

Konstituiranje neoklasicizma v Srbiji ali: kako in zakaj je neoklasicizem mogoče šteti za modernizem – študija ob Rističevi Drugi simfoniji

Constituting Neoclassicism in Serbia or: How and Why Neoclassicism Can Be Understood as Modernism – a Study of Ristić's Second Symphony

Ključne besede: srbska glasba, neoklasicizem, socialistični esteticizem, petdeseta, Milan Ristić

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IZVLEČEK

Prispevek obravnava možnosti rekontekstualizacije srbskega glasbenega neoklasicizma na polju (zmernega) modernističnega / socialističnega esteticizma, značilnega za srbsko umetnost in literaturo v petdesetih letih dvajsetega stoletja. S tega zornega kota je Druga simfonija (1951) Milana Ristića videti kot konstitutivna skladba neoklasicizma / zmernega modernizma, umetnostne usmeritve, ki je postala zelo pomembna za razumevanje srbske glasbe druge polovice 20. stoletja.

ABSTRACT

The paper examines the possible re-contextualization of the Serbian musical neoclassicism in the field of (sober) modernism/socialist aestheticism characteristic for Serbian art and literature of the fifties. From that perspective, the Second Symphony (1951) by Milan Ristić is seen as the constitutive piece of neoclassicism/sober modernism, i.e. of artistic tendency that is going to become very important for understanding Serbian music in the second half of the 20th century.

As many other terms in the history of music, the term neoclassicism has had an ambivalent historical reception, reflecting as always the ideological and socio-historical circumstances of music production and consumption.¹ Beginning with negative one, denoting everything that is “wrong” and “distasteful” in (German) romantic music tradition and in the context

¹ For detailed discussion on the reception of the term see: Scott Messing, 'Polemics as History: The Case of Neoclassicism'. In: *The Journal of Musicology*, vol. 9, no. 4, Autumn 1991, 481–497.

of French pre-Fist World War thought, the term soon became “a synonym” for the pure French, thus overtly nationalistic attitude towards the demanded aesthetic and the role that music should play in the inter-war, again predominantly French culture.² Although there were few (and not in the least negligible voices)³ that condemned such aesthetic views and the methods for reaching them, and in the same time condemned the term itself as regressive and restorative, they were not to be “listen to” for a quite long period of time. After the Second World War, the term was more and more neglected, while in the climate in which the high modernistic and avant-garde tradition rejecting, followed by that “neglecting”, the term again gained a negative, although this time somewhat tacit, reception.

In the case of Serbian music history of the postwar period, at first similarly to USSR’s appropriation of the neoclassical aesthetic, the term was not recognized as the one that would denote the desired simplification of musical means, and after that the positivistic reception of the Serbian music production gave way to its occasional uses, denoting usually just few works, or some period in composers’ outputs thus again indirectly reflecting the notion that neoclassicism is not something to be “proud of” and that if there was some signs of it that they were only of short breath that were not crucial in the context of one composer’s or Serbian music production.

In the context of postmodern times, turning once again to the methods and possible meanings of neoclassical products, as well as observing their possible ramifications, and finally acknowledging the fact that neoclassicism was here to stay as an important cultural issue, some efforts for re-contextualization and re-affirmation of the term (as well as the production it denotes) were made. Thus the notion of the specific modernistic origin and effect of neoclassicism occurred, and here it shall be further pursued.

It is a well known fact that after the 1948 break with USSR the than FNRJ (later to be SFRJ), and Serbia as one of its federal units, turned out to be the strongest European balance between two “worlds” thus gaining the status of the somewhat privileged geopolitical and cultural space for different influences most frequently promoted in the realm of art and culture. Thanks to this, we were for the long time prone to generally regard the fifties as the decade that preceded great modernistic and avant-garde breakthroughs of the sixties, as some sort of preparatory period for the final connection with the “European contemporary music trends” and making up the notorious “belatedness” of Serbian music. Our assumption here is that actually the fifties should be perceived as crucial point of departure for the postwar development of Serbian music, and further more that the neoclassical output of this decade is much more prominent than it is usually “admitted” and which is usually avoided by introducing the terms such as neo-expressionism in an essay to denote some “unexpected” forms of, what else than neoclassicism. But, this time we will not dig deeper into examination of the reasons for such avoidance of the term neoclassicism that would imply also the re-contextualization of the whole creative production of the fifties, although there would be some clues for it. Instead, we will turn our attention to the moment in which we think the Serbian neo-

² Different terms, dependent of ideological demands for what is basically the similar phenomenon we meet for instance in Germany (Neue Sachlichkeit, translated more often as New Objectivity, and connected more often with Gebrauchsmusik movement). Cf. Stephen Hinton. *The Idea of Gebrauchsmusik – A Study of Musical Aesthetics in the Weimar Republic (1919–1933) with Particular References to the Works of Paul Hindemith*. New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1989.

