

Serbian choral music from the first half of the 20th century

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Abstract: *In the period of the building up of Serbian musical life, the first professional musicians were foreign artists, and then, in the second half of the century, domestic professional personnel were also formed. Serbian choral composers were educated in various European centres, such as Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Munich, Rome and Leipzig. The work of numerous Serbian singing societies in the 1830s paved the way for the quality of some choirs, especially those in Belgrade, to be noticed on the international scene in the era of Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac. When the era of S. S. Mokranjac was over, according to many, a "new era" for Serbian art began, and the tradition of the time was not only not abandoned, but also expanded and flourished.*

Key-words: *Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, Rukoveti, Serbian music education*

1. Introduction

The causes of the problems that accompanied the rise of Serbian artistic life in the inter-war decades, including the discrepancy between the developmental tendencies of creation of modern features and the undeveloped artistic taste of the public, can be reached most directly by looking at the starting position of the school system. The importance of education for the development of the complete culture of a nation does not require much discussion. The facts are obvious: art schools are not only the breeding grounds of future artistic generations, but also of future audiences, in fact, of the population of consumers of art products without which culture cannot exist. In terms of educational development, fine arts and music have had a very similar position in the history of Serbian culture, and in the first half of the 20th century they achieved simultaneous development. „At the end of the First World War, two institutions of music education were established in

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Belgrade at the level of lower and secondary schools: in 1899, Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac founded the first - the Serbian Music School, and Stanislav Binički founded the second, in 1911, the Stanković Society of Singers.” (Tomašević 2009, 106).

When it comes to Serbian music in the period between the two world wars, it seems that, with the exception of the field of choral singing, which had its own earlier tradition, the increase in the quality of the reproductive art was noticeable in the soloistic, both vocal and instrumental areas, where, therefore, it was again the result of exploitation of individuals. Of the total number of Serbian reproductive musicians who actively participated in the musical life of Belgrade, only a few of them had the opportunity to complete their studies abroad. Later they became soloists, played in chamber music ensembles and worked as pedagogues. Most musicians, however, were educated at home and could only reach high school level. They were the ones who worked in important musical institutions such as the opera and symphony orchestras. It is well known that the programmes of the Belgrade music schools were based on the Western European model from the very beginning, but it is also obvious that without the effect of a thorough musical education, the desired professional leap in the quality of performance could not have occurred, regardless of the extent and intensity of the latter's performance practice. Also, of all the teachers employed in music high schools, only the best trained ones occasionally performed as soloists in Belgrade, and among them, there were very few who managed through their performances to meet the strict criteria of the main music centres in Europe.

2. Objectives

Throughout the period between the two world wars a large number of musicians began to work in the Serbian area. A large number of choirs were established in Belgrade alone, including several large choral ensembles: „The First Belgrade Singers' Society (with conductors *Kosta Manojlović*, *Predrag Milošević*, *Vojislav Ilić*), the *Obilić* choir (*Jovan Bandur*, *Lovro Matačić*, *Svetolik Pašćan*, *Branko Dragutinović*), the *Stanković* choir (*Mihailo Vukdragović*, *Milenko Živković*) and the *Abrašević* choir” (Pejović, 2003, p. 85). Thanks to conductor *Kosta Manojlović* (he conducted the choir from 1919-1931), who developed an affinity for old vocal polyphony during his studies at Oxford, the *Belgrade Singers' Society Choir* was among the first in the history of Serbian music to hold several concerts with the works of *Palestrina* (*Missa Papae Marcelli*, 1925) and the English madrigalists (1927, 1929). The performance of *Giuseppe Verdi's Requiem* (1934), *Georg Friedrich*

Händel's oratorio *Messiah* (1937) and the first prize at the international competition in Budapest (1937) mark the choir's "golden" moments during the years of work with *L. Matačić* (1932) and *Predrag Milošević*. To its credit, the *Obilić Academic Singers' Society* was considered the "breeder of Serbian musical culture" in the interwar period. Members of the choir - enthusiastic and talented students of the University of Belgrade, won the highest awards not only at home, but also throughout Europe.

