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Contributions to a genre in decline: Serbian Symphonies in the first half of the 20th century

The crisis of the tonal system that occurred at the beginning of this century affected unavoidably the genre of symphony. Although no longer the dominant composition form\(^1\), the genre retained its great attraction for numerous composers. They continued to explore the potential of the symphony under new conditions, sometimes producing outstanding works. Some of the genre's specific features were dissolved in the process of crossing different formal principles. There have been attempts to systematize structural innovations in 20th-century symphonies\(^2\) but it turned out that the majority of those changes had already been anticipated in romanticism, some even in classicism. The symphony thus proved its vitality through continuous changes and reinterpretations of the basic sonata principle.

Nineteenth-century national schools, especially the Russian and the Czech ones, marked an important and very fruitful phase in the development of symphonies. The achievements of Dvořák, Borodin and Čajkovskij among others served as models for the first Serbian symphonies. Their themes were often based on authentic folk tunes or on tunes composed in folk spirit, and they demanded thematic work of primarily variational type, thereby producing looser and sometimes rhapsodie structures\(^3\). Arnold Schönberg was not alone in expressing his distaste for such "folkloristic symphonies" and their "static treatment of folklore", but the public and many composers in different countries were sensitive to their melodic, rhythmic and harmonic richness, wide emotional span and lyrical charm. This


\(^{2}\) For instance: Christopher Ballantine, Twentieth-Century Symphony, London 1983.


different kind of symphony had a decisive influence on Serbian composers who wished to create a national school of their own.

Historically it makes sense that the first Serbian symphony was composed as late as the beginning of the 20th century. Only in the first decades of the 19th century, after the liberation from the Turks, were the first steps made towards organizing national musical life according to the Western model. It is important to bear in mind that the large Serbian population living in Austria (later Austria-Hungary) took part in the flourishing of European musical culture in the 18th and 19th century, but here we shall focus on Serbia itself, which was an independent state until 1918, when it merged into Yugoslavia.

The first orchestra in Serbia was founded in 1831 by a Czech musician, Josif Šlezinger. When the National Theatre opened in Belgrade in 1868, it formed its own orchestra, which had a modest role in the performance of "komadi s pevanjem" (a kind of "Singspiele"), but was also able to play music from the European repertoire between acts: opera overtures from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Weber's *Oberon* and *Der Freischütz*, fragments from Rossini's *Barbiere di Sevilla*, etc. At the very end of the 19th century the Belgrade audience was given the opportunity to hear, for the first time, a symphony and an excellent one: Beethoven's *Symphony No. 6* ("Pastorale").

The way leading to the first preserved Serbian symphony, Miloje Milojević's *Vsegord i Divna - Symphony in A major* (1903) was paved by orchestral works of Davorin Jenko, Petar Krstić, Božidar Joksimović and Stanislav Binički. It is stressed that Milojević's was the first preserved symphony, as 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.

We know of 23 Serbian symphonies of which 15 are preserved, composed in the period 1900-1950. Neither the number, nor their general aesthetic and artistic level are impressive. Only a handful of those works (Petar Konjović's, Milenko Paunović's, Predrag

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5 This article is based on the author's research whose results were presented for the first time in her MA thesis "Simfonije prve polovine XX veka u Srbiji" ["Symphonies in Serbia in the first half of the 20th century"] Belgrade (Faculty of Music) 1986 (unpublished).
Milošević's, Milan Ristić's) could be designated as more than conventional in essence and expression. The primary significance of the Serbian symphonic output in the period under consideration is historical. It should be added that those works are little known to the general audience due to their rare public performances.

Since Milojević's Vsegord i Divna was a rather amateur work, composed when its author was only 19, with monotonous harmony and metre (2/4 all through the 4-movement Symphony), it is often stated that the first Serbian symphony was in fact Petar Konjović's Symphony in C minor (1907). This youthful work by one of the most distinguished Serbian composers shares many characteristics with Milenko Paunović's Yugoslav Symphony (1914). Konjović's and Paunović's symphonies are typically late-romantic, with large proportions and a marked tendency to thematic unification. Both works possess a national flavour through their use of Serbian folk songs. It is noteworthy that Konjović built his themes after the authentic folk songs on which one of the most outstanding and influential Serbian composers to this day, Stevan Mokranjac, based his Rukoveti (choral cycles). Such a gesture is easily recognized as an homage to the elder contemporary composer. Konjović's Symphony is epic in character, which is a result of its thematic process being based on the principle of variation rather than on strict thematic work. Following a long tradition, the work has a tragic introduction, whose fragments recur in all the main parts of the 1st movement. Paunović's Yugoslav Symphony also has a slow introduction presenting the gloomy "Fate motive" that is to have a constructive role in all the movements. The titles of the three movements ("Evening", "Midnight Visions" and "Morning") point to the composer's inspiration from the well-known poems of the romantic poet Djura Jakšić. Although the character of the symphony is intimate, Paunović chose to name it "Yugoslav" probably because of its being imbued with folk-song spirit. Both Konjović's and Paunović's work were never followed by other attempts by their authors in the same genre. Stevan Hristić, another of the most notable Serbian (Yugoslav) composers, was even less inclined to writing symphonies, leaving only sketches of a symphony.
The third known Serbian symphony is Svetolik Pašćan's *Symphony in D major* (1920), modeled - like Konjović's and Pašćan's works - after the German late-romantic symphonies, with inevitable influences of Czech symphonic music, especially that of Antonin Dvořák. Konjović, Paunović and Pašćan rejected the modern orientations of their times, although they were well acquainted with them - Konjović having studied in Prague (1904-06), Paunović in Prague (1907-08) and Leipzig (1909-11), and Pašćan in Zagreb (1910-14; graduation in 1922). Those were all, of course, early works in their careers and they might have come closer to contemporary trends had they continued to write symphonies.

