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## Star Persona and National Identity in the Age of the Empire: The Role of Maja Strozzi-Pečić in Petar Konjović's Opus

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### Abstract

This study explores the collaboration between the soprano Maja Strozzi-Pečić and the composer Petar Konjović. It sheds light on the relations between the star and the musical work, as well as the notions of gender and genre, reinstating the performer to the centre of the historical stage within the epoch and the genre of music not usually associated with stardom. It examines the star as both the product and the producer, and as an embodiment of a national identity, highlighting the star's agency in the creation of her own persona and the co-authoring of the works that she performed.

### Keywords

Maja Strozzi-Pečić, Petar Konjović, art song, stardom, national identity

### Introduction

Despite an engagement with the issues of *body* and *voice*, particularly in popular music, research into Balkan musical identities centres largely on composers and their works. This is particularly the case with the research on the role of music in the formation of small-state nationalism in the Balkans at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the role of the performer largely passed over. Though traditional notions of the 'work-concept' and the role of the performer have been challenged in the last couple of decades, with studies on the careers of famous singers, studies on body and voice and performance studies all finally changing the commonly perceived role of singers as 'megaphones' – that is, instruments to amplify the composer's voice – the singers' contributions have not been explored further (Strohm 2002).

The story of Croatian soprano Maja Strozzi-Pečić (1882–1962) shows how, even in the realm of art song, star production and the performer could shape the repertoire, deploying nationalism to

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promote both the star and the music. Strozzi-Pečić was a top opera singer who subsequently turned into an active promoter of a ‘national repertoire’, collaborating with a number of composers.<sup>2</sup> She formed a particularly close partnership with Petar Konjović (1883–1970), who dedicated all of his songs to her.

In this article I argue that the role of Strozzi-Pečić in the genesis of this repertoire was manifold: as a performer, authoring distinct performance mannerisms which helped shape the composers’ melodic lines; as an inspiration for folk song collections and arrangements; and as a performer whose dramatic interpretations shaped both the works and the public reception of the songs that she performed as expressions of a ‘national’ identity. I will particularly examine the role of Strozzi-Pečić’s star factor in this process.

### *Issues of voice and national identity*

Among the many meanings that the term voice has for scholars, I draw on Strohm’s definition to interpret the evidence found. The term *voice* encompasses a multitude of facets, embracing the vocalist’s instrument, casting history, personality and the qualities that he or she is famous for. According to Strohm, the singer’s *voice* interacts with other voices creating the work, with the work performed eventually made up of a ‘conglomeration of voices’ – stories, authors, fictional characters, performers and listeners/readers (Strohm 2002: 53–58). Although he discussed it in the realm of *dramma per musica*, it can be applied to Serbian art song as well. Just as *dramma per musica* often revolved around a particular singer, Konjović’s output was centred on Strozzi-Pečić, calling thus for this research and a belated recognition of her contribution. The emphasis on the information about historical reception is vital both for the evaluation of Strozzi-Pečić’s star status with audiences and critics, as well as the reception of the repertoire presented as the newly established ‘national music’.

The question of national identity in the Balkans has been a highly politically charged issue throughout the history. Creating a distinctive cultural identity was a key task for small nations fighting for independence from two Empires (Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian) at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The emerging Yugoslav idea and subsequent formation of the joint Yugoslav state further complicated the musical landscape (Djokić 2003). The ‘locality’ of composers posed more questions at times as many of them lived and

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘national repertoire’ stands here for the repertoire written by the composers from the territory of the former Yugoslavia. I will look closer into the definition of ‘national’ later in the text.

worked in countries other than the ones of their origin, often being appropriated by their ‘adoptive’ environments (including parts of the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes i.e. Kingdom of Yugoslavia).<sup>3</sup> Konjović spent most of his early career in Croatia, gaining initial recognition as a composer there. His studies in Prague as well as the time spent in Croatia broadened the borders of his ‘imagined homeland’. He shared the dominant idea among South Slavic intellectuals of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – the idea of Yugoslavism, understood mostly as a cultural union of kindred but separate nations<sup>4</sup> (Trgovčević 2003). Konjović’s five-volume song collection *Moja zemlja* [My Country], subtitled *100 jugoslovenskih narodnih pesama za glas i klavir* [100 Yugoslav Folk Songs for Voice and Piano] can be regarded as his musical manifesto of Yugoslavism (Tomašević 2014: 89).