Obilić's rich work (together with *L. Matačić* and *J. Bandur*): in addition to numerous a cappella concerts, he participated in the Belgrade premieres of *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Coronation Mass* (1926), *Igor Stravinsky's* oratorio *Oedipus Rex*, *Karol Szymanowski's Stabat Mater* (1933), *Arthur Honegger's King David* (1928), *Anton Bruckner's Mass and Te Deum* and *Richard Wagner's Parsifal* (concert, 1938), as well as the fact that in 1937 at the *Munich Festival* it was declared "world champion", is clear proof why this choir was beyond any competition in the country. *Obilić* remains the only choir in history whose performances of the most successful works of Serbian choral literature have been recorded since the end of the third decade of the last century on gramophone discs of the world famous companies *His Master's Voice* and *Columbia*. The repertoire and international reputation of the *Stanković Music Society Choir*, which first performed *Ludwig van Beethoven's Misa solemnis* (1937) and successfully toured the Czech Republic and Romania (1924), France (1927), Bulgaria (1939) and Hungary (1940), testify to the high quality of local choir performance. The *Abrašević Choir* gave a special colour to the Belgrade choral scene in the fourth decade. Apart from the battle song genre, *Abrašević* was the only choir in the country, following the example of Czech avant-garde satirical theatres, to cultivate the genre of the recitation choir, which, with the cooperation of aesthetician *Pavle Stefanović*, composer *Josip Slavenski* and pianist and musicologist *Stana Đurić-Klajn*, was conducted by composer and musicologist *Vojislav Vučković*. „The most successful dramatic-musical-ballet visions were realized on the principles of *Jacques-Dalcroze's* understanding of rhythmicity, artistic experiences and film projections, with the poetry of *Neruda*, Chinese and South American poets.” (Pejović, 2004, p. 209). There is no doubt that the particularly prominent place of choral performance in the interwar period is directly, strongly connected with the political and ideological aspects of musical life in Serbia and its specific position in Europe. Given the wide audience of fans and active participants of choral music, it is not unusual that after the end of the First World War, choral ensembles of the newly established Kingdom were entrusted with the important task of encouraging the spread of the Serbian idea through repertoire and mutual cooperation. First of all, it started with reciprocal visits: choirs from Belgrade organised tours, and choirs

from Zagreb, Sarajevo, Ljubljana, Maribor, Trbovlje, Skopje returned to Belgrade. In 1924, the South Slovenian Singers' Association was founded, which started an independent sheet music printing business, stimulating the promotion of domestic creativity. Meetings of choirs - with members of the Association - were held in 1929, while the gathering of academic choirs followed a year later.

The repertoire of Serbian song societies shows many names of composers - famous and forgotten, as well as their compositions. Looking at the programmes of Serbian singing societies up to the First World War, the most popular were the compositions of *Davorin Jenko*, then *Jovan Paču*, *Robert Tolinger*, *Mita Topalović*, *Josif Marinković*, *Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac*, *Isidor Bajić*, *Stanislav Binički* and *Petar Konjović*. Thus, the songs of *S. S. Mokranjac* remained popular and widely accepted, as well as the numerous choral works of *Isidor Bajić*. It seems that the popularity of the works of almost all of the above-mentioned creators of music was primarily related to the environment in which they worked. Thus, the choral works of *J. Paču*, *I. Bajić*, *R. Tolinger*, *M. Topalović* were enthusiastically accepted in Vojvodina, but also in the wider Austro-Hungarian borders, in Vienna or Szeged; the youth choirs of *P. Konjović's* youth choirs were popular in Vojvodina and Serbia, as were the compositions of *D. Jenko*, *S. S. Mokranjac* and *J. Marinković*, which were also heard in Vienna, Graz, Budapest, Timisoara, New York and other cities. „From a perspective on the repertoire of the numerous Serbian singing societies up to the First World War, as well as on the characteristics of the compositions themselves, it seems that the consideration of choral works on the poetic theme, i.e. the character of the work, is justified to the greatest extent within the discourse of patriotism, the discourse of folklore and the discourse of lyrical sentimentality.” (Šuvaković et al. 2008, 333). This discursive division of the whole choral work can be realized not only in all three mentioned stages of the development of Serbian music, but also allows a perspective on the representation of certain groups of compositions according to the broader context.

