
CONVERSATIONS

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A GAME OF MIMICRY – MIMICKING A GAME A CONVERSATION WITH TATJANA MILOŠEVIĆ

Tatjana Milošević (1970, Vranje) earned her bachelor's and master's degrees in composition from the Faculty of Music in Belgrade under the supervision of Prof. Zoran Erić, who also supervised her DMA project – a chamber opera titled *Who Killed Princess Mond?* – accepted in 2013. Today she is a full professor of composition at the same institution. Since 2009 she has also taught composition at the Academy of Art in Banja Luka. As a visiting professor, she has also taught at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia (USA). She was a lecturer and member of the jury at the 15th Young Composers Meeting in Apeldoorn (Netherlands).



Tatjana Milošević
(Photo by Zoran Savić)

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Works by Milošević have been performed at numerous major festivals, events, and concerts of contemporary music in most countries of Europe, the United States, South Korea, China, as well as Serbia and neighbouring countries (International Review of Composers, BEMUS, NIMUS, BUNT, SAXperience, Music Biennale Zagreb, Groeten uit Arnhem, International Week for New Music Bucharest, International Music Festival Romania, Piano Risuonanze, Nieuwe Hollandse Waterlinie 2001, Music Harvest, Nuovi spazi musicali, Autumn Music Festival in Skopje...).

Milošević has collaborated with renowned performers and ensembles from Serbia and abroad: the RTS Symphony Orchestra, Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra, St. George Strings, Construction Site New Music Ensemble, Trio Pokret, Trio Singidunum, Ensemble Metamorphosis, Collegium Musicum Academic Choir, Belgrade Baroque, Tea Dimitrijević & Dejan Subotić Piano Duo, Het Trio (Netherlands), De Ereprijs (Netherlands), Creo (USA), Trio Clavino (USA), Ensemble Devotio Moderna (Romania), Nada Kolundžija, Bojan Sudić, Ljubiša Jovanović, Steffen Schleiermacher (Germany), Adele D'Aronzo (Italy), José Luis Granados (Spain)...

From her extensive oeuvre, one might single out the following works: *Sjaj Betelgeza ili tajna crvenog džina* ("The Splendour of Betelgeuse or The Secret of the Red Giant") and *Šetnja sa Rinom* ("A Walk with Rina"), two chamber pieces with which she represented Yugoslavia and then Serbia at the 1997 and 2018 ISCM World Music Days festivals in Seoul and Beijing; *Buzzle*, premièred in 2000 by Dutch pianist Marcel Worms at BIMHUIS, a jazz venue in Amsterdam; *Spyro*, premièred by Zagreb String Trio at the 2002 Bemus festival; *CoinciDance*, a ballet performed by Orkest De Ereprijs at the 2009 *Groeten uit Arnhem* festival in Arnhem (Netherlands); *Green with Buzz* and *Ludus Mimesis*, two symphonic works; the chamber operas *Who Killed Princess Mond?* and *Hadži-Pantelijin šnajderaj* ("The Tailor Shop of Hadži-Pantelija"); *Random*, performed at the 2017 pianoRISUONANZE in Trieste; *Dok mislim na tebe* ("Whilst Thinking of You") for piano and string orchestra; the mini-opera *Adonis and Galatea*... With support from UNESCO, in 2001 she took part in "Waterproof", a project that included a performance and the release of her electronic piece *Tribute for Fort Honswijk*. She is also active in the domain of incidental music (the short film *Glumčevo brdo* – "The Actor's Hill", the documentary-feature film *Dribbling and Cooking*, and the plays *Victor* written by Roger Vitrack and *The Wizard of Oz* directed by Aleksandra Glovacki).

Tatjana Milošević has won the following awards: the September 7th Award of the City of Vranje for outstanding contributions in the field of education and culture; Third Prize at the 4th International Composers' Forum in Belgrade for *Sjaj Betelgeza ili tajna crvenog džina* and Second Prize at the Gradus ad Parnassum International Competition for Students of Composition in Kiev, both in 1995; First Prize at the 7th International Composers' Forum in Belgrade in 1998, for *Ludus Mimesis*, in the students category; and two Vasilije Mokranjac Awards of the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, for *CoinciDance* (2003) and for *Green with Buzz* in 2008.

I'll start this conversation with your piece Ludus Mimesis¹ for symphony orchestra, written in 1998, whose title you translate as Igra podražavanja ("A Game of Mimicry"). For, it seems that this title is precisely the key for understanding your artistic procedures in many of your subsequent pieces – for you, composing is a game, involving communication with your entire musical heritage and environment, which often resonates in your music and which you treat according to the archival principle, but in part, it is also about mimicking, imitating... What sorts of doors are opened by Ludus Mimesis?

