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The Symphonic Poem in Slovene Music

Simfonična pesnitev v slovenski glasbi

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IZVLEČEK

ABSTRACT

Članek bo predstavil značilnosti simfonične pesnitve na Slovenskem s pomočjo zunajglasbenih programov, ki so jih skladatelji izbrali za svoje simfonične pesnitve in preko analize izbranih del.

The article will outline the characteristics of Slovene symphonic poems through the programmes on which the composers referenced their symphonic poems and with musical analyses of selected works of the genre.

The present article aims to present the characteristics of the genre of the symphonic poem in Slovene music. The main characteristics of the genre will be presented through a chronological review of the composers who have worked with the symphonic poem, with special emphasis on specific works that seem particularly interesting. The article will also investigate the reasons for the belated "popularity" of the symphonic poem in Slovene music, as the first examples of this genre by Slovene composers were created when the symphonic poem was already part of the past in most of Europe, and only rare examples were still occasionally created.

In the second half of the 19th century, the rise of national consciousness had a very powerful influence on musical development, as it forced all activities, including art, to subject themselves to the purposes of the national movement. In light of this, only works that expressed patriotic content were welcomed, the most convenient form thus being vocal musical works. For the sake of the national movement, "Slovene music [...] renounced the high positioned creating force of the European West, which could not

serve [its] purpose,"¹ and for a while terminated all relations with it,² which had long-term consequences. We should also bear in mind that the lack of concert reproduction did little to encourage composers to complete new symphonic works. These circumstances hindered the development of instrumental music, and orchestral works were rare until the 20th century. During the first decades of the 20th century, the conditions improved to such an extent that composers were able to dedicate themselves largely to symphonic music.

The first three great Slovene symphonists were Blaž Arnič, Marjan Kozina and Lucijan Marija Škerjanc, all followers of the 19th century compositional tradition and all composers of symphonic poems to a greater or lesser extent.

With eleven symphonic poems, Blaž Arnič is the most representative figure of this genre. The extra-musical content to which he refers in his symphonic poems mostly derives from Slovene folk tales or patriotic themes. In most cases, they do not have strictly defined subjects. Consequently, Arnič attempts to capture the general atmosphere, instead of representing a specific action. Thus, he approaches Franz Liszt's idea of expressing mood rather than depicting a story.

All of Arnič's symphonic poems have a similar scheme; he always contrasts lyrical, calm themes with dramatic, agitated themes. In his symphonic poems, the mood changes multiple times, there is always a gradation, and it seems that, although the form and the extra-musical content of the poems are different, their course follows exactly the same pattern. Moreover, the composer uses the same musical means to achieve these contrasts in themes and gradation (ostinato, similar figures and gradation procedure).

Arnič created his first symphonic poem *Ples čarovnic* (*The Witches' Dance*) in 1936. The subject matter is taken from a folk tale about a farm worker who has sinned and is punished by witches, who dance around him faster and faster, until they lose all of their power. The course of the music is similar, beginning calmly, gradually increasing in intensity and then calming down again. *Divja jaga* (*The Tempest*, 1965) and *Povodni mož* (*The Water Sprite*, 1950) are also based on folk tales. In contrast, *Pesem planin* (*Song of the Highlands*, 1940) supposedly paints a mountain landscape with a calm atmosphere and during a storm, while *Pričakovanje* (*Expectation*, 1943) and *Gozdovi pojejo* (*The Forests Sing*, 1945) refer to the Second World War. The aforementioned musical course and means are also evident in the symphonic poem *Zapeljivec* (*The Seducer*, 1939), which stands out for its extra-musical content as it deals with one's inner world. The work supposedly illustrates one's inner struggles, depicted in the musical work as the constant superposition of two contrasting themes.

The second great symphonist, Marjan Kozina, compiled four symphonic poems – *Ilova gora* (*The Ilova Mountain*), *Padlim* (*To the Fallen Heroes*), *Bela krajina* in *Proti morju* (*Towards the Sea*) – into one work entitled *Simfonija* (1946–1949). All of the compositions refer to patriotic themes. Later, Kozina began work on a new cycle entitled *Novo mesto*; however, he only finished the symphonic poem *Davnina* (*The Dawn of Time*, 1959). In this work, he captured the atmosphere of ancient times with a simple rhythm and a very simple, melodically stunted theme.

¹ Cvetko Dragotin, *Slovenska glasba v evropskem prostoru* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1991), 278.