In the time of shifting borders and changing ideology, the terminology used by the composers was inevitably fluid. Konjović was no exception to the composers’ practice at the time to use both national/ethnic (Serbian/Croatian/Slovene) and Yugoslav attributes in their works, as well as Balkan and Slavic ones (Vasić 2004; Milanović 2008; Atanasovski 2011). Defining the ‘national’ in these complex identity grids within which Konjović and Strozzi-Pečić were operating is beyond the scope of this article. I use the term ‘national’ as an umbrella for the repertoire composed, as well as for the composers’ projections of emerging musical identities in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. Rather than focus on explaining the variable terminology within the context of Konjović’s ‘integral Yugoslavism’, I will use the terms ‘Serbian’, ‘ours’ and ‘Yugoslav’ as he used them in his writings.<sup>5</sup> I will explore whether Strozzi-Pečić’s agency helped Konjović to shape and draw the borders of his ‘imagined homeland’; also, how her performances delivered these ideas to the audiences and whether her projection of a ‘national’ music identity corresponded to his.

<sup>3</sup> Best known are the cases of Davorin Jenko (1835–1914), an ethnic Slovene, and Josip Slavenski (1896–1955), an ethnic Croat, who both lived and worked in Serbia.

<sup>4</sup> Historians have often overlooked the musicians’ role in creating national identities. Ljubinka Trgovčević (2003) mentions no musicians, be it composers, critics or performers, although she writes about writers, painters and sculptors. Further complicating the question of national identity was formation of new states during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with political establishments accordingly recognising and re-appropriating certain composers (Milin 2014; Marković 2009).

<sup>5</sup> For more information about Konjović’s evolving political profile see: Tomašević 2014.

## Who is singing?

Recent studies on music in the Balkans have filled the void of previously almost nonexistent literature on the topic in English.<sup>6</sup> They deal with different aspects of musical life in the region, but one important avenue usually remains closed. Who was performing the repertoire? Performers in general, and singers in this particular case, are rarely ‘heard’, with existing studies on performers usually focused on popular music and recent history.<sup>7</sup> Classical singers are still denied claims to authorship and their agency in the creation of a musical work during the performance, and in the case of the national identity as well, remains unrecognised. There are various examples of acknowledged chauvinism in discourses of music history, whether towards small nations, gender or various minorities groups, and the oversight of performers is no exception. In a system run by music historians, an ‘outsider’ view by a singer can provide a different insight by shifting the focus from grand narratives to music as a performing art; exploring agencies, events and practices rather than works (Fulcher 2011).

### *The Composer and his Muse – Recovering the Lost Voice of Maja Strozzi-Pečić*

Strozzi-Pečić was born in Zagreb into an artistic family. Her mother was a famous Croatian actress Marija Ružička-Strozzi, herself an aspiring singer who switched to acting after an illness. After initial studies in Zagreb, Strozzi-Pečić went to Vienna where she studied singing with J. Gansbacher. Following her operatic debut in 1901 in Wiesbaden as Zerline (Auber, *Fra Diavolo*), she joined Opera in Graz in 1903. She joined Zagreb Opera as Rosina (Rossini, *The Barber of Seville*) in 1910, where she sang until her retirement from the operatic stage. Her roles included Madame Butterfly (Puccini), Rusalka (Dvořák), Lucia di Lammermoor (Donizetti), Mimi (Puccini, *La Bohème*), Melisande (Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*), Marguerite (Gounod, *Faust*), Desdemona (Verdi, *Otello*) and Violetta (Verdi, *La Traviata*) – her signature role.

Strozzi-Pečić was a world-famous Violetta of her time. Thomas Mann in his novel *Doktor Faustus* described her as “perhaps the

<sup>6</sup> For more information on historiography see: Romanou 2014. There has been a surge in scholarly interest in the last couple of years, partly fuelled by the centenary of the beginning of World War I. Recent publications include Samson 2013; Milin and Samson 2014; Medić and Tomašević 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Samson discusses ‘divas’ in ‘turbo folk’ music in the Balkans (Samson 2013: 605–611); and Petrov deals with the success of Yugoslav popular music in the Soviet Union in the 1950s and onwards (Petrov 2014).

most beautiful voice of both hemispheres” (Mann 1948: chapter 37), and, amongst many other composers, Igor Stravinsky dedicated four songs to her.<sup>8</sup> However, there are virtually no scholarly works about her. While modern scholars acknowledge Konjović’s role in forging an early twentieth-century Serbian musical identity within the supranational Yugoslav identity, Strozzi-Pečić’s contributions have gone largely unnoticed.<sup>9</sup>

At the time when Strozzi-Pečić was already a famous opera singer, Konjović was still a fairly unknown composer. Born in Čurug – then within the borders of Austro-Hungarian Empire, nowadays in Vojvodina, the northern province of Serbia – he was a self-taught musician by the time he submitted his first opera *Ženidba Miloševa* [The Marriage of Miloš] to Prague Conservatory in 1904. He was accepted to the second year of studies and graduated in 1906. He was director of both Opera (1921–1926) and Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb (1933–1935), Rector and Professor at the Music Academy in Belgrade, and the founder and first director of the Institute of Musicology of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

