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The Ascent and Decline of Serbian Symphonic Music

A ascensão e o declínio da música sinfónica na Sérvia

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Ivana Medić

Resumo

Neste artigo, analiso a forma como as políticas estatais e as infraestruturas influenciam a música erudita num determinado local e momento. Este estudo centra-se no desenvolvimento rápido e substancial da sinfonia sérvia entre o fim da Segunda Guerra Mundial e a dissolução da Jugoslávia socialista, e anteriormente quase inexistente. Ao longo dessas décadas, existiram várias condicionantes que permitiram o florescimento da música sinfónica; e que são descritas no artigo. A importância crucial dessas circunstâncias foi, infelizmente, confirmada após a dissolução da República Socialista Federal da Jugoslávia, a guerra civil que se seguiu e a consequente perda de toda a infraestrutura de apoio institucional à música contemporânea, o que levou a um declínio igualmente rápido na produção sinfónica.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Sinfonia; Arte musical da Sérvia; Música do século XX; Historiografia; Política cultural do Estado.

Abstract

In this article, I analyze how state policies and infrastructure influence art music in a given place and time. My study focuses on the rapid and substantial development of the previously almost non-existent Serbian symphony between the end of World War II and the dissolution of socialist Yugoslavia. Over these decades, several conditions existed that enabled symphonic music to flourish; these are described in the article. The crucial importance of those conditions was, unfortunately, confirmed after the dissolution of the SFR Yugoslavia, the ensuing civil war, and the consequent loss of the entire infrastructure of systemic support for new music, which led to an equally rapid decline in symphonic production.

KEYWORDS: Symphony; Serbian art music; Twentieth-century music; Historiography; State cultural policy.

Introduction

Historical accounts of Serbian music in the second half of the twentieth century have usually focused on specific composers regarded as 'important', as well as their landmark works, subscribing to the ideology of the autonomy of artistic creation and thus largely ignoring social, anthropological, historical and political factors that led to the creation and development of certain music genres. In this article, I wish to shift the perspective and analyze how extramusical conditions and the infrastructure influenced music creation, using the example of Serbian symphonic music. By doing so, one arrives at a wholly different history of art music and its specific genres.

The present study focuses on the development of the previously almost non-existent Serbian symphony, from the end of World War II until the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-91). During this period, several conditions existed that enabled symphonic music to flourish; after they were lost, the genre underwent a rapid and ongoing decline.

This study is part of wider international research dealing with hundreds of 'forgotten' symphonies written in the second half of the twentieth century in the countries of East and Central Europe. Although Serbia (then a part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) was not under strict Soviet political influence after 1948, many similarities remained, such as a state-controlled production which encompassed all of the arts and their institutions, including the entire educational system. Due to the absence of a strong symphonic tradition in Yugoslavia before World War II, composers were strongly encouraged after the war, once the communists had come to power, to write symphonies in order to 'fill the gaps' in the country's musical history and to contribute to narratives celebrating triumph over evil. Namely, in post-war communist Serbia and Yugoslavia, just like in the other countries under the Soviet sphere of influence, the 'great' symphony came to be regarded as a 'supreme' genre, which was ascribed a special semantic/symbolic meaning, influenced by the Soviet Marxist aesthetics that regarded symphony as a 'substitute' for the Mass in the atheist/agnostic contemporary world (Aranovskii 1979, 27),[1] i.e., as a bearer of humanist and moral values. Furthermore, the reliance of Eastern European communist governments on the collective mythology of World War II heroism and partisan resistance fostered a commitment to a Beethovenian type of heroic symphonism (Medić 2013, 5). Many of these postwar symphonies were never performed outside the countries where they were written and remained largely unknown even in the neighboring lands. Nowadays, many of them are all but forgotten.

To show how the same history of Serbian symphonic music can be written in different, even opposite ways, I will engage in a constructive 'polemic' with a well-known text about Serbian symphonic music—namely, the chapter entitled 'Orkestarska muzika' [Orchestral Music], written in 2007 by Dragana Stojanović-Novičić and Marija Masnikosa, renowned

1 Mark Aranovskii stated outright: 'The symphony is a complex construction of signs, a statement, consisting of "words"with certain meanings' (Aranovskii 1979, 160).

Serbian musicologists and professors at the Department of Musicology, Faculty of Music in Belgrade (Stojanović-Novičić - Masnikosa 2007, 493-515). This study was published as one of the chapters of the book *Istorija srpske muzike: srpska muzika i evropsko kulturno nasleđe* [History of Serbian Music: Serbian Music and European Cultural Heritage], edited by Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman for the official Serbian publisher of textbooks and other educational literature [Zavod za udžbenike]. So far, this collective monograph is the only comprehensive history of Serbian music, and it is widely used as a standard textbook at different levels of education. It provides ample information to anyone interested in Serbian music—although, unfortunately, it is only available in the Serbian language, which greatly reduces its potential readership.

