

UDK 782Savin:Lepa Vida

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Risto Savin and Slovene Identity: the Journey to *Lepa Vida*

Risto Savin in slovenska identiteta: pot do Lepe Vide

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IZVLEČEK

Po poklicu profesionalni avstro-ogrski vojak Risto Savin je v svojem skladateljskem delu postopno razvil slovensko glasbeno identiteto. Sprva je pisal za glas, klavir in komorne zasedbe v nemškem slogu, potem je pa začel skladati na slovensko poezijo Antona Aškerca (1895) in napisal svojo prvo kratko opero, *Poslednja straža* (1904). Slog, ki ga je razvil pri tem, je predstavljal osnovo za njegovo prvo veliko opero *Lepa Vida* (1907).

ABSTRACT

As an Austro-Hungarian soldier, Risto Savin gradually achieved Slovene musical identity, first by working in a Germanic style for songs, piano and chamber music and afterwards by setting Slovene poetry by Anton Aškerc (1895) and writing his first short music drama, *Poslednja straža* ('The Last Watch') (1904). The style he thus developed acted as the basis for his first major opera *Lepa Vida* ('Fair Vida') (1907).

By profession Risto Savin (1859–1948) was the soldier Friderik Širca in the Austro-Hungarian army, but he was also a Slovene composer, at first in his spare time and later in a full-time capacity. His life spanned a critical period in the history of his nation and his activities reflect this. In his military career he was a loyal and dedicated officer, but in his heart he was devoted to his native land of Slovenia, its nationality and its culture. This dichotomy appears in his music, with some early works, especially his instrumental and chamber music of the earlier 1890s, following the trends of Central European styles, particularly of German and Austrian composers, while others, particularly the songs, choruses and most importantly the operas, turn more to the folktales, history and society of Slovene lands. Although Savin had been moving in this direction for many years, mostly unobtrusively, he was gradually able to develop his Slovene character much

more openly. The lessons learned from his settings of songs by Aškerc (1895), his first pieces based on Slovene poetry, were soon applied to a more dramatic context. He made the decisive move in 1904 with the composition of the one-act opera *Poslednja straža* ('The Last Watch'), presented as a Slovene opera and performed in Zagreb in 1906. This was a very significant development, marking another step towards a Slovene national character. One can now sense that the climax of this activity was the composition of the opera *Lepa Vida* in 1907. With the setting of a full-length opera Savin had now fully established his 'Slovene' credentials and without this transformation the later operas would never have taken the form that they took.

Savin was born a contemporary of both Gustav Mahler (1860–1911) and Richard Strauss (1864–1949), although his music shares only a general stylistic similarity with either of them. One can see a greater indebtedness to the music of Beethoven, Schubert, Mendelssohn and Brahms, certainly in the earliest period of his extant compositions, dating from 1891–1897. It was the time in which he explored the German Lied, and composed the largest number of orchestral and chamber works and piano pieces. This was the time when Savin was studying in Vienna (1892–1896) and Prague (1897–1899). We can see that at this time he was probably thinking in terms of the models that might well have been offered him by Robert Fuchs, his teacher in Vienna and refining his craft accordingly. Let us consider some of these works. Savin composed various songs to settings of German words from at least 1892 onwards, but mostly around 1900. Some were by well known poets: *Lass das Fragen* by Hans von Hopfen (1835–1904), *Bist du braun, bist du blond* in a German translation of a poem by Paul Verlaine (1844–1896), *An die Entfernte* by Nikolaus Lenau (1802–1850), *Wald bei Nacht* by Karl Schneller (1878–1942)¹, *Bild der Nacht* by Eichendorff (1788–1857), and the 1894 Lied *Mädel, wie blüht's* which sets words by Rudolf Baumbach (1840–1905). Cvetko considered that these all followed traditional models,² and were composed mostly in the style of the Schubertian Lied.