The folk songs of *S. S. Mokranjac's* predecessors and contemporaries, for the most part, do not represent a complete form and, from a formal point of view, leave the impression of a suite. In fact, only *S. S. Mokranjac* will succeed in shaping the musical and textual content of the craft into an artistic form. The form of the songs in the sections is conditioned by the variation of the motif of the folk melody, so that, with the exception of a few examples, they are based on a fragmentary structure, i.e. on the repetition and variation of the two, three or four-bar motif. *S. S. Mokranjac's Rukoveti* are considered the most significant achievements not only in the work of this author, but also in the entire Serbian musical history. However, the works that preceded *Rukoveti* and were created concomitantly with it remain almost unknown, excluding *J. Marinković's kolo*. This genre was practiced by

Serbian musicians who worked in the country and abroad, as well as by foreign composers, mostly Czechs from Serbia. *Spletovi* contain Serbian folk songs from Serbia proper, Old Serbia or Macedonia and Kosovo, Vojvodina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as songs from Dalmatia. The composers have taken appropriate folk songs from the collections of *Emanuil Kolarović*, *Kornelije Stanković*, *Franjo Kuhač*, *Ludvik Kuba*, *Vladimir Đorđević*, as well as from each other. Some of them engaged in melographic works, such as *S. S. Mokranjac*. The lyrics of the songs in the suite are arranged in different ways, and in some works there are obvious attempts to connect the lyrics of individual songs or higher-order textual units in a meaningful way, as a starting point for the realisation of the macro-dramaturgy of the work, i.e. as a basic element that allows one to speak of a single composition (suites by *Vaclav Horejšek*, *Hugo Doubek*, *Josif Marinković*, *Isidor Bajić*). „*Rukoveti* of folk songs are written for male and mixed a cappella choirs, with the exception of the 4th *Rukoveti* by *S. S. Mokranjac*, intended for solo bass, mixed choir, with piano and castanets.” (Šuvaković, Pejović et al. 2008, 335). For the mixed choral ensemble *Kornelije Stanković*, *Hugo Doubek*, *Jovan Paču*, *Tihomir Ostojić*, *Aleksa Šantić*, *Josif Marinković* (*kolo* VI, X, XI), *S. S. Mokranjac* (*Rukoveti* II, III, V, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI, XII, XIII, XIV, XV and Hungarian and Romanian folk songs by *Isidor Bajić* wrote folk songs.

In the period between the two world wars, choral music was still current, although the beginnings of a more consistent and serious cultivation of orchestral and chamber music, and even opera music, contributed significantly to the profiling of Serbian musical creativity and performance. „The interwar period in Serbian music was marked by the multifaceted activities of several powerful personalities, including *Miloje Milojević*, *Petar Konjović*, *Josip Slavenski*, and alongside them *Stanislav Binički*, *Kosta Manojlović*, *Stevan Hristić*, *Marko Tajčević* and others take centre stage” (Marinković 200, 123). Certain musical creators of this period express their creed most fully in choral works, such as *Kosta Manojlović*, *Stanislav Binički* and *Marko Tajčević*, while *J. Slavenski* does so to the same extent in instrumental compositions.

Handwritten musical score for "Trinaesta Rukovet" by Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac. The score is written on four systems of staves, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The tempo is marked "Andante molto e espressivo". The lyrics are in Cyrillic script. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like "p" and "f".