Konjović first met Strozzi-Pečić in a concert organised by the Serbo-Croat Academic Youth Organisation in Budapest in 1914.<sup>10</sup> In 1916 Konjović and Strozzi-Pečić started their collaboration in Zagreb, with an impromptu session resulting in *Sabah* [Morning] – one of Konjović’s most vocally demanding songs, to which I will return later.<sup>11</sup> The following year Strozzi-Pečić premiered Konjović’s songs in Zagreb, and afterwards regularly performed them until one of her last concerts in 1951.<sup>12</sup> They collaborated both on the concert and opera stages, including the Yugoslav premiere of *Pelléas and Mélisande* in Zagreb in 1923, which Konjović conducted with Strozzi-Pečić singing the title role.

Although Strozzi-Pečić actively performed until the 1930s, there are unfortunately no recordings of her voice. The only evidence available is in the ‘ventriloquistic detritus’: descriptions by critics, admirers and the like, with a wealth of surviving visual evidence overwhelming the lost voice<sup>13</sup> (Smart 1994: 32). Recordings

<sup>8</sup> Igor Stravinsky, *Quatre Chants Russes Pour Voix et Piano*, London: J&W Chester, 1920.

<sup>9</sup> For the most up-to-date list of writings on Petar Konjović see: Tomašević 2011.

<sup>10</sup> On 28 February 1914 Strozzi-Pečić sang two songs (*Jesenja Elegija* and *Japan*) by Miloje Milojević (1884–1946), Serbian composer and a close friend of Konjović. Pianist Rajna Dimitrijević performed Konjović’s piano piece (*Legenda*).

<sup>11</sup> Konjović composed *Sabah* to his own lyrics about unrequited love.

<sup>12</sup> Strozzi-Pečić celebrated her seventieth birthday with a recital in the concert hall Istra in Zagreb on 8 December 1951. She sang Konjović’s song *Umre, umre Rajole* from his song collection *Moja zemlja* [My Homeland].

<sup>13</sup> Maja Strozzi-Pečić’s collection held in *Hrvatski glazbeni zavod* (HGZ) [Croatian Music Institute] in Zagreb holds a vast amount of photo-postcards, photographs,

from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century showed that singers produced bright vowels and quick vibrato; used more portamento and rubato, and transposed or omitted high notes more often (Crutchfield 2012). The extensive body of research into performance practice based on recordings of singers from that era can be used to extrapolate the same conclusions about Strozzi-Pečić's vocal style, although these remain inevitably speculative (Day 2002; Cook et al 2009; Leech-Wilkinson 2009).<sup>14</sup>

The most detailed account on Strozzi-Pečić is actually by Konjović, in his essay *Maja de Strozzi*; the essay was first published in a journal *Savremenik* in 1918, i.e. just a year after Strozzi-Pečić premiered his songs in Zagreb:

Her voice is not big and it does not affect one with its volume; its virtues lay elsewhere. She is an unusually delicate soprano, slightly covered in the middle range, which gives it a certain edge, dark and fluid in the lower range. Vibrant and elastic, without tremolo though slightly nervous at times, it is able to paint the finest lines in music, from the Italian fioraturas and coloraturas to the melancholy of our folk song. Her artistic self oscillates between those two simultaneously existing poles (Konjović 1920: 106).

Konjović praised not just Strozzi-Pečić's vocal technique, but also her acting skills and her psychological portrayal of coloraturas, setting her apart from all other performers. He particularly found it evident in her role in *La Traviata*, where she managed to surpass the failings of a "frail libretto" and transform a "poor and meager piece" into an impressive dramatic creation that evokes the strongest emotions on "our" stage (Ibid: 108–109).

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programmes. According to the curator Nada Bezić, the amount of material implying Maja Strozzi-Pečić's star status exceeds that of any other singer of that time. Another significant Strozzi-Pečić collection is held in *Muzej grada Samobora* [Samobor Town Museum].

<sup>14</sup> It is therefore of particular interest to read Konjović's review of Elena Gerhardt's concert in Zagreb in 1918, both to help 'recover' the voice of Strozzi-Pečić and review the changes in performance practice (Konjović 1920: 170–173). Elena Gerhardt (1883–1961), German mezzo-soprano and Strozzi-Pečić's contemporary, was famous for her Lieder performance. Konjović praised her performance, which would be considered "frankly appalling" by today's standards (Leech-Wilkinson 2009: chapter 4, paragraph 1), for her colossal vocal technique, an even vocal production in all registers and an amazing breath control. Konjović criticised her lack of passion though, a trait that he valued highly in Strozzi-Pečić's performances. Strozzi-Pečić was an opera singer who ventured into Lieder later in her career, as opposed to Gerhardt who specialised as a concert singer from the start. Strozzi-Pečić's operatic experience may have influenced her emotionally charged performances that Konjović approved of. His stand corresponds with a general trend towards more emotionally expressive performances in all kinds of music during the first four decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Leech-Wilkinson 2009: chapter 4, paragraph 23).