In the absence of the Piano Sonata which is missing, presumably lost, the only surviving piano pieces from the early period are a small number of solo piano miniatures, comprising *Pavliha na potovanju* op. 8 (estimated to have been written around 1894), which is a piano piece in three short movements, and the Six Piano Pieces (1895) which were originally numbered as op. 6 but the composer later removed the numbering and did not include them on his work-list. These are formally cast in traditional binary or ternary structures, with only a minimal variation on the return of the opening music. The ternary pieces use repeated sections with the plan of AABABA. The piano writing is idiomatic, with close attention to keeping the interest not only in the melody of the upper part but throughout the texture. Taking the pieces in turn one can point to features that show the composer's complete command of pianistic idiom. The *Sarabande* op. 8 No. 2 is binary in form, with distinctive use of the motif of a dotted quaver and semiquaver falling a semitone, but with natural variations on this figure. The first of the pieces originally numbered op. 6, *Étude*, presents a harmonic progression articulated by a triplet arpeggio and a dotted-quaver-semiquaver-two quaver pattern. The harmonies

¹ Schneller was an Austrian army officer who published poetry between the two world wars.

² Dragotin Cvetko, *Risto Savin: osebnost in delo* (Državna založba Slovenije, Ljubljana, 1949), 23.

show some interesting juxtapositions and chromaticisms. The *Barcarola* No. 2 is in A flat major and in 9/8 time with gently moving lines. The middle section starts in the minor moving through various key-centres to return naturally to the key of the opening. The fast E-major *List v album* ('Album Leaf') No. 3 in its very short span explores some chromatic movement in its short middle section. The next two pieces, *Narodna* No. 4 ('Folk Song') and *Večerna* No. 5 ('Evening Song'), are interesting in that they introduce some folk elements, the former the song 'Pobiči mi po cest' gredo' and the latter two songs: 'Zvedel sem nekaj novega' in the A section and 'Pobič sem star šele osemnajst let' in the central section. The beautiful character of *Večerna* must have encouraged Savin to reuse the music in his *Suite* for string orchestra op. 15. The last of the set, *Romanca*, a ternary piece mostly in a diatonic B flat major, uses arpeggio figures to accompany a gently rising and falling melody and sequences of block chords. Overall, then, these pieces show a capable piano technique in miniature forms, but are very modest in their aims and achievement.

The piano writing of the trios discussed next is of a very different order and is very much more impressive. Savin's two Trios for violin, cello and piano were composed in 1893 or 1894. The piano trio as a favoured chamber music combination had had a long and distinguished history with impressive works by Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, as well as more recent examples by Schumann and Brahms. Both of Savin's Trios follow the type of formal plans used by his predecessors. The later of the two and the one which Savin himself appreciated better by giving it an opus number and including it in his work-list, is the G minor Trio op. 6 (originally numbered op. 18). It has an extended and well wrought sonata-form first movement. The motivic development is extensive, with motifs taken both from the opening subject and the more lyrical second subject. All three players share the melodic and motivic interest fairly equally, with the piano making considerable use of arpeggio textures when taking a subsidiary role. Imitation between the parts is both frequent and well handled, showing the composer's firm grasp of traditional contrapuntal practice. The lyrical Andante ternary-form second movement is less imposing, but provides the appropriate contrast, while the finale is a genial rondo type with a serious slow introduction. Overall the work would stand a comparison with similar works by Schumann or Brahms, even if the melodic distinction is not so high.

This was also the period when Savin wrote most of his orchestral pieces. Again one would expect that his teachers required certain examples to ensure that his techniques were securely grounded. What is interesting is that the two orchestral pieces of 1894–1895 are impressive in their own right without making any allowances for their probable origin as student 'exercises'. The *Serenade* op. 4 for wind instruments is a single-movement work that shows a very secure control of writing for wind instruments and for the melodic lines being shared between the different players. Savin's method of dovetailing the lines of flute, oboe and clarinet is very skilled, with considerable assurance in their handling. The composer's use of a late Romantic harmonic idiom is brought into strong focus in this work with both incidental and structural chromaticism, which is particularly emphasised in chord progressions played by the full ensemble. One could look to the wind serenades of Mozart for some models, but the music is more like the early wind

ensemble pieces by Richard Strauss. The *Scherzo* for small orchestra op. 11 of 1894–1895 is again well constructed. Here the rhythmic momentum is skilfully maintained by the use of moving inner parts. A number of repetitive rhythmic patterns are sometimes varied with hemiolas cutting across the basic 3/4 metre, giving a hint of folk influence. We should not read too much into this feature at this stage, but it is certainly something that Savin was to follow in his next compositions. The *Suite* for string orchestra op. 15 of 1897 is very interesting in this connection, though, with its four movements, 'Introduction', 'Scherzo', *Večerna*, and 'Kolo', giving some idea of the variety that the composer was now employing. The opening movement is gently impressionistic, and the Scherzo has some of the folk-like character of the earlier orchestral scherzo. The third movement, entitled *Večerna* ('Evening Song'), transcribes a gentle piano piece, also with folk-music connections, from 1895, and the finale takes the round-dance, the Kolo, in another move towards nationalistic music.

