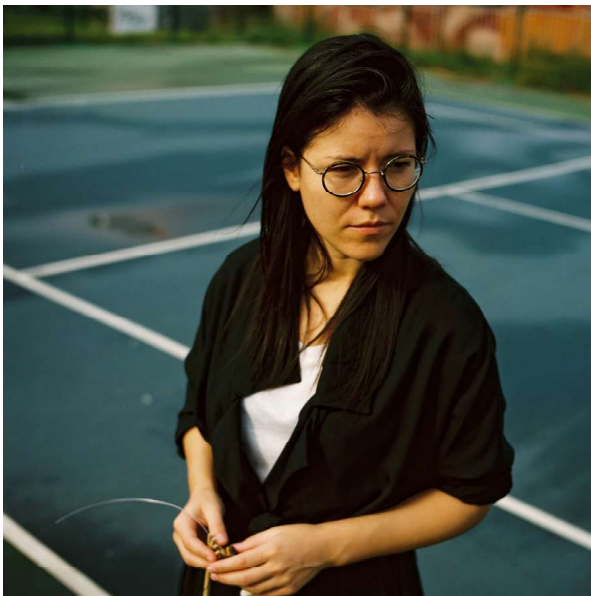


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“THE MOST IMPORTANT ROLE PERFORMER CAN TAKE ON IS TO PROMOTE NEW MUSIC”: Interview with Nataša Penezić

The pianist **Nataša Penezić** is one of the younger generation’s performers dedicated almost exclusively to modern and contemporary music, as a soloist and in various ensembles. In both capacities, she has given performances at festivals such as Klangspuren Festival IEMA in Tyrol, Aarhus Festival, Aurora Festival, Euro Arts Music Festival, Kom och Hör, Citta di Chioggia, Musica in Laguna, European Clarinet Festival, Ring Ring, KoMA, KompArt, RuidAlSud and Palić Film Fest. She also appeared as a soloist with the Russian CREDO Orchestra, Orchestra Sinfonica di Chioggia, as well as Serbian Ensemble SYNC and Muzikon chamber orchestra. After an education that led her through the academies of Novi Sad, Belgrade and Stockholm, she became an educator herself, holding a teaching position at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad (piano as a subsidiary subject). In 2018, she completed her doctoral artistic project titled *Interpretation of new means of expression in selected*



piano works by Pierre Boulez, Luciano Berio and Frederic Rzewski. At a concert held as part of the 26th International Review of Composers in Belgrade, she performed Boulez’s *Douze notations*, Berio’s *Sonata*, and Rzewski’s *Marriage* (from the cycle *Road*). The last piece was heard for the first time in Serbia, and as a curiosity (given the content related to Leo Tolstoy’s novel *The Kreutzer Sonata*), Penezić was the first woman ever to perform it. During the past few years, she has also worked with composers such as Sofia Gubaidulina, Jonas Forsell, Brian Philip Buch, Mariano Paternoster, Dušan Radić, Ivan Jevtić, Jasmina Mitrušić and Miša Cvijović.

You are primarily performing music of the 20th and 21st centuries. Within that vast scope, how do you choose the works you are going to dedicate yourself to in the given period? Do you have “favourites” among composers or do you strive to test yourself in as much different repertoire as possible? What challenges do you look for as a performer?

During the last few years I have committed myself to learning as much as I can about the history and repertoire of the past 100 years. I am primarily interested in 20th and 21st century music, and I realized a long time ago that it would take constant learning in order to really be “in the business” of playing modern and contemporary music. This is probably the main reason I decided to audition for doctoral studies at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. Since then I’ve spent each year experimenting with diverse repertoires, ranging from Soviet composers to the Second Viennese School, American modernists to the European Avant-garde, applying knowledge and reassessing it practically in every imaginable playing formation, all the time looking for equally enthusiastic colleagues to work with. The first thing I did after submitting my written paper was to rent out the score of the *First Piano Concerto* by Dmitri Shostakovich. I didn’t think that would be my first project after completing the doctoral project, as I was so high on researching Boulez and Berio and Rzewski, but I got a call from *Muzikon Chamber Orchestra* and realized this choice presented a perfect balance – playing as diverse a range of repertoire from the last 100 years as possible. It is an idea that I wish to follow during the next period as well. I have some totally contrasting pieces lined up for the coming season, and I intend to delve into as many different concepts, compositional and playing techniques as possible and explore them in both solo and chamber projects.

Your doctoral artistic project deals with new means of expression in piano literature, with emphasis on functional value of secondary tone parameters in the organization of contemporary musical languages. Why did you choose the examples of works by Boulez, Berio and Rzewski and how precisely do you access these particular parameters?