² *Ibid.*, 288.

Lucijan Marija Škerjanc composed only one symphonic poem, entitled *Mařenka* (1940), which is based on a story by Ivan Cankar and is actually a choreographic piece. The composer tried to follow the content of the story consistently in the music, with various contrasting atmospheres representing the dark domestic environment of the main character of the story and her optimistic imagination.

A great contribution to the genre of the symphonic poem in Slovene music was made by Anton Lajovic, a composer of a slightly earlier generation. Anton Lajovic was not a typical symphonic composer, as most of his works are vocal compositions. Nevertheless, in his late creative period, he composed a work that is supposedly a distinctive representative of Slovene romantic symphonic music,³ his only symphonic poem, *Pesem jeseni* (*Autumn Song*, 1938). This is a lyrical symphonic poem without a firm programme. The main connection with the extra-musical content, autumn as a motive of fleetingness, is found in the lyrically formed first theme and the general course of the harmony. The adding of non-harmonic tones, the use of altered chords, the design of unusual harmonic connections (mostly a result of scalar or chromatic voice leading), and the interrupted cadences give the composition a melancholic frame that is invoked by a punctuated rhythm in the percussion. With these compositional means, the composer achieved an exceptional degree of expression. The composition does, however, have one deficiency: the merging of ternary song form with sonata form is not very affective, as the constant repetitions slow down the musical development and prevail in length over the short development section.

There are some interesting parallels between the works *Zapeljivec* by Blaž Arnič and *Pesem jeseni* by Anton Lajovic. Both approach Franz Liszt's concept of a symphonic poem, as they are more an account of an atmosphere and do not follow a strict narrative. Moreover, both composers adopted Liszt's compositional idea – motivic transformation – in their compositional process. Even the structure of the works coincides with Liszt's realisations, as they are both in modified sonata form (or at least tend towards sonata form – *Pesem jeseni*), thus not reflecting the plot of the extra-musical programme formally.

The composers and works mentioned thus far all remained loyal to the musical tradition of the 19th century. However, the symphonic poem *Mati* (*Mother*, 1940) by Slavko Osterc stands out strikingly from this time, as the composer used the newest compositional techniques, adopting free atonality in the work. *Mati* is based on the homonymous poem by France Prešeren. Osterc also contributed to the development of the symphonic poem with the three symphonic pictures he created in his youth. *Krst pri Savici* (*The Baptism at the Savica*, 1920), *Ubežni kralj* (*The Fugitive King*, 1922) and *Povodni mož* (*The River Man*, 1924), which could very well be considered to be the first Slovene symphonic poems. *Krst pri Savici* and *Povodni mož* follow the extra-musical programme very strictly, as specific events are even indicated in the score; moreover, Osterc assigned specific motives to the two main subjects in *Krst pri Savici*.

The musical language in the symphonic poem *Mati* by Slavko Osterc is by far the most progressive; even Osterc's student Demetrij Žebre, in his symphonic poem *Svo-*

³ Ivan Klemenčič, *Musica noster amor* (Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 2000), 127.

bodi naproti (*Towards Liberty*, 1944), returned to the use of some traditional compositional practices (the use of sonata form, periodically and symmetrically constructed themes, traditional motivic work) as a result of the pressures of socialist realism to make music accessible to a wider public.⁴ Marijan Lipovšek also used some traditional musical means in his symphonic poem *Domovina* (*My Native Country*, 1950), which refers to a short story by Ferdo Kozak about an exiled writer who wants to return to his homeland.

Interest in symphonic poems later started to decrease. Although single-movement orchestral works with extra-musical programmes were still created, they were in principle not marked as symphonic poems. Examples of this include *In memoriam* (1955) by Igor Štuhec, who composed a “real” symphonic poem in 2010 entitled *Od Save do Mure* (From Sava to Mura); *Korant* (1969) by Lojze Lebič, which, like some other symphonic poems, refers to the folk figure of the *kurent*; and the historically oriented *Slava vojvodine Kranjske* (*The Glory of the Duchy Carniola*, 1989) by Pavel Mihelčič.

