

The Role of the Piano In Romanticism Approached by Serbian Composers

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Abstract: *Serbian piano literature can be divided, quite meaningfully, into several categories if one takes into account the classification criteria: a) the origin of the compositions, b) the level of their content and c) the level of success of the piano performance. Piano performance survived for several decades as the only form of creative expression of Serbian citizens.*

Key-words: *romanticism, piano, Kornelije Stanković*

1. Introduction

„The most recent archival studies of preserved musical material have challenged the view, accepted until recently in local musicology, that Kornelije Stanković's *Ustaj, ustaj, Srbije* written in 1853 is considered the first Serbian work for piano.” (Jeremić-Molnar 2001, 247). It turns out that the beginnings of Serbian piano music have to be looked deeper into the past - up to 1841 - and that the author of the original piano work, the waltz *Pozdrav srpskim devama*, was Aleksandar Morfidis-Nisis. He was, taking into account the information available today, the first author who allowed music lovers among the Serbian citizens of Vojvodina to enrich their musical library at home with piano works created in their national and close cultural environment. The term offered does not, of course, exclude the possibility of further corrections.

2. Objectives

Serbian musical romanticism undoubtedly coincided with the romanticism of European countries, primarily Austrian/German, considering the political,

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sociological, cultural orientation towards the Habsburg Monarchy. In this sense, it is necessary to clearly define what is meant by the term „Serbian music” in the period that in the history of Serbian culture and art received the status of the beginning of a new era. „Namely, taking into account the profile of culture and art and specific periodization, the beginning of the 19th century did not exclusively mean the beginning of a new era in the artistic sense, but the beginning of a new period in Serbian history, politics, social order, in consequence in culture and arts”. It is a period that marked an almost direct transition from the medieval spiritual world to the modern age embodied in romanticism.

Thus, the Serbian people lived in two different regions, Austrian and Ottoman, and Serbian culture developed in two different contexts. As a result, the musical discourses of musical romanticism indicate the greatest kinship with German romanticism - in relation to French or Italian, although there are undeniably unifying signs of a single basis of European romanticism as a whole - which is also obvious from a perspective on the level ideological of the musical discourse. In addition, the centers where not only the ideology of Serbian romanticism was formed, but also achieved notable results in diplomatic struggles for the political status of the country, transmitted influences on the formation and life of the new Serbian bourgeoisie, and even formed their Serbian cultural identity (the publication the first dictionary of the reformed Serbian language, literature in the Serbian language and even sheet music with Serbian music, for example) were Vienna and other cities of the Habsburg Monarchy, as well as Leipzig.

A comparative view of the European music, i.e., German/Austrian and Serbian, is justified precisely in the communicative role of the musical discourse. Except that, due to historical and social circumstances, in Serbian music (especially in Serbia itself) there were no opportunities to cultivate music of all genres (symphonic, concert music, for example), mixed programs characteristics of the musical life of cities have analogues in Serbian music. Thus, the words "mixed programs ... of the concerts, in which the symphony, except from the operas, and virtuoso solo pieces, prevailed until about the middle of the century revealing that education and entertainment had not yet become permanent functions" can almost be applied to music without modifications.

The reasons for the late writing of Serbian piano music were numerous - lack of instruments, lack of adequate professional staff, need and interest in creation - and all originated in the unfavourable position of the Serbian people, caused by the oppression of centuries. Moreover, the necessary first step - placing the piano in the cultural discourse of the Serbian population - had to be preceded by the profiling of the social formations as primary consumers and carriers of piano music. Class, property, status and educational differentiation of the population, which

allowed the emergence of citizens and elites, was an essential condition for the reception of all attributes of the European enlightened society, among which the piano could (and should) be included without hesitation. Its elitist nature, which has persisted in Europe for decades, was most strikingly apparent in an environment inhabited by Serbs. The instrument required financial power and implied a certain degree of cultural awareness. It could only be available to members of those social circles that either satisfied the former or harmoniously synthesised both necessary assumptions.

It is therefore certain (although there is no reliable information about when exactly and in which family the piano was played) that the first stringed instruments on Serbian inhabited territory appeared in Vojvodina, a more culturally progressive environment. "Judging from the information presented in the musical catalogue of Emanuel Janković's German-French library in Novi Sad, printed in 1790, spinet and pianos had already begun to form, together with stringed instruments, the instruments of the wealthier Serbian families in this town at the end of the 18th century" (Radujko-Rade 2000, 26). Even more careful authors, who have not identified a piano in those instruments, have stated that "already in the first decades of the 19th century, in the context of the spread of the Biedermeier from Vienna to the urban areas of the Habsburg monarchy, piano playing received great importance in the cultural life of the inhabitants of Novi Sad" (Stajić 1951, 306). One thing is certain: the playing of music that began to take place in the salons of the wealthier Serbs of Vojvodina and the intelligentsia was evidence of the adoption of elements of the cultural life of their immediate European environment.