After providing an overview of this historical survey of Serbian orchestral music, I will show how the same events could have been presented and assessed completely differently. I should emphasize that the scholarly approach employed by Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa is neither right nor wrong *per se*; namely, writing historical texts, especially those that aim to be comprehensive and canonizing, is all about making choices. Since it is not possible to encompass everything in one text, the methodology, the selection of artists and their works depend on the type of story one wishes to tell. The factors influencing the authors' choices range from word limit restrictions, the type of publication they are writing for and its intended readership, the editor-in-chief's vision, personal and professional biases, etc. What is important is to constantly be aware of the choices that we make and the reasons why we make them.

Historical Context for the Development of Serbian Symphonism

The symphonic tradition in Serbia began its belated development only at the beginning of the twentieth century. Due to the lack of sufficiently trained composers, music academies, and professional orchestras in Serbia (a country that only gained its full independence after centuries of Ottoman rule in 1878), musical life was dominated by choral music until the end of the 19th century. Just as it was beginning to establish professional and cultural institutions, the Kingdom of Serbia endured several consecutive devastating wars: the two Balkan Wars (in 1912 and 1913), and World War I (1914-18); upon the end of the latter, Serbia became a part of the newly-founded Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, ruled by the Serbian dynasty Karađorđević. The first preserved[2] attempt at writing a symphony belongs to Miloje Milojević (1884-1946), who wrote the work *Vsegord i Divna: Symphony in A major* in 1903, when he was only nineteen years old, with a very rudimentary knowledge of composition; Melita Milin remarks that it was an amateurish work, with monotonous harmony and the same 2/4 metre throughout the entire four-movement symphony (Milin 1999, 153). Thus, the first Serbian

2 Melita Milin states that 'there is some documentation of the composition of symphonies by Robert Tolinger, Hugo Doubek and Isidor Bajić and also about their performances. Unfortunately the manuscripts of those works are lost' (Milin 1999, 153).

composer who wrote a 'professional' symphony, in 1907, was Milojević's friend Petar Konjović (1883–1970), educated at the Prague Conservatory. Konjović's Symphony in C minor is a four-movement late-Romantic work, infused with elements of stylized Serbian folklore;[3] it was only premiered sixteen years after its completion, in 1923, in Zagreb (nowadays the capital city of Croatia), and, by that time, its style had already become 'outmoded', to use Arnold Schoenberg's term (Schoenberg 1946–1975, 113).

The next two symphonies, entitled *The First Yugoslav Symphony* (1914–20) and *The Second Yugoslav Symphony* (1924), were written by Milenko Paunović (1889–1924), who studied composition with Max Reger at the Leipzig Conservatory. Both symphonies were written as three-movement cycles, featuring influences ranging from Gustav Mahler's depictions of nature and Cesar Franck's cyclic principle, to Serbian romantic poetry; the First is subtitled *Na Liparu* [At the Linden Forest], after poet Đura Jakšić's (1832–78) eponymous poem.[4] Another composer, Svetolik Pašćan-Kojanov (1892–1971), educated in Zagreb, wrote a Symphony in D major in 1920; just like Konjović's and Paunović's works, it was modelled after German and Czech late-Romantic works.

The foundation of three important institutions—the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra in 1923, Radio Belgrade in 1929 (which established its own Symphony Orchestra in 1937), and the Belgrade Music Academy, also in 1937, facilitated by the influx of instrumentalists who immigrated to Serbia after the October Revolution, created the necessary preconditions for Serbian symphonic music to flourish. However, this development was, abruptly, halted by the outbreak of World War II and the Nazi German occupation of Serbia. It was only continued after the liberation in 1945, albeit in completely changed political circumstances, in the newly established Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia, ruled by the Communist Party and the lifelong president Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980).

Writings about symphonic music in Serbia followed the same developmental path as the genre itself. Due to the lack of professional musicologists, writing about music was mainly in the hands of amateurs until World War I. The first Serbian doctor of musicology was the aforementioned Miloje Milojević, who studied composition, conducting and piano at the Music Academy in Munich, and musicology at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Munich. After the war ended, he continued his studies in Prague, where he defended his doctorate in musicology at Charles University. The second Serbian professionally trained musicologist, Vojislav Vučković (1910–42), also defended his PhD at Charles University in Prague in 1934. But while Milojević's thesis was on Bedřich Smetana's harmonic style, Vučković, a devout communist and leftist, dedicated his dissertation to music as a means of propaganda. Back in Belgrade,

3 The recording of Konjović's rarely performed Symphony is available on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvReYKA8hkA> (accessed 1 November 2024).

4 The recording of Paunović's *First Yugoslav Symphony* is available on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAMERHXja9I> (accessed 1 November 2024). On Paunović's life and work see: Milanović (2017).

both Milojević and Vučković wrote extensively about various genres and phenomena of both historical and modern music. Whereas Milojević, who taught at the Faculty of Philosophy and the Music School 'Mokranjac' (and since 1937 at the Music Academy), wrote mainly didactic, historical-stylistic-analytical essays and studies, Vučković wrote from the leftist viewpoint and regarded music as a tool for achieving ideological, social and political goals. Unfortunately, both Milojević and Vučković perished during or immediately after World War II, and after the liberation, the task of writing about symphonies fell onto the new generation of writers in the newly established, communist state.