³ The Schoenberg’s essay ‘Igor Stravinsky: Der Restaurateur’ from 1926 comes to one’s mind at once.

classicism was constituted, as a kind of a firm modernistic trend that embraced whole decade and laid a ground not only for the production of the next decade, but actually for the great deal of the postwar Serbian music production in general.

In that context we regard Second Symphony (1951) by Milan Ristić (1908–1982) as a constitutive music piece of the neoclassicism, i.e. modernism in Serbia. Not only that this little symphony stands at the beginning of the “new era” in Serbian music and culture, but in the historical context it testifies of the importance of the year in which it was made and premiered. Once again we can hardly emphasize the fact that the year 1951 was “the year” for the establishment of Serbian postwar modernism in arts. Although Mića Popović had his famous exhibition in late 1950, it could be understood as a symptom of the great breakthrough of the year 1951 in which Petar Lubarda has had its own, Dobrica Ćosić wrote “Daleko je sunce” and Milan Ristić composed his Second symphony. Although this all may seem like a positivistic gathering of the facts aimed at designing some kind of canonic formation, the real issue here is not only why this all happened in 1951, but rather the “way” it happened. By comparison with the solutions that literature and art histories offer, it should be said that if Lubarda’s and Ćosić’s works were observed as modern ones (due to the fact that in these arts it was easier to observe the realism-modernism collision) the effort should be made for regarding Ristić’s symphony in the same way, considering the possible apprehension of it as the same kind of drift from the (socialist) realism demands upon music. Although correctly accepted as something new and different from the usual pieces of socialist realism provenance, the importance and possible consequences of the adopted procedures in the Second symphony were usually understood as a kind of synthesis in the context of composer’s output,⁴ and as just one more, and not so “progressive” neo-trends in Serbian music of the fifties.

Rethinking the music production of the epoch in question, with the knowledge of its in arts’ history already accepted denotations as the period of sober modernism, or socialist aestheticism, we begin to wonder whether there are some possible explanation of it in these terms, and how this kind of contextualization positions Ristić’s symphony?

The assumption is that sober modernism/socialist aestheticism exhibits some features of modernisms, but without heightened expressiveness and subjectivity of the radical modernisms (such as pre-First World War avant-garde movements). “After the Second World War in USSR, Eastern Europe and Balkans, in the countries of real socialism, with the decay of the socialist realism ideology and development of the middle class bureaucratic, technocratic and humanistic intelligence, the moderate (sober, added by V.M.) modernism develops as a ideologically neutral and aesthetized art that enables the compromise between ideological demands of revolutionary government (or ideology) and aesthetic interests of the post-revolutionary technobureaucratic classes.”⁵ In such circumstances, Ristić’s symphony and its neoclassical design surely should be regarded as exponents of the modernism in Serbian music. Thus, as a first clear, almost manifestly neoclassical piece in postwar years, this symphony also turns out to be the piece that constitutes Serbian neoclassicism/sober modernism in music.

⁴ Marija Bergamo. *Delo kompozitora – Svaralački put Milana Ristića od prve do šeste simfonije*. Beograd: Univerzitet umetnosti, 1977, 80.

⁵ Miško Šuvaković. ‘Umjereni modernizam’. In: *Pojmovnik suvremene umjetnosti*. Zagreb: Horetzky, Vlees & Beton, Ghent, 2005, 644.

In the context of Ristić's creative output, this piece together with the pieces that immediately follow it, were perceived, as was already mentioned, as a kind of synthesis that Ristić came upon after the years of (stylistic) "swerve" – "years of wandering and maturing" (1945–1950),⁶ which also were preceded by the years of (youthful) rebellion – "early" and "mature expressionism" (1937–1945).⁷ Since the issue of "swerve" – "zaokret" and its possible re-contextualization, much in the same way we're trying to introduce now with the issue of neoclassicism, is more than important for understanding Serbian music of the last century, we shall leave it for some next occasion. What is now of greater importance for our topic is to try to reveal those "hidden" and "dangerous" liaisons that exist between expressionism and neoclassicism, i.e. between supposedly radical and sober modernism/socialist aestheticism in the case of Ristić. Long ago revealed connections between Second Symphony and the pieces written immediately before it,⁸ could be "expand" to the periods of "early" and "mature" expressionism thus enabling the reception of the whole pre-Second Symphony output as modern, sometimes radical, but mostly sober in its different aspects. It could be argued that Ristić's strong tendency was toward clarity and strictness of the compositional procedure, be it serial organization, be it fugal construction. The common trait is, of course, the predominantly linear musical thought of the composer. Furthermore, it is possible to devise a specific positioning of serial techniques, i.e. Schoenberg's dodecaphony or Haba's compositional methods in the context of the inter-war neoclassicism/sober modernism as a specific kind of "return to order", let us add, return to object(ivity) trend, thus redirecting Ristić's output in the realm of different modernisms' methods, with full comprehension of different ideological circumstances, for achieving the actually desired clarified and objective creative goal. Marija Bergamo lucidly observed "two (stylistically-technical)⁹ spheres" in Ristić's work between 1940 and 1945, grouping the pieces as the ones devoted to harmony, and others devoted to formal issues, the first bearing the traits of classical formal solutions, the others constituting the "phase of certain "classicism" in regard to harmony and melody, the reestablishing the connection with tradition, (in which) the classical form has been completely avoided."¹⁰ Hence, it could be further argued, that everything before the Second Symphony, as well as everything after it in the case of Milan Ristić was devised in, perhaps similarly if not equally sober modernist way including the obvious composer's affection for thinking in terms of the autonomy of the music. This would actually leads to the conclusion we were not aiming to, i.e. to the notion of the unified output and a purely modernistic/positivistic way of thinking, if there were not for the abovementioned different ideological circumstances in which Ristić's pieces were made. And that question leads us immediately to the question concerning the musical features of the Symphony as neoclassical/modernistic ones.

