her radio work *Post-Excavation Activities*, for which Maraš was awarded the Mokranjac prize, Serbia's highest recognition for composition. She combines her love for radio, live performance and composition with her teaching assignment as a Professor of Creative Music Technology at Hochschule für Musik FHNW, Basel, where she is also Co-head of Electronic Studio. Given the mutual appreciation for radio art, our conversation revolved around creative and listening experiences concerning this medium.

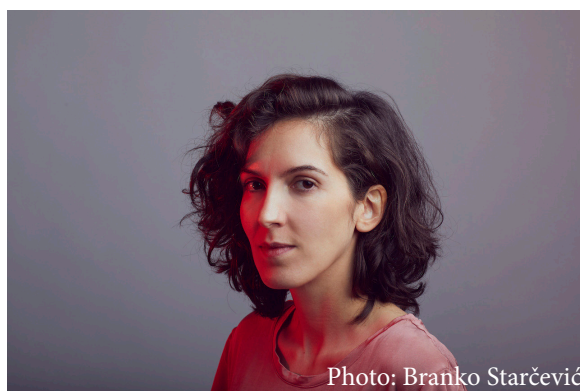


Photo: Branko Starčević

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1 The interview was realized with support from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia (RS-200176). Conversation was conducted via the Zoom platform, and the transcript was subsequently edited, condensed and authorized.

2 The full biography is available on composer's website: <https://www.svetlanamaras.com>.

*Reading one of your interviews, I was intrigued when you described your early experience while listening the LP of children radio drama Vuk i sedam kozlića. Was it usual when you were growing up to listen to audio books or radio dramas?*

The answer is: no, not at all! I got my hands on the record accidentally – it was my sister's. She was also playing the piano, and we had one at home, so I started composing on this piano from an early age, and this is why I wanted to go to music school initially – I was interested in music making. Something else also comes to my mind from back then, which drew my attention musically. I had a little book (nowadays they are quite common, but at the time, they were very rare)... When you open it, there is a little piano that you can play, and as you turn the pages there are pictures, sceneries to play along with. It was a game-like experience, and quite a lot like the record you mentioned, related to storytelling. I think probably this is what got me into the world of music and it corresponds to how I consider radio to be – full of storytelling and narrative in the widest sense. There is also a little bit of this childish, magical and wondrous spirit that I have connected to the radio (and music) ever since then.

*When did you realize that you could do something similar to the sound world you heard on that record and in the book? Did those experiences influence your interest in the tradition of concrete music, which you are reminiscing on in Post-Excavation Activities?*

I experimented with sound a lot, ever since I started working with it and quite a lot during the studies. Throughout primary music school and later during high school when I got my first computer, I was composing using MIDI and VSTs – technology which was not that highly developed at the time. Later on, it came spontaneously to experimenting with the no-input mixer and amplified objects, but I have not grown up on the tradition of concrete music, simply because there was no high awareness of it during all these explorations of mine. I think that the interest in a particular world of (small) sounds for me started very early (in my childhood) and became engraved somewhere in my musical memory and also probably in my musical sensibility. As I was developing the tools that I work with and became more skillful and versatile in working with sound, I tried to depict this sound-world that was already there. Concrete music and Schaeffer's approach – for me that way of working always looked like a laboratory which involved a great deal of experimentation. And this is where I saw a similarity to what I was doing. Unlike *Elektronische Musik* which draws you more into thinking very accurately about sound, its properties, and processes, concrete music was for me a way of getting into a materiality of sound through experimenting.

Also, the idea of capturing the worldly sounds onto the tape, like they did in early days of radiophonic music, always seemed very physical and appealing to me.

*Where does this physicality and tangibility come in if you work on a computer? How do you relate to it, how do you feel it? Can you tell me more about this discrepancy between this literal materiality in history and the way you work today?*

What helped in connecting these worlds for me was the field of improvisation. As an electronic musician, it is through improvisation that I developed my performing tools. I have a variety of controllers – tangible ones, pressure based, foot pedals – and they contribute a lot to what I can gain from sound. I developed a highly performative setup, and these real-time manipulations I often record and then I can use them as a material to compose with. I usually don't start from sampling a sound and working with it visually on a computer screen – there are lots of physical things involved in the process of making the sound. You can't achieve such a result by drawing automations in the software in the same way as using your body to play on an instrument. In this way, you can control the parameters very dynamically, and this expressiveness ends up engraved in the sound. Referring to *Post-Excavation Activities*, there was a lot of work done on the Synthesizer in this way, where the manipulations were momentary and this ended up in the recording. Movement and changes within the sound, for me, reflect in some way its materiality.