Although the SFR Yugoslavia parted ways with the USSR and Eastern Bloc in 1948 and abandoned the doctrine of socialist realism, the technical and ideological conditions for composers became only slightly less repressive, and socialist realism was gradually replaced by moderated modernism (Medić 2007). Yugoslav contemporary music never received much systemic support, which contributed to its relatively marginal position, both nationally and internationally. The professors of composition and theoretical subjects at the Belgrade Music Academy (later Faculty of Music) insisted on a rigidly conservative curriculum that required mastering classic formal patterns and using an accessible harmonic language. From the 1950s onwards, an opinion prevailed among Serbian music professionals that composers should seek novelties, but not at the cost of rejecting traditional expressive means, and that the gradual introduction of new techniques was more desirable than a sudden break with the past. Thus, the first generation of Belgrade-educated composers gradually moved from neo-romantic stylistic premises and incorporated some (neo)expressionist or (neo)impressionist elements, often imbued with folklore elements, sometimes resulting in quite incongruous works (Medić 2021). The term *moderated modernism* was coined by Theodor W. Adorno in 1939 as a derogatory label for the work of composers whom he considered 'regressive'. However, it is necessary to distinguish between moderated modernism in countries that had strong modernist and avant-garde movements and where the return to more accessible music could indeed seem regressive—from the countries such as Yugoslavia, which, due to an interplay of historical circumstances, began the development of their cultural institutions quite belatedly, and throughout the twentieth century attempted to catch up with European cultural currents, with full awareness of the infrastructural and discursive constraints of their environment. Hence, in Yugoslavia, moderated modernism did not have a derogatory meaning and simply designated a stylistic formation whose main characteristic was the tendency to reconcile and unite the modern and the traditional, as well as the local and the global tendencies (Medić 2007; 2021). Similarly, writing about Aleksandar Obradović's symphonic output, Jelena Janković-Beguš (following art historian Ješa Denegri) defined *socialist modernism* in music as the next evolutionary step after socialist realism; this stylistic formation pointed to the specific position of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia 'between East and West' during the Cold War, as it emerged at the crossroads of the features of Eastern and Western cultural models (Janković-Beguš 2017, 143-5).

After the first edition of the Music Biennale Zagreb in 1961, which exposed Yugoslav composers to the latest European and global avant-garde tendencies (Emmery - Miladinović Prica 2024), many Serbian composers attempted to incorporate elements and techniques of the avant-garde, including aleatorics, micropolyphony and, to a lesser extent, serialism. In this way, they created works that sounded 'avant-garde' in the Yugoslav context; however, I believe that this 'local avant-garde' actually belongs to moderated modernism, both for technical and ideological reasons: namely, it appeared relatively late and its expressive means were 'new' only in the local context; also, it was achieved through gradual adoption of increasingly modern compositional procedures, rather than the radical and (self-)organized artistic revolution accompanied by influential manifestos (Medić 2021).

On the other hand, the turn of events since the first Biennale proved quite traumatic for some Serbian composers, who did not know how to cope with the influx of new styles and techniques; and, some very influential figures, such as Vlastimir Peričić (1923-2000) and Dragutin Gostuški (1923-98), even abandoned composing music and turned to writing, teaching, and working in the media.

History of Serbian Orchestral Music as a Straightforward Line

When embarking on writing the first comprehensive *History of Serbian Music*, the editor-in-chief, Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman and her contributors wanted to collect in one place all hitherto known information about Serbian art music and to establish a 'canon', but also to provide a reliable university textbook for the module National History of Music, taught at various Serbian music higher education institutions. This hefty volume (786 pages) is divided into four parts and twenty-seven chapters, supplemented by an extensive bibliography and a glossary of names and terms. The first part deals with the general tendencies of the development of Serbian music, from the earliest preserved traces of musical culture in this territory to the situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century (the book was published in 2007). The second part is dedicated to stylistic topics, whereas the third part presents an overview of various genres of Serbian art music and their most notable representatives, as selected by the editor and authors of individual chapters. Finally, the fourth part is dedicated to music education, performance and writings on music. According to the publisher's blurb, 'the history of Serbian music is viewed from different problem angles represented in individual, thematically differentiated contributions, which cover the development of Serbian music from its earliest times to the present day. Contributions are individually rounded but, at the same time, mutually coordinated and connected'.[5]

5 See <https://www.knjizare-vulkan.rs/muzika/6732-istorija-srpske-muzike> (accessed 1 December 2024). The blurb also discloses that all authors were employees of the Faculty of Music in Belgrade (working either at the Department of Musicology or the Department of Music Theory) and that the book was the result of a multi-year scientific project.

Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa's historical survey of Serbian symphonic/orchestral music begins with the authors' statement that the development of Serbian orchestral music can be traced only since the beginning of the twentieth century; throughout the chapter, the terms 'symphonic' and 'orchestral' are used interchangeably. After the introduction, the authors discuss orchestral works written in Serbia from a diachronic perspective: they focus on each decade of the twentieth century and list the works written at that time. The description of the first decade begins with two lost orchestral works, by Isidor Bajić (1878–1915) and Milojević,[6] followed by Konjović's Symphony in C minor. The authors emphasize that Konjović's Symphony is based on folk melodies lifted from Stevan Mokranjac's choral *Rukoveti* [Garlands] and that it was written under the obvious influence of the nineteenth-century Slavic symphonism (exemplified by Czech and Russian composers such as Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák, and Alexander Borodin).

Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa then list some orchestral works by Konjović, Milojević and Stevan Hristić (1885–1958), but highlight that none of these three composers, who are considered the first modernists in Serbian music, were predominantly interested in orchestral music, but rather in opera (Konjović, Hristić), ballet (Hristić), and chamber music (Milojević). This is followed by a discussion of the period after the end of World War I; the authors include two orchestral works by Petar Stojanović (1877–1957) but never mention the fact that, apart from being an ethnic Serb, this Budapest-born composer and violinist did not live in Serbia until 1925, when he moved to Belgrade from Vienna, where he had honed his craft under the influence of other Viennese masters. Two orchestral *Suites* by Svetomir Nastasijević (1902–79) are singled out for their 'primitivist' treatment of the folklore material. The composer who is introduced as having made the first symphonic breakthrough in Serbian music is Josip Slavenski (b. Štolcer, 1896–1955)—the authors do not mention that he was an ethnic Croat from Međimurje, educated in Budapest and Prague, who moved to Belgrade in 1924 and, just like Stojanović, received his entire compositional training and established his orchestral style abroad. On the other hand, Milenko Paunović, the author of two symphonies, is completely omitted from the chapter, without explanation.

Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa remark that in the 1930s, the number of orchestral pieces began to increase, with the return to Belgrade of the generation who studied in Prague, including Mihailo Vukdragović (1900–67), Mihovil Logar (1902–98), Predrag Milošević (1904–88), Milan Ristić (1908–82), Ljubica Marić (1909–2003), Vojislav Vučković, and Stanojlo Rajičić (1910–2000). The chapter includes a brief overview of the works written during their studies in Prague, as well as those written upon their return to Serbia; however, the authors do not mention whether any of these works were performed, when and by whom, nor what their

6 However, as previously mentioned, Milojević's symphony *Vsegord i Divna* is actually preserved; also, Bajić was not the only Serbian composer whose symphony is lost (Milin 1999, 153).

performance history was after the premieres. For example, the authors do not mention that composer Stanojlo Rajičić withdrew his first four Symphonies, for reasons that ranged from personal dissatisfaction with these works, via their poor reception, to the inability to secure decent performances.[7] Furthermore, the authors do not mention that, although these Serbian composers were exposed to a variety of modernist styles in Prague, including Alois Hába's experiments in fourth-tone and sixth-tone music, upon returning to Belgrade they had to drastically simplify their styles. Namely, they realized that the time was not yet ripe for Serbian avant-garde music, because of the underdevelopment of Serbian musical life and its institutions in general, and the overall poor reception of the most advanced contemporary music. Stanojlo Rajičić recalled that he and his peers realized that 'to continue using contemporary musical language meant that one's music would not be performed and would not be understood' (cit. in Milojković-Đurić 2008, 131). Thus, composers who initially advocated for equating radical avant-garde music with the radical political left, such as Vučković, changed their orientation towards more accessible styles, even before the outbreak of World War II (Milojković-Đurić 1984). All of these composers continued to write orchestral music during World War II, sometimes inspired by the national liberation war; Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa list some of these wartime works, but do not mention whether these composers were communists, nor do they attempt to argue whether their ideological stance influenced their works.

Moving on to post-World War II music, Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa briefly list its stylistic traits (mainly socialist realism and neoclassicism) and observe that it was in the 1950s that Serbian symphonic music began its first major ascent. They do not mention that the reason for this was that the first generation of composition students at the Belgrade Music Academy graduated after the war and, as a graduation piece, they had to write a major orchestral work, preferably a symphony. Among the composers from that first home-grown generation, the authors single out Vitomir Trifunović (1916-2007), Rudolf Bruči (1917-2002), Vasilije Mokranjac (1923-84), Dragutin Gostuški (1923-98), Aleksandar Obradović (1927-2001), Dušan Radić (1929-2010), and others. They also mention their composition professors' names—Stanojlo Rajičić, Milenko Živković (1901-64), and Marko Tajčević (1900-84), but do not reveal whether those professors wrote any symphonic works until that point—probably because the answer is 'no', except for Rajičić. Moreover, the authors do not mention similar developments in other peripheral European countries, especially in the Eastern Bloc.