Particularly valuable is Konjović's witness account of Strozzi-Pečić's transition into the concert repertoire and, subsequently, national repertoire. At the beginning of the World War One Strozzi-Pečić took a two-year break from the operatic stage due to a dispute with the Opera House management. Bela Pečić, her husband, an excellent amateur pianist, undertook a mission to facilitate his wife's evolution into a Lieder singer. He diverted her professional path from theatre into a 'noble' performance of art song (Ibid: 112–116). After performing works by French, German and Russian composers, Strozzi-Pečić turned to the 'national' repertoire. I will later explore in detail her activity in this field, but at this point I wish to highlight the extent to which 'national art' and Strozzi-Pečić's part in creating it were the main focus for Konjović: "her biggest merit is the fact that she dedicated herself completely to the service of national art, and with her artistic skills she raised the standard of our singing tradition" (Ibid: 105). Konjović disagreed when Strozzi-Pečić complained that "Composers' art is a lasting one, performers' art is a fading one"; in his view, the power of a performer's artistic persona determines the audience's reception of the piece: it is the performers who shape collective memory and the audience's taste, give the artwork a stamp and help decide the work's destiny (Ibid: 104–105):

The art song, where the souls of a poet and a composer meet to create the most honest of all music forms, needs the input of the third soul – the performer's. The performer has to eliminate the poet, the composer, and the voice itself, creating thus the work as the purest impression (Ibid: 170–171).

Critics at the time acknowledged Strozzi-Pečić input: "Together with Konjović and Nikolić [lyrics], she was the third author of this song" (*Obzor*, 6 March 1917). However, despite what composers and critics wrote about Strozzi-Pečić, there is still hardly any mention of her in scholarly studies. Perhaps if composers were writing the music histories, since they are more acutely aware of the unique value that the right performer can bring to their pieces, the performers' contribution would be appreciated more.

### Maja Strozzi-Pečić – a Star

A champion of the 'national' art song, as well as a celebrated prima donna, Strozzi-Pečić was arguably more influential than Konjović in the first decades of the twentieth century. There are numerous reviews of her unrivaled status with the audiences and critics, but could she be called a *star*? Do any of the scholarly criteria of stardom apply to her? Could it be argued that the economic, social

and technological conditions needed to allow the stars to reflect the audiences' tastes were met in Croatia at the time?<sup>15</sup> Considering the surge in interest in stardom and celebrity in contemporary popular discourse and the perceived change in the nature of modern stardom, it is easy to disregard the past. There have been shifts in the nature of fame, with apparent move towards a culture of 'attributed' celebrity, emerging from concentrated media representation, rather than previous 'achieved' celebrity, linked to talent and accomplishment (Rojek 2001). However, many of the concepts of stardom discourse, starting with Dyer's focus on stars and ideology, remain universal (Dyer 1979). Musicologists in the Balkans have not looked into how scholarship on modern day stars may have a bearing in the cases of specific singers who shaped the repertoire.

The concept of stardom encompasses different criteria depending on the field of study. For musicologists, a star is a performer of unparalleled virtuosity. For theatre and cinema scholars, a star is a commodity with a unique value depending on their irreproducibility. A star's value is conditioned by consumer demand and scholars recognise stardom when a performer becomes essential to the marketing and dissemination of an entertainment<sup>16</sup> (Joncus 2010: 277). I argue that Strozzi-Pečić fulfills all of these criteria.

### *Virtuosity*

Konjović was not alone in admiring Strozzi-Pečić's outstanding coloraturas and acting skills. There are numerous reviews of her operatic performances, praising her coloraturas in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, or her acting skills in *La Boheme* and *La Traviata*; reports of enthralled audiences and numerous curtain calls. She is often distinguished from other singers, the characteristic deemed essential for the acquisition of a star status (Morin 1962):

Audience, usually not generous when praising local artists, yesterday called Maja for ten curtain calls after [Lucia's] madness scene (*Male novine*, 14 March 1913).

While performances of this [Lucia's] aria by Hempel, Kurz or Bosetti [sopranos performing in Croatian Opera] sound dazzling and spectacular,

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<sup>15</sup> Joncus (2010) examines the sociological parameters of stardom and their applicability to *dramma per musica*. The surplus of labour in the entertainment market, entertainment that is centralised and specialised, as well as consumers with purchasing power, were the conditions mostly met in Croatia at the time of Strozzi-Pečić's and Konjović's collaboration.