Indeed, *Ludus Mimesis* does provide the key for understanding some artistic procedures that I still like to employ in my work. In this piece, *mimesis* appears for the first time as the main means of expression, combined with other techniques of composition in order to avoid eclecticism, incompleteness and/or incoherence – phenomena that often appear in works composed by using the mimetic procedure.

Although *Ludus* consists of segments titled after various mythological characters (*The Dance of the Argonauts*, *Satyrs in Arcadia*, *Leda and the Swan*, *The Awakening of the Phoenix*, *The Sea of the Nereids*), the conceptual basis behind these games of mimicry is not the mimesis of ancient myths, nor is it about evoking works inspired by those myths. These mythological associations are only a stimulus for what follows. Above all, these games of mimicry refer to compositional procedures (for example, Ravel's), motor rhythms (for instance, Bartók's), orchestration (for example, Debussy's), poetics (for instance, Stravinsky's), macro-formal design (for example, Messiaen's), *rubato* involving exotic wind instruments (for instance, Far Eastern singing)... I worked hard to have the degree of mimicry involving the models mentioned above cover a wide range – from hints to paraphrases – invariably seeking to

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFXGCerJCjg&t=57s>

pull the listener into a vortex, whether big or small, of associations and recognitions, without resolving the dilemma whether it's something 'old' in a 'new' way or something 'new' in an 'old' way. The musical material of *Mimesis* is entirely original. Two leitmotifs, which dominate the work, have been very significant in my subsequent work as well: the first involves a repeated note permeating the entire work, at different tempi, with or without an echo, whether on a single pitch or being part of a complex vertical sonority; the other one is the way I treat high-pitched sonorities, which, by the degree of their presence in the overall flow of the piece and the orchestration procedures applied in it, acquire a special functional role in order to supply the work with a specific leit-timbre of its own.

When I wrote it, the title of the piece was contested by some, because those two words, the first of which is in Latin, the other in Greek, are both in the nominative case, but, eventually, it was accepted. The title has also been translated as *Podražavanje igre* ("Mimicking a Game"), but given that the basis of the piece is mimicry in general, not just mimicking a game, that other rendering is, in my opinion, more pertinent.

In your compositions, there are different layers of music running side by side, emerging and vanishing, like in a dream of sorts, the past and the present wrapped around each other. In your work Chatatutu² for flute, violin, and piano, the main musical material you worked on came to be by imitating bird-song, evoking the poetics of Olivier Messiaen. One also hears overtones of Debussy's Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun – in the material of the piece, the atmosphere, the emphasis on timbre. There is also reference to the baroque era in baroque motoric rhythm. How do you choose what type of music to address in a particular piece?

I think it is the instrumentarium that for the most part determines what type of music I'll address. *Chatatutu* was commissioned by Ensemble Singidunum and thinking about the sound of a flute, violin, and piano spontaneously summoned from my memory the evocations you mention. Likewise, working on my first electronic piece, *Tribute for Fort Honswijk* from 2001, stimulated me to think about different musical materials corresponding with one another, their multiple layers and dimensions, so-called 'poly-musicality'. In his *Letters to Myself*, the composer György Ligeti explained the phenomenon as follows: "Behind music there is another music, and behind it yet another

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHV3TIZS4zo>

music – an endless perspective, like viewing oneself in two mirrors, producing an infinite number of reflections”.

The material for Chatatutu was obtained by extracting a layer from Ludus Mimesis. Do you often go on working with the same material in multiple compositions? Is that another way of presenting your view of music as an infinite kind of weaving?

I resort to using the same thematic materials in multiple pieces when I think that reflecting on a chosen musical idea, its quality, re-examining its usefulness, its development, trying out new combinations of sound might lead to different formal, thematic, timbral, and textural results. The material in *Chatatutu* you mentioned is the opening theme from *The Awakening of the Phoenix*, the fifth play [igra] in *Ludus Mimesis*, representing the start of developing a different musical flow. I made a further step in the same direction in *Šetnja sa Rinom*. That piece is entirely based on the leit-theme of Rina, the main heroine in my ballet *CoinciDance*. Since its form is a variation, I didn't insist on varying the developmental quality of the opening material, but, rather, on depriving it of its original emotionality and sonority. I think that in the end I managed to 'breathe' into it an entirely different identity.

In Chatatutu, there is a notably consistent level of control in terms of organising the material and working with its musical parameters. Is the notion of play in music partly about toying with one's system of composition with the intent of constantly finding new solutions?