Concerning the 1960s, Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa emphasize the rapid increase of symphonies, both qualitative and quantitative. However, the reader is not given explanation why this happened, and why at this moment—instead, it is presented as a wholly 'natural' development. The authors highlight the influx of avant-garde tendencies in the works of the

7 On Rajičić's long and meandering professional path and its equally changeable reception, see (Bralović - Medić 2021).

generation born in the 1930s, but also remark that many composers, both older and younger, continued to write neoclassical symphonies. Among that new generation, they single out the 'avant-gardists' Petar Bergamo (1930–2022), Berislav Popović (1931–2002), Petar Ozgijan (1932–79), Vladan Radovanović (1932–2023), Rajko Maksimović (1935–2024), and among the 'neoclassicists' Vartkes Baronijan (1933–93), Mirjana Živković (1935–2020) and others.

Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa describe the main stylistic tendencies of the 1970s as continuations of trends from the 1960s and mention several new names on the Serbian symphonic scene: Rastislav Kambasković (1939–2023), Srđan Hofman (1944–2021), Branislava Predić-Šaper (b. 1946), Vuk Kulenović (1946–2017), Vlastimir Trajković (1947–2017), Ivan Jevtić (b. 1947), Zoran Erić (1950–2024), and others.

The 1980s witnessed the first decline in interest in symphonic music, but the authors do not analyze the reasons for this. They note Serbian composers' increased interest in Orthodox chants and the country's historical and mythological legacy, but again without explaining that this was the result of the onset of Serbian nationalism that led to the eventual break-up of the SFR Yugoslavia. They continue to overview stylistic directions, including the first hints of postmodernism visible both in the works of the generation born in the 1940s and the younger ones, including Miroslav Štatkić (b. 1951), Milovan Filipović (b. 1952), Jugoslav Bošnjak (1954–2018), Predrag Repanić (b. 1958), Srđan Jaćimović (1960–2006), Ivan Božičević (b. 1961), and Milana Stojadinović Milić (b. 1962). When listing their orchestral works, Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa do not mention that those were actually their graduation pieces and that none of these composers (except for Bošnjak) would later establish themselves as symphonists.

Writing about the 1990s, Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa emphasise strong postmodernist tendencies and the continued interest of art music composers in Serbian church and folk music; however, the authors do not point out that this happened in the circumstances of the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the ensuing civil war, the country's international isolation, drastic impoverishment, hyperinflation, and the loss of music publishing houses. Also, the authors do not mention that entire generations of Serbian composers emigrated and continued their careers abroad.[8] The authors list orchestral works by (then) young composers Miloš Zatkalik (b. 1959), Tatjana Ristić (b. 1964), Nataša Bogojević (b. 1966), Isidora Žebeljan (1967–2020), Milica Paranosić (b. 1968), Jelena Jančić (b. 1968), Goran Kapetanović (1969–2014), Nataša Danilović (1969–2014); the list continues after the turn of the millennium with the names of Tatjana Milošević (b. 1970), Ivana Ognjanović (b. 1970), Božidar Obradinović (b. 1974), Irena Popović (b. 1974), Ivan Brkljačić (b. 1977), and Marko Nikodijević (b. 1980). With the sole exception of Isidora Žebeljan (who graduated in the class of Vlastimir Trajković), all these composers graduated in the composition classes of only two professors at the Belgrade Faculty of Music,

8 On the destinies of more than seventy Serbian émigré composers, see Medić (2020); Medić (2022); Emmery (2022).

Srđan Hofman and Zoran Erić, which leads one to conclude that these young composers made it into this book just on the strength of the reputation of their professors[9] (and few of them continued to write orchestral music after graduation).

So, in the chapter on Serbian orchestral music, Dragana Stojanović-Novičić and Marija Masnikosa mainly focused on listing the composers and works that they selected as worthy of being mentioned; furthermore, they did not reveal their criteria for choosing certain composers and omitting others. This is problematic because this chapter, just like the entire book *History of Serbian Music: Serbian Music and European Cultural Heritage*, was meant to establish the 'canon' of Serbian art music; hence, there should have been firm criteria in place to explain why certain composers were chosen for canonization, whereas others were not. Furthermore, while listing the composers and their works, the authors did not make any value judgments or analyze why some works were considered better than others. In essence, the authors tell us *what* was written and *when*, but do not elaborate on *how* and *why* some things happened the way they did.

Another feature of the analyzed chapter is that it is mainly the history of the Belgrade composition school. Namely, with the exceptions of Rudolf Bruči and Miroslav Štatkić (who both studied in Belgrade, but later taught composition at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, the capital city of the northern province of Vojvodina), all composers who worked in other Serbian cities and towns are omitted from this chapter. Unfortunately, this Belgrade-centric view of Serbian music history is quite typical of Serbian musicology, which is dominated by writers based in and focused on Belgrade.

The Rise and Fall of the Serbian Symphonic Tradition

I will now subvert Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa's seemingly straightforward history of Serbian symphonic music. Rather than taking the existence of the symphonic genre in Serbian music after World War II for granted, I will focus on the preconditions that enabled symphonic music to flourish for several post-WWII decades, after which it experienced a rapid and lasting decline.