<sup>16</sup> Joncus uses the model proposed by Barry King (1987) to identify stardom at work in *dramma per musica*. I argue that it can apply to these particular circumstances as well.

in the performance by Mrs. Strozzi coloratura is in service of musical expression; we forget virtuosity because we are enchanted by art (*Hrvatski pokret*, 15 March 1913).

Strozzi-Pečić's comeback to the opera stage after her self-imposed break was described as a revelation: "the audience did not realize the artistic value they enjoyed in her performances until they lost it" (*Pokret*, 20 January 1915).

### *Irreproducibility*

The concert in Budapest in 1914 where Konjović and Strozzi-Pečić met for the first time proved to be pivotal for Konjović's work. Although he first heard her perform in Belgrade Opera in 1911, the Budapest concert was the first time he heard her sing the 'national' repertoire. According to Konjović, that concert was a sign that Strozzi-Pečić's calling was to promote the artistic folk song among Yugoslav people in her concerts:

In Budapest... in the young composer Miloje Milojević's heartfelt gratitude, whom she helped so much in achieving success, Maja felt all the lure and power of her [newly discovered] artistic mission (Konjović 1920: 111).

This quote highlights Strozzi-Pečić's contribution to the songs' success. When, two years later, Konjović was trying to organise his first concert in Zagreb, there was no doubt in his mind who should be performing his songs:

I am still waiting for a reply from Maja Strozzi, to decide if there will be a concert. She has been in a dispute with the Opera management since before the war started and has not performed in Zagreb since. I am not putting my hopes too high up, but I will not go ahead without her (Mosusova 1971: 163).<sup>17</sup>

Strozzi-Pečić agreed to perform Konjović's songs, and the concert was held on 3 March 1917 in the concert hall of the Croatian Conservatoire. Strozzi-Pečić and baritone Marko Vušković (1877–1960) sang eleven songs.<sup>18</sup> Such was the success of the concert that it was repeated only three weeks later, on 24 March 1917. For a young composer wishing to present his work for the first time, to rather

<sup>17</sup> This quote is from a letter to Tihomir Ostojić (1865–1921), a distinguished literary historian and music connoisseur, who was Konjović's professor at Grand Serbian Orthodox High School in Novi Sad. For more on Konjović's and Ostojić's friendship see: Tomašević 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Strozzi-Pečić sang *Chanson*, *Iščekivanje*, *Večernja pesma*, *Pod pendžeri*, *San zaspala*, *Nane*, *kaži tajku* and *Sabah*. Vušković sang *Minadir*, *Ukop*, *Noć* and *Čekanje*.

not have it performed if not by Strozzi-Pečić is a telling sign of her unique value. Though it can be argued that he chose Strozzi-Pečić simply because of her vocal skills, I believe it not to be the case. She was not only a good singer, but a singer whose performing gifts let her uniquely make his music a force for binding together members of a community.

### Strozzi-Pečić's Star Persona and the Creation of the 'National'

So far I have explored the collaboration between Konjović and Strozzi-Pečić and her role in the creation of his vocal oeuvre, as well as her links with the 'national' repertoire written by other composers. She was a performer whose vocal qualities influenced the composers' melodic line and prompted the collection of folk songs that the composers elevated to the level of an art song by tailoring them to her strengths. I will now argue that her input went even further, and that she served as an interpreter whose dramatic representations shaped the public reception of the songs performed as expressions of the 'national' identity.

#### *Melodic Lines*

In case of at least one song we have Konjović's direct testimony of Konjović's and Strozzi-Pečić's 'co-authorship'. In a letter to Ostojić dated 25 June 1916 Konjović wrote that Maja de Strozzi spoke to him about her artistic plans involving the national repertoire and asked to see his songs. The following day they met again, and Konjović was so fascinated by how she sang the songs he had brought, that they had an impromptu session improvising a new song (Mosusova 1971: 158). The song in question was the aforementioned *Sabah*, Konjović's most vocally demanding and, with its fioraturas and an optional ending on the high C in piano dynamics, his most 'operatic' song. In Strozzi-Pečić's collection in HGZ there is Konjović's sketch of this song with his dedication "Improvisation - to Maja de Strozzi" dated 15 June 1916. The extent to which both sides were impressed with their budding collaboration is evident from Konjović's passing comment in the same letter: only a few days after their meeting, Strozzi-Pečić sent Konjović a telegram asking urgently for sheet music of his songs. *Sabah* was hugely successful with the audiences and the critics alike: "The way she sang *Sabah* was a crown she placed on the composer" (*Obzor*, 6 March 1917). But although she was praised for her performance, her role in creating the song was never recognised. However, it cannot be ignored though its fioraturas

match the tessitura, the outline and even some notes of the first Violetta/Alfredo duet, and the ending of the song matches the end of Violetta's second aria, undoubtedly as the result of Strozzi-Pečić's improvisation on her signature role.