Photo: Irena Selaković



*In addition to the reminiscence and recreation of the materiality of work in the studio as laboratory, were you trying to creatively rethink the specific experience of listening to radio art, or maybe listening to magnetic tape with its own sound qualities?*

One important thing for me that I think about when speaking about electronic music, is “acoustic space” – how I call it nowadays. If you think very generally, the acoustic space of electronic music that we can hear on YouTube through our loudspeakers, this variety of albums, is a specific way of working with the sound in stereo format, and we are used to listening like this. It is an interesting phenomenon though, that requires a lot of thinking about how this space between the two speakers (left and right) is being used. Now, radio for me works a bit differently. Radio is a bit like a vacuum – it is an empty space without the resonance, which is its most important feature. And it’s not defined by any format – mono or stereo... Unlike the concert hall, acoustic space at radio is artificial, and we need to build it. It is not enough creating the sound itself but also the “space” where we place the sound. If we make one sound object – we can’t put it into this void, but we need to create a small universe around it. What for me radiophonic composition allows and, in a way, invites us to do, is to basically build these acoustic spaces throughout the whole piece and to move (together with the listener) through them. This is very exciting for me and much more enriching as an experience than having the whole album of mainstream electronic music, for example, fixed in one single place without moving anywhere. This way of working is related specifically to the radio, because of this ancient acousmatic idea that there is a curtain and we do not see anything on the other side of it. It is some sort of dark place where literally no sounds exist before we put them there. Therefore we create an illusion with each piece and we invite the listeners in. We are taking them on a journey through this virtual space that we created. There is something very physical to it because this is how listening works in real life – we are hearing something here, something crackles there, something sounds behind the window, we are moving through different rooms... There is much greater variety of acoustic spaces in real life than in produced music in general. Radiophonic composition invites going into a bit of a different direction, and rethinking this subject in a more creative way.

*As a historical phenomenon, radio art was connected to the studios, mostly within the institution of radio and the technical limitations of what can be broadcasted. In a contemporary digital environment, what do you extract from this historical context when you are working in radio art?*

I guess what connects radiophonic compositions since the early days is a feeling of “real-time” and something happening “live”. Radio is an ongoing thing that never stops. And music becomes something that you have to glue to this ever-rolling tape. There is no silence on the radio. I think this is what makes it special although it is not an audible quality. This makes a huge difference in the way we approach composing for the radio. I have experienced this by producing a show *Electronic studio live* (at Radio Belgrade 3) with my colleague Ksenija Stevanović and recently in Basel, in a project with my students and Radio SRF2 Kultur. In both shows, pieces were performed on the radio and broadcasted live. It was a very special feeling to follow this line of events, from making the sound in the studio to going live “on air”. There was something specific to it knowing that this sound that was being made, is going somewhere right now. It is quite different conceptually than if you are making something and you have this whole, finished piece from beginning to the end, which you present then. Live radio broadcast therefore is a very specific format, which creates a unique listening experience. If you have (like we did in these two shows I mentioned) performers and audience in the studio, technicians who are in charge of the broadcast, presenters announcing the show, all in one room, they are all part of the same process. During a live radio show like this, we are all listening with the same ears, and at the same time with the ears of the ones who will hear this in the radio broadcast. This is for me a beautiful and touching experience because it has something very emphatic and human to it, that unites us all, and I think this quality brings us closer to the sound and music itself.

*Regarding a newly found recognition of radio art in the music community, it is important to note that prior to recognition of your radio art work in 2020, Mokranjac was awarded to a radiophonic piece for the first time in 2017 to Ivana Stefanović for Veliki kamen. She noted that this was meaningful confirmation of her long-lasting attitude that radio art is musical art, although it was not perceived as such only few decades before. What are your thoughts on this complex relationship between music and radio art?*

I see it as historical question that mirrors the question of bringing noises into music, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the dilemma of whether noise is a musical sound. I think we went in theory and practice through these questions very thoroughly and we have come to the point where it is not necessary for us to deal with them anymore. Which is an amazing place to be at, really, considering how much struggle it took. To take Schaeffer as an example again – his work depicts this transition, from sound effects to musical sounds. We are so far

from it historically, that I have myself grown up on the thought that I can equally use anything that is sound or noise in my music. Also, looking at my students and how they produced pieces for the radio, I actually noticed how much more freedom there is to decide what the material that we work with is, and how we manipulate these different layers. Nowadays, we can work with variety of sounds – referential or not-referential ones, soundscapes, music (in a more conventional sense) – all within one work, and all these different layers of acoustic being could have different importance in the piece. Just the fact that we can very freely combine all of them tells a lot about the heterogenous state of things that we have right now. The work of Hanna Hartman is a great example of this – how she mixes materials of different origins and derives amazing musicality from concrete sounds, leaving us with a question mark: what is it that we are hearing? Considering all of this, I think the distinctions between music and radio art, or any other format, are not there anymore.



Photo: Andrey Gordasevich

*Judging by research projects, exhibitions and literature on radio art, it seems that the field is becoming ever more interesting for practitioners and theoreticians alike in recent years. What do you think is happening now that is sparking this interest?*

In my experience while working with students, I noticed that they had no connection to radio at all. Somehow it does seem to be old medium for the people who were born maybe in the 2000s. In that sense it did not seem to me that radio is a widely accepted and very popular medium, except for us enthusiasts. Interesting people are bringing it into the cultural field in a new way and trying to find some new formats for the old medium, but it does not seem that young people resonate with it a lot. What is interesting is that once they found themselves on the other side of the production process and made works for the radio (my students), it opened up an amazingly creative space which they enjoyed, because they stepped out of what their work was otherwise, into something new. This is connected to everything I said before about considering these acoustic spaces and also the certain storytelling that comes with the use of sounds. I think in that way radio is always, when compared to musical mainstream, something more creative, more free and more experimental. It is really a place of freedom.

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