The first precondition that allowed symphonic music to develop in the interwar Serbia (then a part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) was the foundation of the Music Academy in Belgrade in 1937. Its activities were interrupted only four years later, when Belgrade was occupied by the Nazis. The Academy continued to work in limited capacity during World War II; hence, the first generations of Belgrade-trained composers only graduated and began their professional careers after the war ended. Their graduation work had to be a symphony or another large-scale

9 It must be mentioned that Srđan Hofman was the husband of the book's editor-in-chief, musicologist Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman. They both taught at the Belgrade Faculty of Music (at departments of composition and musicology, respectively), and Srđan Hofman served as the Dean of the Faculty from 1989 to 1998. Zoran Erić was Hofman's close friend and collaborator, and a fellow professor at the department of composition. Both Hofman and Erić also served as Vice-Rectors (Erić also as the Rector) of the University of Arts in Belgrade.

work for the symphony orchestra, for two reasons. First, there was an acute awareness that Serbian (and Yugoslav) music was lagging behind that of other European countries in terms of the development of its professional musical life, in particular concerning a lack of symphonic tradition; hence, music professionals felt that musical life needed to develop in this direction, to 'catch up' with what had been missed. This 'provincial' attitude emerged from the fear of dilettantism in a relatively young musical culture; writing a symphony proved that someone had mastered their craft and could be taken seriously. For example, the composer Rudolf Bruči admitted that music critics reprimanded him because his first performed work was a *Sinfonietta*, instead of a 'real' symphony, and they questioned whether he could write symphonies at all; as exemplified by Petar Bingulac's assessment of the *Sinfonietta*, 'We would prefer if the composer demonstrated that he could master the formal structure of the classical symphony, instead of attempting to exhaust the content and form of the four-movement symphonic cycle within a modified one-movement sonata form' (Bingulac 1988, 306). This is why in his ensuing works Bruči made efforts to prove critics wrong by writing three symphonies (in 1951, 1964 and 1971), one of which, *Sinfonia lesta*, completed in 1964, won the Grand Prix International at the Belgian Queen Elizabeth contest in Brussels in 1965 against the competition of two hundred and fifty compositions from twenty-six countries, and thus helped establish Bruči as a 'serious' composer and a future member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (Medić 2021, 42–3).

The second reason for favoring the symphony was mentioned in the Introduction; namely, the fact that it was ascribed a high aesthetic and 'ethical' value, not only as the pinnacle of the composer's craft, but also as a 'moral compass' of the society. This prestige associated with the genre of symphony was further confirmed by the fact that almost all composers who were elected as members of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in the decades after World War II, such as Stanojlo Rajičić, Milan Ristić, Vasilije Mokranjac, Dušan Radić, Rudolf Bruči and others, wrote symphonies and other large-scale orchestral works. Mokranjac, in particular, was an exemplary exponent of 'heroic symphonism' (Medić 2013). As already mentioned, the general stylistic profile of Serbian music of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s revolved around moderated modernism, which favored symphonies and other (neo)classical genres.

The expansion of orchestral and more specifically symphonic music in postwar Serbia was also fostered by the fact that several professional, state-funded orchestras were established, or the prewar orchestras expanded to attain the full symphonic proportions; in particular, the Symphony Orchestra of the Radio-Television of Belgrade was tasked with performing new works by Serbian composers and recording them for the archive of Radio Belgrade (Simić Mitrović 2015, 68–9; Janković-Beguš 2015, 230–1). The opportunity to have their works performed and recorded was not only presented to established composers, but also to the young, upcoming ones, which served as a great impetus for their creativity (Simić Mitrović 2015, 71–2). Namely, the composers were more motivated to write symphonies if they had assurances that their effort would be rewarded, i.e., that their works would be performed and/or recorded.

Additionally, in the postwar decades, festivals of classical and contemporary music, such as the Belgrade Music Festival (acronym BEMUS, established in 1969), actively commissioned new symphonic works to be performed at the festival's annual editions (Medić - Janković-Beguš 2016). The Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra also commissioned new symphonic works and performed them during their yearly seasons or published open calls for composers to submit their works (cf. Radonjić – Maksimović 2024). I should mention that the Philharmonic still does that, but only very sporadically, and they mostly commission short orchestral pieces (up to 15 minutes long).

During the decades of the flourishing of Serbian symphonic music, several institutions, such as the Association of Serbian Composers, funded by annual contributions of its members and by SOKOJ (the music authors' agency), as well as the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (acronym SASA), established music publishing activities and printed, among other things, many orchestral scores. The SASA was more restrictive because it only published scores by composers elected as full or corresponding members (fellows) of the SASA, while the Association had a varied publishing activity.[10]

It is important to note that there were several distinguishable 'cliques' gathered around the institutions such as the Faculty of Music, the Association of Serbian Composers, the Department of Fine Arts and Music of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, as well as the Radio-Television Belgrade and the Yugoslav Broadcasting Corporation. The first three groups (established around academic or professional institutions) had more chances to have their works published, written about and ultimately canonized; but the latter two groups (attached to the state media corporation) had ample opportunities to have their works performed by the Symphony Orchestra of Radio Belgrade and recorded, either live or in a studio.