Though Konjović's melodic lines became more elaborate during this time, the creative collaboration with Strozzi-Pečić did not end solely with his song opus:

While talking about the *sevdalinka* style, she [Strozzi-Pečić] asked me if it would be possible to compose an opera in that style. I told them [Strozzi-Pečić and Bela Pečić] about *Koštana*, the one that I have been carrying in my heart for some time now, in the hope that the passionate motifs from Vranje [a town in the southern part of Serbia] could create a new Carmen. The enthusiasm she showed, and the way she understood instantly the soul of this music with her supple voice and passionate heart fuelled my desire and nothing will quench my angst till my dream becomes a finished work (Mosusova 1971: 158).<sup>19</sup>

Konjović worked on his most popular opera *Koštana* with Strozzi-Pečić in mind. However, the realisation of the project took longer than expected and by 1931, when it premiered, she was no longer actively performing on opera stage. However, for ten years from their first creative meeting they collaborated extensively on Konjović's song opus. There are Konjović's sketches in Strozzi-Pečić collection showing he was sending her his musical ideas in initial stages. At times these were no more than a couple of bars long phrases of vocal line, as if asking for her opinion or validation of the folk motives he chose to arrange.

### *Folk Song Arrangements*

Konjović started arranging folk songs during his student days in Prague, publishing the five-song collection *Iz naših krajeva* [From our lands] in 1906.<sup>20</sup> His interest in this repertoire intensified during his time in Croatia, resulting in the aforementioned collection *Moja zemlja*. Tomašević uses these two collections to explore the shifting borders of Konjović's imagined homeland (Tomašević 2014). *Moja zemlja* includes arrangements from all parts of the former Yugoslavia, composed between 1905 and 1925. Konjović worked on it mostly while he lived in Croatia and it would certainly be farfetched to claim

<sup>19</sup> Mosusova mentions briefly Strozzi-Pečić and *Sabah* (Mosusova 2011), but only in the context of Konjović's opera *Koštana*.

<sup>20</sup> The first song in this collection, *Pod pendžeri* [Under your window] is Konjović's original work – he wrote both the lyrics and music.

that Strozzi-Pečić was the crucial factor influencing his broadening of the geographical area covered by the songs. However, their ongoing exchange of the music material that he worked on, documented in the song sketches preserved in HGZ, indicates that she was actively involved in the process of creating the collection. She regularly performed songs from *Moja zemlja* alongside Konjović's original songs, which was certainly an incentive for such an increase in their number. Telling of her role is also the chronology of Konjović's song opus. He arranged the bulk of the songs from the collection *Moja zemlja* while he lived in Zagreb and actively collaborated with Strozzi-Pečić. After he left Zagreb in 1926, he not only stopped arranging folk songs, but he never again composed a single original song either.<sup>21</sup>

### *Maja Strozzi-Pečić – The Face and Voice of National Identity*

*Moja zemlja* was not the only instance of Strozzi-Pečić's active part in the creation of the 'national' repertoire. Rather than merely arranging the folk songs, Konjović and other composers set poems specifically with her in mind. Antun Dobronić (1878–1955), Croatian composer and music critic, wrote a review to mark Strozzi-Pečić's celebration of 25 years in Croatian Opera. He singled out Violetta as the "role and *face* [my italics] she is best known for". However, just like Konjović, Dobronić put an emphasis on her transition to concert activity, the fact he credited her husband for. According to Dobronić, the actual scope of this [national] repertoire is largely due to the efforts of this "artistic power-couple", as Bela Pečić "literally chased and nagged" the composers to compose more songs for them to perform. He listed composers "who should feel personally indebted to Maja and Bela" [in the following order] – Konjović, [Božidar] Širola, [Jakov] Gotovac, [Zlatko] Grgošević, [Marko] Tajčević and himself (*Narodne novine*, 4 April 1936).