Fig. 1. *Trinaesta Rukovet* - Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac (manuscript)

Among the authors who most clearly form bridges between the earlier period and this historical period is certainly *Stanislav Binički*. Like many of his predecessors, *S. Binički* was inspired by *Milorad Petrović's* Folk Poetry in the Folk Spirit of *Seljančica* (1908), which he conceived as a collection of six choral songs. The first, second and sixth songs (*Tri devojke*, *Jesen stiže* and *Hm!*) were written for a men's choir, while the other three (*Čini ne čini*, *Divna noći*, *Dvoje dragih*) were written for a mixed choir. Although contrasting in character, these songs are united by *S. Binički's* characteristic composition in the spirit of urban folklore, with augmented seconds penetrating the melodies of the Balkan minor, but they are also treated as alterations with the fourth altered. *Kosta Manojlović* composed choral music from

the time of the Balkan Wars, when his first work *Iz šumadijskih gora*, a cycle of three compositions (*Ubojni poklič*, *Prizrene stari*, *Bože svetle zore*) for a men's choir, was written, until the middle of the 20th century, when he created one of his last choral compositions, *Kolo iz Prizrena* for men's choir (1948). This fact alone - though certainly not the only one - indicates the author's interest in poetic and musical folklore, treated in accordance with the poetic principles established in the work of *S. S. Mokranjac*, but also evidenced by his own solutions.

Marko Tajčević is one of the musical creators in whose work vocal compositions are the central and most important part. In them, as well as in his piano works, he expresses his inspiration from folklore, primarily Macedonian. The group of compositions mentioned includes the *Komitske pesme* suite for male choir, as well as a collection of six Macedonian songs for mixed choir from 1932.

The image shows a musical score for a vocal piece. The title is "Do tri mi puški puknaja". The tempo and mood are "Lento, con duolo". The score is written for voice and piano. The lyrics are: "Do tri mi puški puk-na - ja, le - le tu - go, puk-na - ja". The piano part has a "le - le!" marking at the bottom. The score includes dynamic markings like "pp" and "p".

Fig. 2. Marko Tajčević- *Komitske pesme*

While the three folk songs in the suite - *Ajde, puška pužna*, *Mori se sobrale sejmenite* and *Do tri mi puški puknaja* - form the poetic basis for music written in the spirit of folklore, the collection of six songs represent arrangements of folk songs. A common feature of both works are modal harmonic colours and a free metrical discourse, conditioned by the spoken intonation of the text. *Milenko Živković* treats folk songs in a somewhat similar way in his choral manuals (pet horskih svita), especially in Macedonian songs. *Josip Slavenski* can be listed among the musical creators whose compositions are indispensable in the overall picture of the history of Serbian music, both instrumental and vocal. His poetic principles, unique and recognizable even in the European musical context, are fully embodied in choral music, both in the great vocal-instrumental forms (*Simfonija Orijenta*) and in works for the a cappella choir. He made a highly significant contribution to folk lyricism, while his patriotic, choral songs are not considered significant.

3. Conclusions

Perhaps in no other field than choral music have contemporary Serbian composers had such good premises and strong support for their creation, even for more modern desires, which spontaneously, thanks to accumulated practice and stable taste, have found their way spontaneously and without major twists to performers and audience. The dominance of the national repertoire, in which compositions inspired by folklore prevailed, speaks eloquently of the fact that the spirit of the collective and the romantic ideology of the national in Serbian musical culture became fully widespread only in the period between the two world wars, the same era in which some advocated forcefully and combatively for the new world and the new place of the artistic individual in it. In the same modern world born in the West, other Slavic peoples arrived somewhat belatedly from the East, who had begun their battles for national and cultural identity at the same time as the Serbs and possibly - because of similar development trends and cultural aspirations - became the greatest choral friends of Serbian music. Also, given the fact that choral activity brought together a large number of music lovers, and that choral concerts were usually exceptionally well attended, in the phenomenon of the popularity of choral music in Serbia between the two world wars, and even later, we recognize the confirmation of a theoretical premise: when an artistic phenomenon becomes common, it means that a tradition has been created.

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