With regards to repertoire, no one can tell you what to play, or what not to play. Mentors are there to guide you through the process, and also to maybe (re)shape the concept a bit. The pieces I chose for my doctoral research represented musical ideas that interested me most at the time, even though I did not immediately pair them with specific aspects of expression (which I always knew would be the central idea of my research). Over time, the selected pieces became perfect representatives of what I wanted to explore – different, corresponding aspects of expression, or, more precisely, investigation of means of expression as formative, constructive elements of the structure, and not only within the perspective of composition but also that of a performance. The paper took shape as the work unfolded, giving each chapter its

own identity. Boulez left out precise metronomic marks in his *Notations*, preferring poetically steering us in direction of “the right” choice of tempo (a detail I grabbed and held on to knowing how seldom it happens that a performer lands him/herself in a position to interpret *le maître’s* marks, or the lack of them, so freely). Berio, on the other hand, used the pedal(s) in so many ways that I spent weeks trying to decide which way to go, before finally deciding on its constructive aspect and the analysis of it as a mnemonic device. Rzewski and the speaking pianist technique need no special explanation – the technique and the composer are so rarely investigated by pianists in this part of Europe that I felt the need to tackle the whole thing from as many perspectives and viewpoints as possible. So I wrote about as many elements as I could fit in within a fairly compact little paper – the composer’s comments about the cycle and the piece, the choice of text and how it was adapted, the overall structure, relations between language and music, and the novel and innovative expressive qualities obtained through the use of such a traditional instrument as piano, as well as my work on voice and acting with the actress Lidija Stevanović and collaboration with the composer himself.

A significant part of your doctoral artistic project is dedicated to Rzewski’s composition Marriage, which has both a piano part and a spoken part. Because of the complex demands put in front of the performer, you mentioned “virtuosity rehabilitation”. What does virtuosity mean in contemporary music? What does it mean to you?

Virtuosity is a concept that never really gets outdated – it has been alive and well, changing only its visibility, modulating over time. It is so with regards to all repertoires, both traditional and modern/contemporary. We all work so hard on obtaining these skills that barely come close to any notion of expressiveness, and yet we must do it, knowing it is, in a way, a fool’s errand. There was a time when showmanship relied on the spectacular power of playing in an “openly” skilful fashion. And even then it was only one component of a masterful performance. During the time of the serialists, virtuosity completely lost its credibility, masking itself in thick layers of material, not allowing the performer to take over any of the glory. However, it can be stated that this music was written (exclusively) for *virtuoso* players, as one simply cannot play it without the whole set of virtuoso skills. As for myself, I have no special sentiment toward virtuosity. I don’t find it especially interesting or fun on its own. In the context of a certain (demanding) piece, I look at it as an “end that justifies the means” situation, and I try my best to be as precise as I can. I do find some amusement in seeing how composers develop playing techniques, and how much we all need to be on the lookout for new ways of playing, constantly obtaining new skills, or we might as well lock ourselves in museums and have our audiences slowly become extinct.

Could you describe how the process of working on the composition flows in your case – from the first sight on the score, decision on the interpretation, up to the performance act itself?

The preparation process of a piece of music could almost be compared to a game. There are certain “rules”, some you follow, and some you disregard. Depending on periods, styles, forms, etc. you can be more (or less) free. It’s also one of the reasons I enjoy playing new (newer) music - your ears are not as compromised as within the standard repertoire, so the feeling of freedom seems different, not as controlled. You don’t have models, nor the impression of knowing a piece all your life. It takes years to get to the point of establishing a certain interpretational integrity, but also the courage to then “step over the line” and give a personal reading, an original interpretation... To disregard the rules easily, with confidence, be excited about all the decisions. If I look back at how I’ve worked on *Marriage* – the process was so long, even though I’ve learned the piece quite quickly. As I’ve heard Rzewski say many times, “there can be no correct or standard version”, and I’ve spent quite some time on finding my own ways of performing it. The score was just a starting point, something of a map. All the ideas that were later put into motion (such as the acting aspect of the performance) were analysed and filtered so many times that I can hardly remember all the stages of preparation. I’ve had the luxury of working with our esteemed actress Lidija Stevanović during the process, as well as with my dear friend Milan Jančurić – the sound engineer – who both helped so much in making the first public performance an unforgettable experience for me. And that is the best part of a preparation process, not knowing how the piece will turn out, or, as in this case, whose mark it will bear next to your own.

Speaking of those marks left by collaboration, let’s talk about working with composers, an experience you had quite a few times with different authors. The longest collaboration is perhaps one with Jasmina Mitrušić Đerić whose piano and chamber music you perform frequently. While in these dialogues with the authors, how much space is there for you to build your own performing perspective? On the other hand, how much obligation do you feel towards composers’ instructions, as opposed to improvisation?

The composer I have worked with the most is Jasmina Mitrušić Đerić. I have found this collaboration crucial in times when I needed to grow as a performer, especially one that was so intensely interested in modern and contemporary music, and in a country that basically had (and still has) no financial means to support culture and arts, let alone new art-music production. She introduced me to the concept of creating a piece of music in dialogue, and to the vast field of creative freedom within it. Her *naked* scores were, in a way, a key inspiration for my research during my

doctoral studies, but also what kept me intrigued beyond any institutional learning. We are always collaborating and going forward together, even when I am not playing her music (in public). I will be performing her *Night butterflies* with a wonderful harpsichordist, Milan Popović, during the 15th *Ars vivendi clavicembalum* festival in Belgrade, and this is probably the most important role a performer can take on – to promote new music, fight for new audiences, but also transmit, communicate appreciation and respect for a composer to other performers. Of course, the music needs to be... well, good! But also, it often happens that a lot of really interesting music stays overshadowed and fades into obscurity simply because the community doesn't work hard enough on promoting the good stuff.

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