Strozzi-Pečić's transition to the 'national' repertoire can itself be viewed in the light of her star production. The change of genre is often a tool for reinventing the failing star, as giving the old image a new framework allows the star persona to be reread through the lens of a new genre. It could be argued that, rather than a patriotic sentiment, Strozzi-Pečić's change of genre was simply a clever assessment of then current consumer demand which she used to rebrand her star persona. It could also be argued that she chose the

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<sup>21</sup> Konjović focused on instrumental music and opera after leaving Zagreb. There is a manuscript of one unfinished song (*Jesenja pesma* [Autumnal Song]) in the archive of the Institute of Musicology SASA (catalog number PK172), which dates after this period.

genre of art song for being the last refuge for autonomous art work, one not being tainted with celebrity consumer driven opera world that she had a conflict with. Stepping out of that opera world into the realm of the ‘noble art’ provided a ‘magical’ moment, giving her the necessary ‘it factor’ (Roach 2007). Regardless of the driving force behind it, starting from the concert in Budapest in 1914, she was an established promoter – the *face* of the ‘national’ repertoire. When Konjović chose Strozzi-Pečić to premiere his songs, he did not choose her merely as an accomplished singer. The fact that she premiered a certain repertoire gave it double gravity, marking it both as the work of high artistic standards and the representative of the ‘national’ repertoire – a highly sought-after trait at that time:

Maja Strozzi was born to be an apostle of *our* [my italics] folk song, which she performs with her artistic instinct and her vast musical culture like no one before her (*Obzor*, 6 March 1917)

(She) is famous for her operatic and demanding concert repertoire, but we were surprised how, using the simplest natural means, particularly her clear diction and supple voice, she made these [Konjović’s] songs particularly enchanting. She is, without a doubt, the best performer of the lyrical folk song (*Nezavisnost*, 26 May 1917)

Strozzi-Pečić toured extensively accompanied by Bela Pečić, performing both Konjović’s folk arrangements and original songs, embodying and shaping the national identity that the composer created. Her reputation as a champion of the ‘national’ art preconditioned the audiences’ reception of the repertoire she presented. A detailed analysis of her concert programmes calls for a separate study, but in general, the ‘national’ identity she projected was Yugoslav. She sang songs by composers from all parts of the territory that would form the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. When choosing the folk song arrangements for her concerts, she selected songs from across the region and performed them as par to the original songs. She used the ‘Yugoslav’ attribute in her concert programmes, referring both to the music and the composers. Of particular interest is a concert held on 19 January 1919 in Zurich, titled “A Night of Slavic songs – Works by Yugoslav, Czech-Slovak and Russian Composers”. According to Ernst Isler (1879–1944), this concert proved that *Yugoslav* music [my italics] existed, and could be compared in value to Russian and Czech traditions.<sup>22</sup> Isler found that some of Konjović’s songs had an operatic quality [among other songs Strozzi-Pečić performed *Sabah*]; he particularly valued the fact that his music drew both its melodic

<sup>22</sup> The quote is from Strozzi-Pečić’s personally annotated interview notes, held in HGZ.

line and harmony from the characteristics of the language, a comment which would have been the ultimate compliment for Konjović who wrote extensively on this topic.

Numerous reviews of Strozzi-Pečić's enthralled audiences give an overwhelming evidence of Strozzi-Pečić's binding power for the nationalist ambitions articulated by the composers whose works she performed. The following excerpt may be read as a common patriotic manifesto of that time, but it also highlights the complexity of the national landscape in the region:

Maja de Strozzi was no longer an artist supposed to entertain the audience. That night, her art was intertwined with the audience's national feelings, as if her soul whispered after each song: "yes, I am yours, we belong to each other".

She was supposed to finish the concert with Konjović's song *Sabah*, but it was not to be. It was as if with this song she touched everyone's emotions and lifted them in thoughts to 'Allah', and as if in *The Nightingale* [a character in the song] she depicted our people, who are crying for freedom that was promised by 'Allah'... (*Primorske novine*, 30 May 1917).

Strozzi-Pečić, a Croatian singer, sang a song by a Serbian composer that evokes Bosnian *sevdalinka* tradition and calls Allah. None of these facts seemed to get in the way for the Croatian audience in Rijeka, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to applaud the performer and share the 'national' sentiment.

## Conclusion

While there are numerous studies of the ideas that Konjović promoted in his music and writing, so far there has hardly been any mention of Strozzi-Pečić, the singer who was the first voice and face of his songs. By exploring the role that Strozzi-Pečić played in Konjović's creative output, I have attempted to give the performers their rightful place as co-authors of the work. Though it would be an exaggeration to claim that this repertoire would not exist without Strozzi-Pečić, it is certain that she was instrumental in its creation, with *Sabah* and *Moja zemlja* as the most obvious examples of Konjović's and Strozzi-Pečić's collaboration. Her input went further than that, as she also played a vital role in the audiences' reception of this repertoire. Would it be met with the same response if someone else was singing it? Could it have been another soprano or a male singer? Without going into discussion about the male gaze, scopophilia or the effects of a female voice (Mulvey 1975), it is worth noting that the