There are, however, two composers who continued to compose symphonic poems. The modernist composer Ivo Petrić composed three symphonic poems *Tako je godel Kurent* (*Thus Played the Kurent*, 1976), *Slika Doriana Graya I and II* (*The Picture of Dorian Gray I, II*; 2007). His reference to the traditional type seems less odd if we observe his overall opus, in which programmatic instrumental works prevail. Nonetheless, his symphonic poem *Slika Doriana Graya II* distances itself greatly from the original concept of the symphonic poem. The connection to the extra-musical programme can only be found in the concept of the form, which is nonetheless very affective. The rondo form represents Dorian’s constant returning to the painting, which is more disfigured with each return. The progressive deformation of the painting, reflecting Dorian’s decay, is symbolically represented by the repetitive solo trumpet part, which is slightly changed with every appearance. The episodes in between supposedly represent “the sound vision of one’s life journey”,⁵ although there are no musical means that could be associated with this. Petrić uses a special compositional technique, simultaneously developing singular melodic lines in different instruments. He then constructs denser sections with simultaneous groups made up of several instruments that play variations of the same melodic line.

Slovene contemporary composer Marko Mihevc stands out with his eight symphonic poems, making him one of the two key representative figures of the symphonic poem in Slovene music. Mihevc belongs to an era that did not strictly reject tradition – a mentality characteristic of the movement of modernism – instead attaching itself to the heritage in some ways. The so-called postmodern era stimulated a retrospective view of the tradition and an acceptance of its elements in order to make art that would be comprehensible to a wider public.⁶ Thus, we can understand the work of Mihevc and his combination of new and old techniques as a means of approaching the public. Mihevc found the “comprehensible” side of his work in referring to music of the *fin de si cle*.

⁴ Karmen Salmič Kovačič, “Orkestralni opus Demetrija Zebreta” (master’s thesis, University of Ljubljana, 2006), 135–136.

⁵ Ivo Petrić, preface to the CD *Ivo Petrić* by Ivo Petrić, Loris Voltolini and Orkester Slovenske filharmonije, Slovenska filharmonija, 2010, 1.

⁶ Gregor Pompe, “Nekaj nastavkov za razumevanje postmodernizma kot slogovne usmeritve”, *Muzikološki zbornik* 38, nr. (2002): 42.

It appears that he is primarily influenced by the music of Richard Strauss, to whom his own works very clearly refer.

Mihevč's first three symphonic poems, *Equi* (1990), *In signo tauri* (1992) and *Miracula* (1993), are mutually connected by thematic material. An intriguing fact is that all of the main themes of these symphonic poems are related to the main theme of Strauss's symphonic poem *Don Juan*;⁷ they are comprised of the same two motives: the triplet figure and the punctuated rhythm.⁸ *Equi* in particular closely approaches the idea of the symphonic poem cultivated by Richard Strauss. In contrast to Liszt, Strauss sought to depict dramatic events. In order to achieve this, he made use of extensive tone painting and even introduced some new instruments and playing techniques. It is precisely tone painting that denotes the symphonic poem *Equi*. The programme linked to this musical work is a poem entitled *Konji* (*Horses*). Mihevč set the storm and the gallop of the horses mentioned in the poem to music in a very picturesque way. The storm is depicted with frequent long trills in the woodwinds and strings, glissandos in the strings, numerous small percussion and a special playing technique on the violoncello and contrabass, whereby the performers must tap the body of the instrument with their fingers, giving the sonic impression of "rain drops".⁹ The gallop of the horses is represented by a simple three-note motive, a compound of a very simple rhythm and an ascending and quickly descending melodic line, and the use of woodblocks.

None of the other symphonic poems bare such a strongly defined programme, nor do they demonstrate such vivid connections between the music and the programme. For instance, *Mar Sabo* (1999) and *Jamal* (2004) (and, judging by the title, also *Alibaba* (1996)) only express the general atmosphere of the programmes, as they are pervaded with oriental melodies.¹⁰ Whereas *Karneval* (*Carnival*, 2002) consists of strong dance rhythms that could be related to the general nature of a carnival, the programmes of *Planeti* (*The Planets*, 1998) and *In Signo Tauri* are too loosely based to be connected to the music.¹¹

To summarise, the main characteristic of the Slovene symphonic poem is that most of the works of this genre were created in the 1940s, in the period dominated by the Second World War. The National Liberation Struggle (NOB) had taken over every aspect of life, including art. The most convenient form for expressing national consciousness and the experienced horrors of war in music was the symphonic poem, due to its programmatic nature. As a result, the topics of the extra-musical programmes of the symphonic poems are pervaded with war and patriotic themes. The second reason for the flourishing of the symphonic poem was the founding of the *Ljubljana Philharmonic*,

⁷ Gregor Pompe, "Avtonomno in uporabno: lokalna zgodovinska dilema ali transhistorično dejstvo?", *De musica disserenda* 2, nr. 2 (2006): 62.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Matjaž Barbo, preface to the score *Equi* by Marko Mihevč (Ljubljana: Društvo slovenskih skladateljev, 1993).