The Symphony was conceived as the simple and pure, almost exemplary piece of neoclassicism, much in the same fashion Prokofiev did in 1918 with his Classical one.

⁶ Marija Bergamo. *Delo kompozitora*. Op. cit., 64–79.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15–64.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁹ Our brackets added, since, in our opinion, these are "more" than stylistical and technical issues.

¹⁰ Marija Bergamo. *Delo kompozitora*. Op. cit., 41.

Simulation, as the predominant neoclassical procedure,¹¹ reveals itself in few aspects in what would be otherwise perceived as a typical classical symphonic creation. Although it could be maybe questioned in the case of the formal solution for the final movement (Fugue), simulation is totally confirmed in some harmony, metrical, thematic and orchestration procedures that however gentle, testify of the “real time” of piece’s production. Thus, the tonal relation of the principal and secondary subjects in the first movement (the latter oscillating between F and C major), mixed meters of the third (5/8 and 7/8 as a simulation of traditional music), the chromatic melodic movement of the theme of the second movement, as well as it’s orchestration (for clarinet with a trumpet/bassoons accompaniment) all drift away from the “ideal”, “classical” solutions/procedures. Furthermore, the final fugue, if not a typical classical choice for a final movement, could be examined from the, let us call it the “Hindemith’s perspective” which is again very close to the “Back to Bach” movement – the one of which again could be thought of from the angle of “historicist modernism”¹² and supposed “healing powers” of Bach’s music. On the other hand, the simulated folklore solution of the third movement could also be ambivalently interpreted: as a kind of connivance to the not yet forgotten socialist realism demands, as well as calling upon “great masters” of Serbian music, such as Konjović and/or Hristić (thanks to its predominantly brassy sound) in much the same way as abovementioned calling upon Bach.

Yet, the real modernist power of the Symphony can be revealed even strongly if we reverse the perspective and look on the piece from the point of view of the then still present socialist realism. By turning to the classical symphonic cycle Ristić actually rejects two crucial prerogatives of the socialist realism’s aesthetic – the vocal-instrumental genre, and the subject matter from the war and/or country’s reconstruction. This could be obviously handled almost exclusively in the way that Ristić’s handled it by choosing the purest possible form of symphonic expression, his prerogatives being: keep it simple and relatively short, with the touch of folklore (with which the audience at home and abroad could identified itself) on the one hand, and the touch of the unquestionable (musical) values on the other. Hence, in one ingenious move, he put aside all the possible objections of the governing (musical) elite while in the same time subverting the obligatory ingredients of the “correct” music making. These are the reasons why the Symphony should be understood as a piece of the sober modernism/socialist aestheticism. In the surface it retains a neutral ideological position, while it actually subverts some of the corner-stones of the socialist realism. Since they, from 1948 onwards, were already seriously corroding the Symphony’s role was to put an end, though not so radical one, to that process thus turning out to be a constitutive piece of the neoclassicism/sober modernism/socialist aestheticism in Serbian music.

Embracing the point of view in which the sober modernism was a predominant trend in Serbian music of the fifties, and that Ristić’s Second symphony was the first

¹¹ The two main procedures being paraphrase and simulation. The terms are appropriated L.B. Meyer’s terms from the *Music, Arts and Ideas, Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth Century Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967, 198–203. For the more comprehensive explanation see also: Vesna Pašić. *Neoklasicizam u srpskoj muzici šeste i sedme decenije XX veka*. Beograd, 1994 [manuscript]. Vesna Mikić. ‘Nekoliko beležaka o neoklasicizmu’. In: *Zbornik Matice srpske za scenske umetnosti i muziku*, 21–22, 1998, 107–117.

¹² Cf.: Walter Frisch. *German Modernism. Music and the Arts*. Barkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005, 138–186.

mature symptom of it, the pieces by Radić, Marić and others, however different they may appear at first sight, actually all represent the same aesthetic/ideological position. And, after that the sober modernism, still the basis of the school curricula, continues its adventure throughout the second half of the last century, always anew “compromising” with the “ever-changing” ideologies.