Serbian symphonies composed in the 1930's have come closest to the stylistic tendencies of the period. It is no wonder that the authors of those works studied music in Prague, the music metropolis then open to most avantgarde ideas. Since the Music Academy in Belgrade was founded only in 1937, young people who wished to study composition had to study abroad. The works of Predrag Milošević, Vojislav Vučković and Milan Ristić, in which the energy of music was mainly concentrated in line, carry traces of contacts with Schoenberg's and Hindemith's expressionism. Certain elements of late-romanticism and neoclassical orientation can also be detected. This applies for instance to Rajićić's *I Symphony* whose outer movements bear expressionistic characteristics, whereas the two inner movements are more traditional, belonging essentially to the 19th century. It should be stressed that almost all the symphonies composed in the 1930's were created for the purpose of final exams at the Prague Conservatory. Therefore it can be concluded that the composers decided to write symphonies for the most part in order to fulfill an obligation, not out of any special inner inclination.

The consequence of the linear concept in the works of Milošević, Ristić, Rajićić and Vučković was a daring, predominantly atonal result in the harmony. Typical is a transparent, economic and an "ascetic" orchestration. Since those symphonies were meant to be works for final exams, their first movements usually were rather conventional sonata forms. An exception is the double fugue in place of the recapitulation in Ristić's *I Symphony*. Such an idea is reminiscent of the final movement of Anton Bruckner's *V Symphony*, but it
is possible that Ristić was not acquainted with Bruckner's work and simply decided to place the fugue there in order to achieve special dramatic density. In fact the symphony was composed in reaction to the outbreak of the Second World War in Yugoslavia. In Vučković's II Symphony the third (final) movement also introduces a fugue, this time in the place of the development section after the exposition of three themes.

Ristić, who paid marked attention to the formal design of his works, used the cyclical principle in imaginative ways. For instance in his I Symphony themes from the first movement recur in other movements, progressively acquiring different, important structural functions.

During the Second World War three composers belonging to the heterogeneous "Prague group" continued to write symphonies: Milan Ristić, Stanojlo Rajićić and Vojislav Vučković, the first two having been among the most prolific authors of symphonies in the post-war period. These composers, who promoted avantgarde ideas in Serbia (Yugoslavia) in the 1930's, began to abandon them in the late years of the same decade for two reasons. Firstly, having returned home after studies abroad, the composers had problems with the reception of their works that were judged too modern. Secondly, ideological reasons, concretely the acceptance of the postulates of Socialist realism, influenced one composer, Vojislav Vučković, to explore the possibilities of earlier music, classical and romantic. Vučković's II Symphony - his last work (the composer died in 1942 after having been tortured by the Gestapo) - is a typical case. All the compositional means are simplified, traditional harmony rediscovered, and the programmatic idea "from darkness to victory" too overt. Stanojlo Rajićić's III Symphony also marks a step back to tradition: linearism and scarce texture give place to the renewal of tonality and homophonic structure.

After the establishment of communism in Yugoslavia (1944) pressure was exerted upon creative artists and composers to draw inspiration from "healthy" art that existed before the appearance of "bourgeois" and "decadent" art. This period lasted only a few years, but long enough to isolate domestic artists from contemporary movements in Europe and elsewhere. A typical product of these
times was Nikola Petin's *I Symphony* ("Classical"), which possesses a certain Prokofievan touch, a clearness of formal design, and a firm base in tonal harmony.

Serbian symphonies written between 1900 and 1950 are for the most part youthful works, not rising to the level of the later output of their authors. There were only a few true symphonists among those composers - Paunović and Ristić should certainly be counted among them. Only a handful of the symphonies deserve more than just professional attention: Konjović's *Symphony* not only for its historic significance but also for its vivid symphonic drive and its wealth of melodic ideas; Paunović's *Yugoslav Symphony*, a genuinely symphonic and colourful work; Milošević's witty and acid, technically skillful *Sinfonietta*, whose modernity has a similar expressionistic quality as can be heard in Vučković's formally well-balanced *I Symphony* and likewise in Ristić's *I Symphony* - a composition remarkable for its high coherence and imaginative counterpoint.