In my view, the stuff that a work of music is made of is not immediately a piece of musical content itself, e.g. a series of particular tones or chords, or a specific rhythmic formula and the like, but the principles you follow in developing a given musical content. In other words, the work's concept is not determined by its thematic material. The concept of a work is determined by the way it's shaped, the way its medium is treated, as well as the means of its realisation. That is why I think it's very important to devise, before you start composing, systems for organising the material, and to examine its overall potential. Also, I never use readymade models (whether mine or other people's) in organising the material and treating the musical parameters, but prefer to create them with reference to my initial compositional idea. I think that every idea entails its own means of realisation, a composition technique that will best materialise that idea, and an adequate system for organising its mu-

sical parameters. In that process, one of my chief aids is play, as well as musical intuition.

Do you see compositional technique as a means that, by way of using it in various ways, may yield significantly different results in terms of aesthetics and expression?

Yes, definitely. Compositional technique may define one and the same content as dramatic or lyric, consonant or dissonant, static or dynamic (in the broadest sense of each one of those categories). And not just that. If my favourite compositional procedure, which might be defined as *modulated repetitiveness*, were applied to contrasting thematic contents, the final sound result might feature a total 'equalising' of their differences. Conversely, different compositional techniques might offer great possibilities for developing an extremely simple model, e.g. one based on a single tone, in widely contrasting ways. That suggests that compositional technique may play a decisive role in the aesthetic experience of a work of music. If a work of music is to engage in aesthetic communication with its audience, it must be coded in a way that will enable it to impart its desired message. Compositional technique enables the author to make sure that her idea be coded in such a way that her piece will be received as broadly as possible, or at least that a single, primary layer of its meaning will be received. If that doesn't happen, aesthetic perception of the work will be made much more difficult, perhaps even impossible. I have learnt that from personal experience. As a student, I typically worked with complex structures in quick successions; therefore, I tended to blame the oscillations in the communicative perception of my music on its excessive complexity and the listener's inability to appreciate it. The real reason is the absence of a hierarchy in the perception of multilayered events. Nowadays, with an improved knowledge of compositional techniques, I'm able to separate the layers and thus enable the listener, who may not be familiar with contemporary music, to discover a most striking kind of meaning even in places where the amount of information per unit of time reaches a critical level. On the other hand, an informed audience familiar with contemporary art will be able to identify much deeper meanings.

Chatatutu has another peculiar trait: the relationship of the flute and violin parts, which are in a sort of delay and micro-variation, generates, in the listener, the illusion of a large space. How important to you is the spatial shaping of sound?

This is very important to me and I usually define it whilst generating the work's thematic material. For every composition I make, I devise an individual spatial framework. In *Chatatutu*, I wanted to produce a kind of sound that would 'behave' as though it were coming from a room with an echo or from an aura created uniquely for that occasion. I was able to do that, primarily, thanks to an extremely high degree of homogenisation in the thematic material and an atypical treatment of the violin, which for the most part imitates the flute part, as well as owing to micro-varying and sporadic micro-polyphony, which offer ample possibilities for spatialising sound. By contrast, in a piece titled *Ka zvezdama* ("To the Stars") for accordion and strings, I approached the spatial shaping of sound in an entirely different way. In that piece, the performers are mostly treated like a 'band', and the sound they produce is extremely 'flat', with no illusion of a deeper space. I also like to resort to orchestral approaches that (merely) sound like jazz instrumentation, as well as to mimicking the discharges of energy experienced by performers of free jazz, who often produce physical sensations that are unbearably intense, often losing the sense of the spatiality of sound.

Moving across musical space-time, where every observer perceives and sees a different segment of what is actually a unified entity, you also made the piece Dok mislim na tebe for piano and string orchestra. What is the object of play in that work?

That work explores the compatibility of original thematic material with a transformed quotation from Scarlatti's Keyboard Sonata in D minor (K 213). Isolated from its original context and placed in a new one, the Scarlatti quote becomes a constitutive element in the creation of a different musical language. Its new 'energy matrix' slowly emerges by melting with new, original music, which naturally leads to a gradual blurring of the baroque music reference. In this way, baroque musical features are gradually transformed to a new 'materiality' of musical contents, but without discarding the memory of the original context. Like in other pieces of mine, the musical flow proceeds without an explicit dramatic conflict, instead foregrounding lyrical and meditative events. This notable absence of drama presents the status of incessant play, first initiated in *Ludus Mimesis* (the so-called 'ludic condition'). Metaphorically speaking, *Dok mislim na tebe* represents the dichotomy between the traditional and the innovative, the real and the astral, the old and the new... At the same time, none of these worlds are explicitly represented in the piece, but only implied.