There was also no agreement on the exact date and city in Serbia where the first piano was transported. From a musicological-sociological point of view, the idea of importing the first piano to Serbia is less important. Much more relevant is the fact that this instrument was purchased by a member of the wealthiest and most powerful family in Serbia to enable his daughter, a representative of the newly formed court elite, to highlight her privileged status by playing it. The piano, however, did not remain unknown for long, bound to the court space and available only to the ruling circles in Serbia. Social restructuring and the accumulation of monetary wealth made it possible to integrate the piano among the privileged classes.

The new social position, based on money and education, required appropriate status symbols. The piano was one of the most important symbols of civic life. Owning an instrument, a collection of printed musical literature and home visits by a music teacher were evidence of prestige and fashion, indicators of class membership, signs of a high social standard that needed to be maintained and

improved. However, they meant more than that. The placing of the piano sound in an era when nationally oriented choral and solo vocal music had already acquired a certain status in the cultural discourse of the Serbian population is undoubtedly also a kind of modernizing movement. In a traditional, petrified but development-oriented society, the integration of the piano into the structure of social life at its beginning must be marked as a social leap. It was one of the symptoms of modernisation in the most general sense of the term: in the sense of introducing the new into various social areas. The modernizing effect of piano music was most visible in the sphere of culture and lifestyle.

In addition to enriching the content of everyday life, changing its quality and monotony, the piano has significantly extended the range of creative activity. The integration of piano music into various levels of social life and into the cultural content of the Serbian people contributed to the gradual familiarization of piano literature, the acquisition of instrumental and indirect compositional techniques, and the awakening of creative curiosity. It turned out, however, that piano playing survived for several decades as the only form of creative expression of Serbian citizens. It has been shown that it took much more time, effort, skill and knowledge to adopt the principles, forms and genres of piano music and then to apply them in the process of building national standards. Aleksandar Morfidis-Nisis was among the first to notice the need for piano literature, and the waltz *Pozdrav srpskim devama*, which was distinguished by appropriate attributes of the piano style, marked the establishment of the composer's activity in Serbian inhabited territory in 1841. „The piano creation of the Serbian people from that time until the First World War - over a period of seven decades, whose otherwise slow pulse was disturbed by occasionally pronounced productive oscillations, was created and developed gradually (insufficiently explicitly), attempting to establish a kind of (admittedly incomplete and uneven) dialogue with European piano music.” (Šuvaković, Pejović, Veselinović-Hofman 2008, 409).

Writing the pages of the first chapter in the history of Serbian piano creation, composers of varying degrees of musical knowledge, talents, ambitions and interests were assembled. The educational profile of the composing staff was built by cooperative amateurs and those for whom music was a professional commitment. The above-mentioned contrast, characteristic of the Serbian cultural space of the 19th century as a whole, was significantly mitigated by the participation of foreign musicians, especially Morfidis-Nisis, of Greek origin, the Italian Dionysius of Sarna-San George and numerous Czechs, having completed their studies generally at eminent Prague institutions, among whom Alois Kalauz and Robert Tolinger stood out. Robert Tolinger's piano creation had the power of a turning point in the development of the genre. However, the significance of the

turning point was not given, because in the decades that followed the end of Tolinger's creative involvement, there was a lack of artistic authors on the Serbian piano scene who were genuinely interested in piano creation. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century, when the quantitative growth of piano music finally gave way to the quality of works, that R. Tolinger received worthy successors.

„The line of professional piano creativity, which was initiated by Kornelije Stanković in the mid-19th century and became stronger in the fin de siècle period - when contributions to piano music were made by a number of educated Serbian composers, members of different generations (we refer to: Božidar Joksimović, Vladimir Đorđević, Stanislav Binički, Petar Krstić, Isidor Bajić and their younger contemporaries: Petar Konjović, Stevan Hristić, Miloje Milojević, Milenko Paunović) - was characterized by discontinuity.” (Šuvaković, Pejović, Veselinović-Hofman 2008, 410). The gap in the trained productive staff was filled by amateurs, whose works completely escaped oblivion thanks to lithography and, occasionally, printing. This was significantly influenced by the mood of the performers of piano literature, who eagerly awaited any new attempt at creation, however simplified, and adopted it with relish.