This transformation *towards* the use of folk-like music was coupled with a move *away* from the single-tempo song. A new dramatic sense was being embraced by Savin who was now starting to set Slovene texts instead of the German of his earlier songs. At this stage it is helpful to consider some of these in detail, especially five settings of poetry by Anton Aškerc (1856–1912) dating between 1895 and 1903. These illuminate the new developments in the composer's style along with his close engagement with the Slovene language. They show a dramatic presence and a willingness to change the tempo and character of the music during the course of the piece in recognition of the changed character of the words chosen and in line with the ideas of later Romantic opera. Soon after this, in 1904, Savin composed his dramatic scena *Poslednja straža* which gave him a good opportunity to exploit these techniques. Looking at the *Tri Aškerčeve balade* ('Three Aškerc Ballads') of 1895, we can see the techniques in practice.

The first song *Poslednje pismo* ('Last Letter') starts at a gentle pace (Andante) in an unambiguous E flat major with simple 4/4 rhythms fitting the Slovene words perfectly. Even when Savin modulates to B flat major and B flat minor, the rhythms continue to track the Slovene words according to their natural rhythm. The singer is dwelling on the thoughts of the protagonist who is eagerly waiting to hear from her fiancé on a battle front. Yet suddenly with the narrator's words 'poštni rog' (post horn) a new level of action appears, the possibility of a letter being delivered. In order to convey this possibility and expectation, the composer introduces a horn call that completely changes the character of the music. At this point we have the protagonist's verbal query to the postman set as a recitative with the horn calls punctuating the phrases, illustrating the girl's agitation. The music modulates quickly to the F major central section *Allegro assai e appassionato* in 3/2 in complete contrast to the opening. As in the verbal text the narrator describes how she is refusing to comprehend the letter, the sustained bass line rising against the syncopated chords of the pianist's right hand provide a energetic accompaniment to the steadily rising tension of the vocal part. The climax at the emphatic words 'da krogla priletela je' ('that a bullet flew [towards him]') *fortissimo* in E flat minor is well prepared. The music then winds down to a return to the opening Andante with added chromaticisms and a brief return to the horn calls; the girl refuses to understand that her fiancé is dead, but the return of the music to normality signifies that she will have to accept the

cruel situation. The tempos are well managed with effective transitions which mirror the text. Aškerc's words are set one note to a syllable throughout in order to project the sound without any hint of confusion. Overall then the song conveys a sense of immediacy and atmosphere that is not necessarily present in the ordinary Lied.

The second song, *Javor in lipa* ('The Maple and the Linden'), about an unrequitable love of a male maple for a graceful linden, is much simpler in both character and technique. The Allegro 12/8 tempo and the arpeggiated accompaniment are maintained throughout. The modulations from the basic E major are generally modest. However, the setting of Aškerc's words is intriguing: the beginnings of the phrases are sung on a seven-fold repeated single dominant pitch before rising to the tonic, while repeated notes are frequently found in the song. The rhythm most frequently found is the dotted crotchet followed by a crotchet and a quaver, whether the same pitch is maintained or the melody moves up or down.