You have shown your interest in vocal music and opera in five pieces: Ko je ubio princezu Mond, Adonis i Galateja, Kada te ostavi onaj koga voliš (“When You’re Left by the One You Love”), Hadži Pantelijin šnajderaj, and I am That. When I did some work on chamber opera (and some other vocal works), I came to the conclusion that really to modernise that genre, one would need to re-define precisely the vocal parts, since it is not enough to surround the voice with novel solutions in the ensemble, but rather, one would need to find a peculiar type of expression precisely in the voice, of the sort one notes, for instance, in [Salvatore] Sciarrino’s music. Vocal treatment in your compositions acquires a peculiar dimension because the parts often move in wide leaps and broken rhythmic patterns, deviating thereby from usual, conventional tuneful vocal writing [pevnost]. What is the status of the voice in your vocal endeavours?

I’m glad you mentioned Sciarrino’s vocal expression because the status of the voice in my vocal compositions is closely related, among other things, to textual and dramatic clarity, which is an imperative for Sciarrino.

When I make my vocal parts (disregarding my student works), **I do not begin** by supplying each character with a wealth of thematic material, a thematic profile of their own, having them sing all the time, or exchanging lines with other characters in a chronological fashion. Quite to the contrary. Regardless of what kind of characters they are, how many of them there are, regardless of their relationships, etc., I usually place them in un-contradictory thematic frameworks that are characterised, as you described them, by melodic and rhythmic fragmentation, as well as ‘stuttering’, ‘recollecting’, ‘interrupting’, ‘prattling’, generating latent polyphony... These kinds of frameworks, depending on the degree of variation, transformation, fragmentation, are a personification of widely divergent states and emotions. Working on vocal parts in a thematically consistent way, almost without contrasting contents, broken up by rests and constantly varied, has taken me to a kind of vocal melodic writing that might best be described as *amorphous through-composing*, one that is, it seems, slowly becoming my ‘trademark’.

You’re active in applied music as well, especially in the genre of documentary film. How far do you diverge from your usual way of composing and how willing are you to transform your musical ‘language’ in order to furnish images with sound?

I’m equally interested in composing applied music as I am in composing contemporary classical music, probably because in both types of music I’m very

much into quotations, paraphrases, and simulations, exploring and reviving the music of the past, crossbreeding different genres and styles. The transformation that my musical language undergoes in order to add sound to images is instantaneous. I easily remodel myself into a ('minor') classical composer, impressionist, romanticist, composer of ambiance music... The most recent film for which I composed music was *Pečat braće Ljubavića* ("The Seal of the Ljubavić Brothers"), directed by Slobodan Simojlović, about the printing press of Goražde. The instruments, motives, and harmony of 16th-century music served as a starting point for creating an entirely authentic musical content that, sometimes more, sometimes less so, echoes the sound of the Renaissance. In several items I did a gradual metamorphosis of symbols from an 'old' musical language into another, utterly contemporary language, which is one of the artistic procedures I've been exploring elsewhere in my work. Applied music has its own laws, but that doesn't mean it can't be creative, fresh, and effective.

You've been active in pedagogy for a long time now. You're a professor of composition at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, the Academy of Art in Banja Luka, you were a visiting professor at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia (USA). With your already considerable experience in pedagogy and having taught a large number of students, would you be able to answer if I asked you what it possible to teach a student of composition?

Perhaps it might be easier to answer what is impossible to teach a student of composition? Having taught students for a few decades now, I'm convinced that one cannot develop a feeling for musical time by learning. That is exclusively a matter of talent. How long can you persist with a given body of musical material, when is the time to go for something contrasting, when should you insert a break, when is the time to end the piece? Unwarranted and pointless breadth is the best indicator of lacking this gift. You can work on everything else, including personal taste, but this is the one thing that you cannot learn.

What do you believe in when it comes to music?

I believe in finding a link between modernity and the continuity of tradition. I believe that what people have already discovered in the music of 'the past' may be reshaped into a new work, many times over, in new ways. In that sense, there is no contradiction between the present and the past. For me, it's

a real adventure to find hidden links between different musical genres, styles, techniques, as well as to choose elements for creating my own 'stylistic hybrid', whose integrity, functionality, and uniqueness will turn it into a 'new type'. I'm not interested in random encounters between musical references of different origins, or in creating poly-stylistic collages. What really intrigues me is creating a functional system that might forge a valid relationship between **its own** matter and energy. In that sense, I have developed specific compositional procedures that allow me to move easily from one creative 'orientation' to another. Deciding how to represent these differences is only limited by my personal taste and intuition.

Translated by Žarko Cvejić