If we draw our attention to thematic procedures displayed in Serbian symphonies, we shall observe that those late-Romantic among them lack firmness and intensity of motivic work typical of their 19th century models. Avantgarde composers of symphonies focused on continuous melodic and rhythmic variation of themes (Rajčić) and counterpoint (Milošević and Ristić). A special case is provided by Ristić's *Sinfonietta*, whose form is athenmic and with such radical variational procedures that the themes after their expositions become very soon unrecognizable. This is also the only work in one movement, whereas all the other symphonies are in three or four movements. First movements are in sonata form with the exception of Ristić's *I Symphony* and Vučković's *II Symphony*, and often with slow introductions. Among the second movements, which usually do not deviate from usual forms, the most interesting example is the one of Vučković's *II Symphony* (sonata form with a festive coda). Third movements are scherzos with trios in four-movement symphonies. Here shall be mentioned the symphonies in three movements: Paunović's *Yugoslav Symphony*, Ilić's Symphony, Milošević's *Sinfonietta*, both Vučković's symphonies and Petin's *Classical Symphony*. Final movements are either in sonata or rondo form. One movement stands out: the finale of Vučković's *II Symphony*, where
the fugue takes the role of the development that follows the exposition of three themes. As was often the case in symphonies composed in the two earlier centuries, the last movement functions as an outcome of the development in previous movements. The reason for the dramatic evolution "from darkness/defeat to light/triumph" can easily be found in the fact that some of those works were composed during the war (Ristić's First, Vučković's Second, Rajičić's Second).

At first sight it might look as if the avantgarde orientation (expressionism with elements of neoclassicism) was a dominant trend in Serbian symphony writing. However, one should not forget several lost symphonies that - by analogy to other works by their authors - must have belonged to the conservative, late-Romantic current. Among those should be counted the symphonies of Stanislav Preprek (1929), Milivoje Crvčanin (1938), Mihovil Logar (1947), Petar Stajić (1948), and Svetomir Nastasijević (1950). Such a late manifestation of a style that had blossomed several decades earlier in Western Europe is not specific to the Balkan countries - let us think of the oeuvres of Ralph Vaughan Williams, Jan Sibelius, Sergej Rahmani-nov, among others.

The dominant genres in Serbian music during the selected period were opera, vocal and chamber music. Consequently it is not surprising that among the most outstanding works there is no place for any symphony. When writing for orchestra, Serbian composers showed much more inclination for free forms like ouvertures, rhapsodies and suites.

If we try to trace the influences that were decisive in shaping the creative energy of Serbian composers of symphonies, we shall normally first draw our attention to the musical situation in the countries where they chose to study. With only a few exceptions the young Serbian composers were in favour of Prague and different German cities. The traditions they encountered in those central-European milieux were easily absorbed, together with modern ideas that were quite new to local musicians too.

Only a small number of Serbian symphonies found conductors motivated enough to perform them - at home or elsewhere; the majority of the works stayed in their composers' drawers. Paunović's Yugoslav Symphony had its Belgrade première in 1925, Vučković's
I Symphony in 1939, Rajičić's I Symphony in 1939 and his II Symphony in 1946. Konjović's work was performed for the first time in Zagreb (1923), Paunović's in Ljubljana (1924), Milošević's Sinfonietta in Prague (1931), Vučković's work in Prague on the radio (1933) and Rajičić's also in Prague, but incomplete (1935). Such non-supportive surroundings must have decisively discouraged these composers from continuing to write symphonies.

Serbian symphonic output between 1900 and 1950 is predominantly of local relevance, the genre of symphony being in the first place a challenge to composers to master its highly complex form. This modest heritage was however a solid enough basis for the ascent of the genre in the country in the 1950's and 1960's.

Serbian symphonies composed in the first half of the 20th century:

1903 Miloje Milojević, Symphony "Vsegord and Divna"
1907 Petar Konjović, Symphony in C minor
1914 Milenko Paunović, I Symphony ("Yugoslav")
1920 Svetolik Paščan, Symphony in D major
1920 Predrag Milošević, Sinfonietta
1929 Stanislav Preprek, I Symphony
1932 Dragutin Čolić, I Symphony
1933 Vojislav Vučković, I Symphony
1935 Stanojlo Rajičić, I Symphony
1938 Milivoje Crvčanin, Symphony in A minor
Rikard Švarc, Romantic Symphony
1939 Milan Ristić, Sinfonietta
1940 Vojislav Ilić, "Folkloric Symphony"
1941 Stanojlo Rajičić, II Symphony
Milan Ristić, I Symphony
1942 Vojislav Vučković, II Symphony
1944 Stanojlo Rajičić, III Symphony
1946 Stanojlo Rajičić, IV Symphony
Božidar Trudić, I Symphony ("Balkan")
1947 Mihovil Logar, Symphony
Nikola Petin, I Symphony ("Classical")
1949 Rudolf Bruči, Sinfonietta
1950 Svetomir Nastasijević I Symphony ("Rustical")