¹⁰ This is connected to their programmes: *Mar Saba* depicts a monastery near Bethlehem, while *Jamal* depicts a journey of three friends through a desert in search of the stone of wisdom.

¹¹ *In signo taurus*, named after the composer's astrological sign, is supposedly an "autobiography set to music" (Quoted from: <<http://www.markomihevč.com/cd.php>> accessed July 19, 2011), while *Planeti* (1998) brings a musical image of the play of the moving planets. (Abstracted from: Leon Stefanija, preface to the CD *Biconcentus* by Marko Mihevč, Loris Voltolini, Orkester Slovenske filharmonije; David de Villiers, Žarko Prinčič, Simfonični orkester RTV Slovenija, Društvo slovenskih skladateljev, 2008/69, 6.

which offered better performance opportunities and gave rise to the increased number of symphonic works.

Most of the Slovene symphonic poems follow loosely determined programmes, typically with war themes, and in most cases involve the representation of an atmosphere (for example *Pesem planin* and *Pričakovanje* by Blaž Arnič, *Ilova Gora* and *Padlim* by Marjan Kozina). With regard to the extra-musical content chosen, there are some compositions that follow literary works; the most salient example is *Mařenka* by Lucijan Maria Škerjanc, who tried to transfer the story to the music, but there are also other works that follow folk tales, such as *Ples čarovnic* by Blaž Arnič and *Kurent* by Matija Braničar.

The first composers of symphonic poems were explicit traditionalists, as can be seen in the use of traditional compositional techniques in their works. These examples presumably follow the idea of the symphonic poem acquired from Slavic composers, as it was they who adopted the Lisztian concept and used it to express national ideas. These works by Slovene composers do not essentially differ from those by other European composers, except, of course, with regard to their time of creation. It is interesting that the symphonic poem has not lost its appeal even to some contemporary Slovenian composers and is still composed in the 21st century.

Composer	Na Title	Programme	Date of composition
Slavko Osterc	<i>Krst pri Savici (The Baptism at the Savica)</i>	Homonymus epic poem by France Prešeren	1920
Slavko Osterc	<i>Ubežni kralj (The Fugitive King)</i>	(possibly: Poem <i>Ubežni kralj (The Fugitive King)</i> by Fran Levstik)	1922
Slavko Osterc	<i>Povodni mož (The River Man)</i>	Homonymus ballad by France Prešeren	1924
Blaž Arnič	<i>Ples čarovnic (The Witches' Dance)</i>	Folk tale	1936; 1955
Anton Lajovic	<i>Pesem jeseni (Autumn Song)</i>	Autumn	1938
Karol Pahor	<i>Tuje življenje (Foreign Life)</i>	Homonymus short story by Ivan Cankar	1938
Blaž Arnič	<i>Zapeljivec (The Seducer)</i>	One's inner fights	1939
Slavko Osterc	<i>Mati (Mother)</i>	Poem <i>Nezakonska mati (The Unmarried mother)</i> by France Prešeren	1940
Lucijan Marija Škerjanc	<i>Mařenka</i>	Short story <i>Spomladi (In the Spring)</i> by Ivan Cankar	1940
Blaž Arnič	<i>Pesem planin (Song of the Highlands)</i>	Mountain landscape	1940
Blaž Arnič	<i>Pričakovanje (Expectation)</i>	War theme	1943
Demetrij Žebre	<i>Svobodi naproti (Towards Liberty)</i>	War theme	1944
Blaž Arnič	<i>Gozdovi pojejo (The Forests sing)</i>	War theme	1945
Marjan Kozina	<i>Bela Krajina</i>	War theme (first liberated Slovene territory)	1946