A mere comparison of the music publishing activities in Belgrade and the recordings preserved in the phonoarchive of Radio Belgrade would result in two completely different histories of Serbian orchestral music. Here are just a few examples of the composers who are barely mentioned in Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa's chapter and completely left out of their 'canon'; and yet, these 'discarded' composers often have more recordings of their works than the 'canonized' ones, because of their professional attachment to the Radio-Television and its ensembles. For example, composer Slobodan Atanacković (b. 1937), who spent his entire career as a music editor, then Editor-in-Chief of the music program of Radio Belgrade, as well as the Director of the Music Production of the Radio-Television of Serbia, is only mentioned in Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa's chapter in passing—yet, as of 2024, he has numerous permanent recordings of his symphonic works in the phonoarchive of Radio Belgrade, plus other large-scale works such as oratorios, ballets, cantatas, etc., totalling more

10 A complete list of sheet music scores published by the Association of Serbian Composers is available here: <https://composers.rs/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/UKS-Notni-arhiv-201201.pdf> (accessed 1 November 2024).

than one hundred and fifty recordings. Another composer who was professionally tied to Radio Belgrade, Jugoslav Bošnjak, is only mentioned in one sentence by Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa. However, if we apply the criterion of the number of recordings of his works in the phonoarchive of Radio Belgrade, one concludes that Bošnjak was a major Serbian symphonist, because there are no fewer than sixteen permanent recordings of his symphonies and other large-scale orchestral works, some of them recorded multiple times. Furthermore, just like Atanacković, having access to the recording studios at the radio station, Bošnjak personally supervised the digitization of his older analog recordings, which are now available in superbly remastered audio quality (unlike the works of composers canonized by Stojanović-Novičić and Masnikosa, most of which have only been recorded once, on old tapes, and never digitized).

If we should use just one quantifiable element, such as the number of professional recordings of symphonies, to estimate who is the best Serbian symphonist, a clear winner would be Milan Ristić, whose symphonic works have been recorded almost thirty times, including all of his nine symphonies (some recorded multiple times), as well as many other orchestral works such as *Symphonic Variations*, *Gallop*, *Burlesque*, and *Seven Bagatelles*. Unsurprisingly, Ristić was also a highly ranked executive at Radio Belgrade, first as a deputy music editor-in-chief (1945-63), and then as a music advisor of the Directorate of the Radio-Television Belgrade until his retirement. The fact that he had easy access to the symphony orchestra and recording studios certainly stimulated his creativity and made him the most prolific Serbian composer of orchestral music.

Another incentive to write new orchestral music in the socialist period was the fact that the phonoarchive of Radio Belgrade had to be filled with new recordings of works that could be broadcast on its Second and Third Programs. Hence, Ristić, Atanacković, Bošnjak and others could be certain that their new symphonic works would not only be promptly performed and recorded, but also regularly broadcast on the radio, thus boosting their income from royalties (needless to say, symphonies and other orchestral works commanded higher royalties than chamber music).

It should also be said that, throughout the observed period, daily newspapers and music journals and magazines, for example, daily papers *Politika* [Politics] and *Borba* [Battle], music magazine *Pro Musica*, journal *Treći program* [Third Program], etc. published analyses and critical reviews of new works, and music critique nurtured on Radio Belgrade also contributed to the lively discourse on new music.[11]

The crucial importance of all these preconditions for the flourishing of the contemporary music scene was, unfortunately, confirmed after the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, the ensuing civil war, and the consequent crumbling of the systemic support for new music. Once the crisis hit and the Association of Serbian Composers and Serbian Academy

11 A recent comprehensive collection edited by musicologist Hristina Medić, a long-standing music editor at Radio Belgrade 3, encompasses hundreds of reviews published in Serbian periodicals or broadcast on Radio Belgrade (H. Medić 2023).

of Sciences and Arts stopped printing symphonic scores, once the Symphony Orchestra of Radio Belgrade and the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra stopped performing and recording them, once festivals such as BEMUS stopped commissioning new works, once the Music Information Centre in Belgrade was closed down due to cost cutting, the number of new symphonies and other large-scale orchestral works rapidly decreased. The situation has not improved after the onset of the economic transition, and Serbian symphonic music has not recovered.