The third song *Poroka* ('The Wedding'), with its dramatic changes of tempo and atmosphere, is almost a dramatic *scena*. It begins in a nearly militaristic fashion even if there is a suggestion of the wedding march from the incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by Mendelssohn. The vocal line to start with is emphatically diatonic and rhythmically rigid, set mostly as one word to a syllable with only occasional passing notes. The words are very clearly presented with a natural rise and fall in the pitch. This changes quickly with harmonic shifts that bring us to G minor before returning to the home tonic of G major for a return to the music of the opening. It is with the words of the monk who is conducting the wedding ceremony 'Na veke srečna bodita, po jednem poti hodita!' ('May you be forever happy, may you forever follow one path') that Savin shows his dramatic sense without ambiguity with chant-emulating recitative, imitating the way Slovene priests speak during services. The piano part resembles the organ, with threatening chords based on C minor emphasising the change in mood. This is particularly noticeable with the second phrase 'Težko živi življenje se, če ne deli trpljenje se' ('It is hard to live life when suffering is not shared'). The music shifts quickly to a restful E major for the next Andante interlude 'Pa ona v njega vpre oči, pa tiho reče grajska hči' ('But she directs her eyes at him [the monk] and the noble daughter speaks quietly [to him]'). The girl's words, half prayer, half apology, make it clear that there used to be a romantic feeling between her and the monk, but that the noble girl scorned him. As the girl recovers and formally invites him to the wedding party, the monk's calm is over. His recitative now returns in a varied, agitated form as he proudly rejects her offer. A return to the Andante with a different vocal line for the ending marks the monk's resigned return to the monastery.

The next song to be considered is *Zimska idila* ('Winter Idyll') op. 7 No. 1, probably written before 1900.³ Savin responds to the witty text describing a village girl's blush as her fiancé enters the chamber with a much more straightforward construction, but he relies on techniques that he had used in the other songs. The opening in a diatonic G major with a traditional modulation to the dominant key (D major) is a syllabic setting with the occasional passing note. As in the other songs the composer breaks into a

³ See Aleš Nagode, »Med domom in svetom: pesmi za glas Rista Savina,« *Muzikološki zbornik* 48, št. 2 (2012): 83.

dramatic but brief recitative before moving into a faster closing section.

The last song to be considered in this group is *Skala v Savinji* op. 9 (1902–1903)⁴. It is subtitled ‘Balada’, making the narrative much more explicit. Like *Poroka*, it is a complex multi-tempo song, with changes of tempo and key that mirror the words in a strongly emotional way. The ballad describes the girl returning home alone late at night, followed by a man who importunes her with unwelcome advances. She escapes his attack by jumping to her death in the river Savinja. The long opening section in B flat major is broadly diatonic with a straightforward but flexible vocal line that follows the words syllabically, but using the traditional techniques of emphasis, pitch, duration and volume. The piano’s accompaniment mostly consists of rolling arpeggio figurations in semiquavers. At the climax, with the words ‘Prehodil že sem križem svet in lepih videl sem deklet’ (‘I have walked across the world and I’ve seen beautiful girls’), Savin marks the music *zaljubljeno* (‘lovingly’) to introduce the new section in the remote key of B major in 9/8 time. This section is interrupted by a brief recitative that leads into the fast sections, *Allegro assai*, *Energico* and *Con fuoco*, and a brief return to the figurations of the opening and a sudden but effective recitative ending ‘To bil je skok črez skalni rob / tja dol v Savinje mokri grob!’ (‘This was a jump over the edge of the rock / down to the wet tomb of Savinja!’).

To summarise the observations of these five songs: one can find that Savin uses a number of different methods of presenting his words, simple syllabic settings with mostly stepwise vocal movement, dramatic recitative, more complex vocal phrases with large leaps, and he varies the piano accompaniment in line with the emotional content of the words. In a sense this variety of treatment is the essence of Savin’s progress in setting of the Slovene words that he has chosen. It is not difficult to deduce that this group of songs setting the emotional poems of Aškerc was an excellent preparation for the next major project, *Poslednja straža* (‘The Last Watch’), the first real landmark in his compositional journey, and following that, the opera *Lepa Vida* (‘Fair Vida’).