Marjan Kozina	<i>Ilova Gora (The Ilova Mountain)</i>	War theme (memory of a battle during WWII)	1947
Marjan Kozina	<i>Padlim (To the Fallen Heroes)</i>	War theme	1948
Marjan Kozina	<i>Proti morju</i>	War theme (Hope)	1949
Blaž Arnič	<i>Povodni mož (The Water Sprite)</i>	Folk tale	1950
Matija Bravničar	<i>Kurent</i>	Folk figure	1950
Marijan Lipovšek	<i>Domovina (My Native Country)</i>	Homonymus story by Ferdo Kozak	1950
Zvonimir Ciglič	<i>Obrežje plesalk (Dancers' shore)</i>	Homonymus poem by Jan Havlasa	1952
Blaž Arnič	<i>Divja jaga (The Tempest)</i>	Folk tale	1956
Marjan Kozina	<i>Davnina (The Dawn of Time)</i>	The ancient times	1959
Blaž Arnič	<i>Prvi polet (First Flight)</i>	unknown	1960
Blaž Arnič	<i>Pastoral Symphonic Poem for Violoncelo and Orchestra</i>	The pastoral	1960
Blaž Arnič	<i>Temporal Symphonic Poem for Trombone and Orchestra</i>	unknown	1969
Blaž Arnič	<i>Vasovalec (The Lover)</i>		1969
Ivo Petrič	<i>Tako je godel Kurent (Thus Played Kurent)</i>	Folk figure	1976
Radovan Gobec	<i>Dražgoše</i>	War theme (place of battle during WWII)	1979
Ivo Petrič	<i>Slika Doriana Graya (The Picture of Dorian Gray)</i>	Novel <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> by Oscar Wilde	1984
Marko Mihevc	<i>Equi</i>	Poem <i>Konji (Horses)</i> by Matej Mihevc	1990
Marko Mihevc	<i>In signo tauri</i>	Composer's autobiography	1992
Marko Mihevc	<i>Miracula</i>	Fairy tale <i>Singing bones</i> by the Grimm brothers	1993
Marko Mihevc	<i>Alibaba</i>	Tale of <i>Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves</i>	1996
Marko Mihevc	<i>Planeti (The Planets)</i>	The moving of the planets	1998
Marko Mihevc	<i>Mar saba</i>	A monastery near Betlehem	1999
Marko Mihevc	<i>Karneval</i>	Carnival	2002
Marko Mihevc	<i>Jamal</i>	Journey of three friends through a desert in search of the stone of wisdom	2004
Ivo Petrič	<i>Slika Doriana Graya II (The Picture of Dorian Gray II)</i>	Novel <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i> by Oscar Wilde	1987; 2007
Igor Štuhec	<i>Od Save do Mure (From Sava to Mura)</i>	Slovenian landscape	2010

Table 1: List of Slovene symphonic poems.¹²

¹² Composers used for their programme adapting works a variety of terms, which complicates their genre definition. With the exception of early symphonic pictures by Slavko Osterc, (which are considered here because of their strict adaptation of their programmes and time of creation,) the list consists only of the works that were referred as symphonic poems, omitting other programmatic one-movement orchestral works.

POVZETEK

Simfonična pesnitev se je v slovenski glasbeni ustvarjalnosti pojavila šele v tridesetih letih 20. stoletja, saj so bile šele takrat okoliščine dovolj spodbudne, da so se skladatelji lahko večinsko posvetili ustvarjanju simfoničnih del. K razmahu zvrsti v štiridesetih letih je pripomogel narodno-osvobodilni boj, ki je vplival tudi na umetnost. Zaradi svoje programske narave je bila simfonična pesnitev namreč najbolj primerna oblika izražanja narodne zavesti in opozarjanja na grozote vojne. Zunajglasbeni programi slovenskih simfoničnih pesnitev so tako prežeti z narodnimi, patriotskimi in vojnimi temami. Večina slovenski simfoničnih pesnitev temelji na ohlapno zastavljenih progra-

mih, nekatere se opirajo na ljudske pripovedke, redke na literarna dela.

S simfonično pesnitvijo se je srečalo mnogo slogovno različno orientiranih slovenskih skladateljev, ki pripadajo različnim časovnim okvirom. V veliki meri sta se ji posvetila tradicionalista Marjan Kozina in Blaž Arnič, ki sta uporabljala tradicionalne kompozicijske tehnike. Tudi napredni Slavko Osterc se je lotil pisanja simfonične pesnitve, ki izstopa zaradi skladateljeve uporabe svobodne atonalnosti. Simfonična pesnitev je na Slovenskem ostala zanimiva tudi skladateljem današnjega časa. Marko Mihevc je z osmimi simfoničnimi pesnitvami najbolj izrazil slovenski ustvarjalec simfoničnih pesnitev poleg Blaža Arniča.