champions of the national repertoire in both Croatia and Serbia were women. Soprano Ivanka Milojević (1881–1975) was the first concert singer in Serbia and an active promoter of the ‘national repertoire’. In the patriarchal environment of Serbia and Croatia at that time, both sopranos performed almost exclusively with their husbands as accompanists: Strozzi-Pečić with Bela Pečić, and Ivanka Milojević with Miloje Milojević. The testimonies about Ivanka Milojević are much more scarce due to the fact that she did not command the same star status as Strozzi-Pečić – possibly because she did not sing opera, the most visible form of vocal performance in Belgrade at that time. Their gender, however, opens a significant question beyond the scope of this paper: that of the role of a female as a binding force in identity formation.

Strozzi-Pečić, an internationally recognised performer, a celebrated prima donna, a star, was the winning choice to advocate Konjović’s ideas – i.e. to integrate Serbian art music, as part of Yugoslav music, into the modern European musical nations’ landscape:

We are not the ones to estimate the musical value of these songs, but Mrs. Strozzi sang them in such a way that the audience, by approving her interpretation, also approved this upcoming composer’s work (*Nezavisnost*, 26 May 1917).

It could be debated whether her shift to the “national” repertoire was a calculated move in order to reinvent her star persona or a sincere patriotic quest for the national musical identity. What is evident, however, is that, thanks to the attention commanded by her status of an operatic star and the resulting publicity, she embodied for the audience the nationalist ambitions articulated by the composers that she promoted. Her agency in the creation of her own persona and the co-authoring of the works that she performed needs to be recognised by the scholars in the same way as it was recognised by her audience, thus opening new ways to address the persistently neglected performers’ role in shaping musical works.

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*Верица Грмуша*

## ПОЈАМ ЗВЕЗДЕ И ПРОБЛЕМ НАЦИОНАЛНОГ ИДЕНТИТЕТА У ДОБА ИМПЕРИЈА: ДОПРИНОС МАЈЕ СТРОЦИ-ПЕЧИЋ СТВАРАЛАШТВУ ПЕТРА КОЊОВИЋА

(Резиме)

Упркос скорашњим разматрањима проблема *џела* и *зласа*, посебно на подручју популарне музике, проучавање музичких идентитета на Балкану углавном је усмерено на композиторе и њихова дела. Ово је нарочито видљиво када се проучава улога музике у формирању национализма малих држава на Балкану у доба великих империја, при чему је проучавање доприноса извођача у потпуности занемарено. Разматрање животног пута хрватског сопрана Маје Строци-Печић (1882–1962) указује како су, чак и у домену уметничке песме, статус звезде и извођач могли да утичу на обликовање репертоара, при чему је национализам стављен у службу промовисања и саме звезде и музичких дела.

Као прослављена хрватска оперска звезда, Строци-Печић је доследно промовисала новонастајући „национални” репертоар, изводећи премијерно велики број како уметничких песама тако и обрада народних песама из пера хрватских, српских и словеначких композитора тога доба. Захваљујући бројним турнејама на којима је изводила овакав репертоар, она је пројектовала идеју југословенства, доминантну међу јужнословенским интелектуалцима почетком XX века. Српски композитор Петар Коњовић (1883–1970) упознао је Мају Строци-Печић на концерту који је организовала Српскохрватска академска омладинска организација у Будимпешти 1914. године, да би затим готово све своје соло песме посветио њој. Коњовић и Строци-Печић започели су сарадњу у Загребу 1916. године; као плод једне пробе на којој се импровизовало настала је песма *Сабах*, једна од Коњовићевих вокално најзахтевнијих песама. Следеће године Строци-Печић је премијерно извела Коњовићеве песме у Загребу, а затим их је редовно изводила све до свог последњег концерта одржаног 1951. године. Премда данашњи музиколози признају Коњовићеву улогу у креирању српског музичког идентитета унутар сложеног југословенског идентитета у првим деценијама XX века, допринос Маје Строци-Печић је у потпуности занемарен.

У овом чланку заступам тезу да је, као амбасадорка „националне” уметничке песме, али и као прослављена примадона, Строци-Печић била утицајнија од Коњовића у првим деценијама XX века. Моје истраживање је показало да је њен успех подстакао Коњовића и друге композиторе да се посвете компоновању песама на српском и хрватском језику, као и да обрађују народне песме. На основу композиција које је Маја Строци-Печић изводила и публицијетета који је пратио, у овом чланку анализирам како је она привукла у окриље своје звездане ауре тек исковану (југословенску) уметничку песму као отелотворење „националног” музичког идентитета, обједињујући притом националистичке амбиције које су на другим местима артикулисали композитори чије је стваралаштво промовисала.

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