In order to assess the present situation, I interviewed several prominent contemporary Serbian composers of art music, professors of composition, orchestration and music-theoretical subjects at music academies in Belgrade and Kragujevac, asking them about their symphonic output. Their answers were, expectedly, bleak. For example, Dragana Jovanović, born in 1963, has only written two works for a large symphony orchestra, in 1999 and 2002; neither was ever performed in Serbia, recorded, published, or received any attention (however, she has written several pieces for chamber/string orchestra, with or without a soloist, which have had occasional performances). Her work *Ab Re* for electric guitar and symphony orchestra was performed in 1999 in Bologna, Italy, and recorded by RAI,[12] but never in Serbia. Aleksandra Anja Đorđević, born in 1970, has also only written two orchestral works, with a twenty-year gap between them: *Otmica Evrope* [Abduction of Europa] in 1996 as her graduation work (revised in 2007), and *Radost ponovnog susreta* [The Joy of Meeting Anew] in 2016, which was commissioned by the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra; the title of the second piece is her ironic commentary on getting reacquainted with writing for the full symphony orchestra after twenty years! The first piece was recorded by the Symphony Orchestra of Radio Belgrade in 1998, and the second piece, although performed live, was not recorded. Svetlana Savić, born in 1971, has also only written two orchestral pieces, *Sustineo* and *Extroversions*, in 1998 and 2006, respectively. Both works were performed and recorded, but she was very unhappy with the quality of the performances and recordings and never released them. *Extroversions* were only performed for the second time in 2022, by the Symphony Orchestra of the Serbian Radio Television. Jasna Veljanović, born in 1980, who graduated in composition at the National Music Academy in Kyiv, and now works as a full professor at the University of Kragujevac, wrote some orchestral works while still a student in Ukraine; however, after returning to Serbia, she has never received any incentive to write orchestral music. Veljanović says that she has often felt like an outsider in her home country, precisely because she is not an offspring of the 'Belgrade composition school', and the music establishment in Belgrade has simply ignored her.

Another proof of the decline of Serbian symphonism is the general attitude towards the most prominent exponents of this genre, as exemplified by the case of Vasilije Mokranjac, who wrote five symphonies and a number of other smaller orchestral works. The year 2023 was

12 The recording is available on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SVlX0s8_C0> (accessed 1 November 2024).

the centenary of Mokranjac's birth. In any other country, it would have been an opportunity to hear the composer's entire *opus*, to remind the listeners why he was considered the best Serbian symphonist of his generation, elected Fellow of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and received various accolades. However, neither the Serbian Ministry of Culture, the Faculty of Music (where Mokranjac taught as a Full Professor), nor the Association of Serbian Composers (which he presided over for four years, 1962–5) bothered to organize anything in his honor. So, it was the Institute of Musicology SASA, in fact, one person—me—who bore the brunt of this centenary. With an impossibly small budget, I managed to organize a one-day scientific conference at the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, and a series of concerts and lecture-recitals in several Serbian towns, where my friends and I performed Mokranjac's piano and chamber music. However, organizing a concert of his symphonic music proved almost impossible. Although the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra also celebrated its centenary in 2023, its management showed zero interest in performing at least one of Mokranjac's symphonies, with the explanation that Mokranjac's music is 'too dark and depressing' and that they needed to perform cheerful music in their celebratory year! Eventually, composer Ivan Jevtić, a Fellow of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, managed to persuade the Symphony Orchestra of the Radio Television of Serbia to add two of Mokranjac's orchestral works to one of its December concerts—the First Symphony (which, at that point, had not been performed for more than forty years) and a shorter orchestral piece *Lyric Poem*. This example of the treatment of Vasilije Mokranjac's symphonic output is typical of twenty-first century Serbia, because there is no systemic cultural support that would secure performances of some landmark twentieth-century symphonic works. Institutions such as the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra are more concerned with programming popular symphonic repertoire and ensuring that their concerts are sold out. This is understandable, as they cannot risk empty venues and a lack of income from ticket sales, because the financial support they receive from public funding bodies is insufficient. This, again, illustrates the dismal treatment of the most important institutions, such as the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra, which, after celebrating its centenary, still does not have a purpose-built concert hall, but has to rent the Great Hall of the Kolarac Foundation for its concerts.

Conclusion

The goal of this article was to analyze how extramusical conditions—specifically state policies, financial support, and historical and ideological contexts—act as the essential infrastructure for art music creation. The Serbian symphonic music from 1945 to 1991 provides a powerful case study: its rapid ascent was directly enabled by centralized, state-supported logistical systems and the ideological prestige granted to the genre by socialist authorities. This finding establishes the history of the Serbian symphony not as a straightforward chronological development, but as a dramatic, non-linear narrative defined by the fragility of institutional support.

My analysis offers a necessary corrective to 'unproblematic' historical accounts by demonstrating that the collapse of the Serbian symphonic tradition was as abrupt as its rise, following the dissolution of the systemic infrastructure in the 1990s. In small economies where contemporary artistic creation cannot be commercially self-sustaining, large-scale works such as symphonies are dependent on public subsidies. Without institutional guarantees for rehearsal, performance, and recording, composers lack the stimulus to invest considerable time and effort in ambitious orchestral pieces. The history of the symphonic genre in Serbia ultimately confirms a core theoretical lesson applicable far beyond the Balkans: the ideology of artistic autonomy cannot withstand practical challenges. Or, to paraphrase an old Marxist maxim: without infrastructure, there can be no superstructure.

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