Composers of piano literature - as connoisseurs of the demands of the domestic market and the structure of the consumer population of which they themselves were a part - correctly judged that responsive piano forms and genres of utilitarian function would communicate most fully with the needs of a civilian audience with insufficiently refined musical taste but with strongly developed national sentiments, deep in content in the sphere of folk dances and songs (patriotic and lyrical themes) processed in a simple compositional style, albeit a technically tempting one. They decided to write appropriate dances and marches, to harmonize folk melodies, to stylize current social dances with an international character (polonaises, waltzes, mazurkas and gavota) and to compose themes with variations, fantasies and rhapsodies, of which only the most effective pianistic examples gained a position on the concert podium. The pool of forms used, borrowed from Western European musical literature, was enriched over time with more compositionally and technically complex forms - such as fugue (J. Marinković, P. Krstić), sonatina (J. Marinković, J. Urban), sonata (V. Čolak-Antić) - as well as various miniatures that composers (R. Tolinger, I. Bajić, M. Milojević, P. Hristić, J. Urban) have largely combined in collections.

(Example 1)

4

Гђн Види Вулко.
À madame Vida Voulko.

НА ИЗВОРУ.
À la Fontaine.

(Etude mignonne.)

И. Бажан.
I. Bajitch.

Presto. M.M. ♩ = 184.

Example 1. *Na izvoru* - Isidor Bajić

The choice of the above-mentioned genres of piano music, which gradually multiplied over time, was determined to a significant extent by the composer's level of education, creative ability and ambition. The corresponding, on average, modest results of most composers had a decisive influence on the fact that the constant features of Serbian piano creation were and remained simple in terms of form and harmony, and in a large number of works one can notice the lack of the necessary physiognomy of the piano, related to dynamics or agogics.

Robert Tolinger's piano creation had the power to become a turning point in the development of the genre. However, the significance of the turning point was not given, because in the decades following the end of Tolinger's creative involvement, there was a lack of artistically strong authors on the Serbian piano scene who were genuinely interested in piano creation. It was not until the beginning of the 20th century, when the quantitative growth of piano music finally gave way to quality works, that R. Tolinger received worthy successors.

(Example 2)

СТРУЧАК.

Р. Толингер, дело 17.

ГЛАСОВНИ:

Andante sostenuto.

pp

Andante con moto.

p

un poco mosso ma non troppo.

pp *p* *ff sempre marcato*

ff can tutta forza

Andante sostenuto.

ff *pp* *p*

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R. T. 12.

Example 2. *Stručak* – Robert Tolinger

One of them, Isidor Bajić, surpassed most of his contemporaries in melodic inventiveness and his ability to write a correct form. At that time, I. Bajić solved the current dilemmas between past and future, traditional and new, i.e., between popular and independent folklore, with a compromise. By opting for writing piano compositions in the national style, striving towards the tempting pianistic realisation for a concert only in *Serbian Rhapsody*, the composer preserved the thematic, partly artisanal continuity of the national piano production. His mature artistic attitudes and awareness of the necessary material and stylistic progress came to the fore in his miniatures, first and foremost in *Album kompozicija*, I. Bajić's most mature and significant piano work. The work is characterized by a pleasing, rich and varied melody and a suitably realized character of each individual miniature and of the whole itself, which consists of independent but firmly integrated pieces. Instead of the dysfunctional pianistic style with unwieldy technical formulas that had been present until then, the performer is confronted with a more elaborate piano chord resulting from the appropriate use of the instrument's technical potential.

Two achievements of Miloje Milojević and Petar Konjović's conceptually, compositionally and technically distant youth, the *Minijature* collection and the fantasy *Legenda*, have transparently promoted the demand that Serbian piano creativity be directed towards the future. Similar in purpose, the functional selection of pianistic solutions and texture, characterized by a lively and independent world of inner and accompanying voices, but different in scope (concise pieces versus an extremely extended fantasy), character (chamber miniatures versus a concert work), complexity of formal arrangement (revised, a form of miniatures organized in sentences; as opposed to a completely particular composed solution, (of course, in the context of Serbian music), a previously unused, compositionally and technically perfected solution to the musical discourse of the *Legenda*) and the type of piano processing (a more airy miniature piano chord, not requiring a good command of the instrument's technique; as opposed to the more refined, sometimes complex, dense chord and ample piano technique of the *Legenda*), these compositions suggested new stylistic horizons, but failed to develop them.

3. Conclusions

R. Tolinger, I. Bajić and, above all, P. Konjović and M. Milojević are the ones who stylistically modernized Serbian piano music through the reception and assimilation of certain elements of the European Romantic tradition of the late 19th century,

whose belated presence can be traced back to the second decade of the last century. With elements of the early Romantic stylistic sphere present, the youngest composers in their early piano works, composed in the period of their search for creativity, maturation and wandering in an attempt to define personal expression and resolve the essential dilemmas of the time, gradually alluded to and integrated elements of the musical language of late Romanticism and early Impressionism.

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