Savin’s first stage work, the one-act “operatic scene” *Poslednja straža* (1904), is a continuation of the work that the composer had begun with the settings of Aškerc songs. It is itself based on a ballad by Aškerc, but this time the source was adapted into a short libretto by Richard Batka. It tells the story of a soldier who guards a state ball on a freezing winter’s night, the night before he is meant to be discharged from the army. As the night turns ever colder, he hallucinates about his farewell from home and his beloved; he is found frozen to death in the morning after the ball ends. Though on a short scale, *Poslednja straža* is an ambitious and well-executed work, written for a large orchestra in the post-Romantic idiom. It gave Savin scope to grapple, not always entirely successfully, with larger-scale dramaturgy and the relationship between the orchestra and the voice, exchanging the orchestral recitative with melodic passages, which are often characterized by leaps, among them prominently those of the diminished fifth and the augmented fourth. Like *Lepa Vida*, the setting was originally written to a German text, and later adapted to the Slovene translation by Milan Pugelj. The work was, however, intended as a Slovene opera and was presented as such at its first performance in Zagreb

4 Ibid.

in 1906. Doubtless the experience of seeing it performed contributed to the success of Savin's next operatic venture.

Lepa Vida of 1907 proved to be a watershed in Savin's music. All the threads of his work so far were gathered together in a synthesis that is impressive on almost every level. The vocal and dramatic lessons that were learned in the Aškerc songs and *Poslednja straža*, and above all the sense of word setting in the Slovene language were realised in the clearest possible way. The expert instrumental handling of the orchestral pieces is translated into his mature and confident handling of the orchestra in the opera. To say that the work appeared to an unsuspecting audience at its first performance in 1909 is something of an exaggeration, because of the experience of *Poslednja straža*, but certainly the move forward for Savin was very impressive indeed.

Savin turned to the Slovene story of the Fair Vida, writing his own script, but using a German libretto by Richard Batka. The libretto did prove somewhat unsatisfactory but nevertheless it served its purpose (the original Slovene version to which the music was later adapted is the work of an unknown author). Using a story based in Slavic lands, Savin was able to employ his idiom in an effective way to reinforce his sense of nationalism. This is apparent in the very opening music which takes simple folk rhythms to create a dance-like atmosphere. Yet the work is not a folk opera: it is composed as a stirring romantic tragedy, much in the German tradition. Underlying the music, however, is a sense that the words are not what Savin really wanted. He published the score in 1909 in Budapest with German words in order to make it more accessible in neighbouring countries, but embarked on a substantial revision after the opera's first performance at the Land Theatre in Ljubljana in 1909. A manuscript vocal score kept in the National University Library in Ljubljana is set to Slovene words. At every point in the score of the Slovene version the setting is much more satisfactory, showing a natural feeling for the emphasis and subtlety of the language. The German version appears to be much more formal. The irony of this situation is that in the opinion of every Slovene commentator, the quality of the Slovene libretto is unsatisfactory. Savin was presented with some very awkward lines, but these were in a language with which he clearly felt more comfortable. The situation has been somewhat improved by using a rewritten libretto, a solution that was been adopted in some later performances.

The synthesis of Savin's previous music is clear at every stage. The vocal lines are varied according to the dramatic context. The shaping of phrases and the balance of one phrase against another is always masterly. There is no obvious or extensive use of leitmotifs, even though certain melodic phrases do recur in dramatic contexts. Being through composed, as were the Aškerc songs and *Poslednja straža*, the atmosphere can change rapidly without any difficulty. It is also in the integration of melody and harmony that Savin has made such progress. His command of romantic harmony is completely natural and fluent, fully supporting the dramatic flow of the story of the opera. In conclusion one can see that the opera *Lepa Vida* represented the beginning of Savin's musical maturity, perhaps not his complete departure from German romanticism, but certainly his arrival at a musical idiom that could satisfactorily represent his Slovene ambitions.

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POVZETEK

Risto Savin je bil vojak v avstrijsko-ogrski vojski, a bil je tudi slovenski skladatelj. Njegova glasba je sprva odsevala njegovo germansko izobrazbo, sčasoma pa je razvil prepoznavno slovensko identiteto. Od zgodnjih uglasbitev nemške poezije je prek romantičnih klavirskih del in komorne glasbe v slogu sodobnika Brahmsa prešel na uglasbitve

slovenske poezije Antona Aškerc, v slogu, ki je zrcalil zvoke in meter njegovega domačega jezika. V enodejanki *Poslednja straža* (1904) je ta slog izbrusil, kar je bila dobra priprava za njegovo prvo veliko opero v slovenščini, *Lepo Vido* (1907), z raznolikimi vokalnimi linijami, skrbnim kombiniranjem metrične pesmi in recitativa ter zanesljivim občutkom za dramo.