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*Jelena Novak**

Center for Study of the Sociology and Aesthetics of Music
Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

S IS FOR SINGING, SCENE, SERBIA: TENDENCIES IN THE WORLD OF 21ST CENTURY (POST)OPERA

Abstract: The twenty-first century saw an abrupt and remarkable resurgence of activity in the contemporary opera scene in Serbia. In this essay I construct a 'map' that affords a glimpse into different tendencies, styles, and approaches to opera by contemporary artists who live and work in Serbia, as well as by artists who live beyond Serbia's borders but remain connected to its cultural space through education, language, and the experience of living and/or working there during some period of their lives. I offer a brief outline of developments within each of the following three groups of pieces: 1. reinventing tradition: folklore and beyond; 2. postmodernist strategies: challenging the voices of conventional opera; 3. conceptual and experimental approaches to opera.

Keywords: Contemporary opera in Serbia, Music and opera identity, Jasna Veličković, Anja Đorđević, Irena Popović Dragović, Ana Sokolović, Isidora Žebeljan, Katarina Zdjelar, Marko Nikodijević

* The author's contact details: artina@beotel.net

Introduction: Singing after the turn of the Millennium

The twenty-first century saw an abrupt and remarkable resurgence of activity in the contemporary opera scene in Serbia. In particular, three new operatic works appeared around the turn of the millennium: *DreamOpera* (2001) by the group TkH (Teorija koja Hoda [Walking Theory]) and Jasna Veličković, the chamber opera *Narcissus and Eho* (2002) by Anja Đorđević, and the opera *Zora D.* (2003) by Isidora Žebeljan. Those three works exemplified three different attitudes to opera in Serbia: (1) a reliance on conventional operatic protocols while drawing inspiration from national heritage and tradition (Žebeljan); (2) various postmodern strategies calling into question the conventional form and content of opera (in the case of *Narcissus and Eho* by Đorđević, this meant exploring crossover music); and (3) a conceptual and experimental approach to opera (TkH and Veličković).¹

The three groups of pieces I consider correspond to previously illuminated tendencies exemplified by Žebeljan, Đorđević, and TkH and Veličković. The recent developments in opera discussed here constitute a distinctive 'scene' that departs from the paradigms that previously dominated the musical world in Serbia. During the twentieth century, that world was firmly rooted in romanticism and neoclassicism. Opera appeared on the Serbian cultural scene considerably later than in those European countries that already possessed longstanding operatic traditions. *Na uranku* [*An Early Awakening*] (1903), by the composer Stanislav Binički and librettist Branislav Nušić, is considered to be the first major Serbian opera, created nearly two decades before the founding of the Belgrade Opera House in 1920. *Na uranku* belongs fairly and squarely within the pedigreed traditions of romantic opera, and most of the operas written by Serbian composers during the twentieth century continued to inhabit that romantic universe, often inspired by musical folklore. Romantic traditions of opera have continued into the 21st century, mainly in the work of male composers, such as Rastislav Kambasković, Svetislav Božić and Ivan Jevtić.

In contrast, the diversity of idioms and the multiple musical and theatrical practices that began to appear on the postmodern horizon of Serbian opera in the twenty-first century fascinate with the fecundity and the variety of their means of expression, promoting a break with the romantic traditions

¹ For further details about those three pieces, see: Jelena Novak, "The Latest Serbian Opera, An Essay on Phantasms of Tradition, Gender Identities and Representation in the Musical Theatre", *International Journal of Music New Sound*, 25, I/2004. <https://www.newsound.org.rs/pdf/en/ns25/6Novak.pdf>. Accessed: January 13, 2024.

and calling into question the values conventionally associated with opera as a genre. Most of the Serbian composers who write postmodern operas are women, who seem happy to be regarded as iconoclasts.

I will discuss recent operas by artists who live and work in Serbia, as well as by artists who live beyond Serbia's borders but remain connected to its cultural space through education, language, and the experience of living and/or working there during some period of their lives. The Serbian and ex-Yugoslavian diaspora, of which I am myself a part, is huge. Many composers who previously lived or studied (or both) in Serbia no longer live there. But that does not prevent them from remaining an integral part of Serbian culture.

In this essay I construct a 'map' that affords a glimpse into different tendencies, styles, and approaches to opera, and thus contributes to a better understanding of the history and further development of the genre in Serbia. I will also offer a brief outline of developments within each of the following three groups of pieces:

1. Reinventing tradition: folklore and beyond
2. Postmodernist strategies: challenging the voices of conventional opera
3. Conceptual and experimental approaches to opera

In ensuing sections, I will briefly discuss several pieces that exemplify each group of operas in greater detail, and thus establish a horizon from which we might better construct a history of the genre in Serbia. Most of those pieces were performed in front of the audiences in Serbia except works by Marko Nikodijević, Marina Abramović and *Opera of Things* by Jasna Veličković. The works I had chosen are, in chronological order:

- *Dreamopera* (2001) by Jasna Veličković (b. 1974) and *Teorija koja Hoda* (TkH)
- The opera *Narcissus and Echo* (2002) by Anja Đorđević
- The one-act opera *Zora D.* (2003) by Isidora Žebeljan (1967–2020)
- *Operrrrra is a Female* (*Opera je ženskog roda*, 2005), directed and curated by Bojan Djordjev (b. 1977)
- The one-act opera *Svadba* [Wedding] (2011) by Ana Sokolović (b. 1968)
- *Vivier: A Night Report* (2013–14) by Marko Nikodijević (b. 1980)
- *AAA (Mein Herz)* (2016) by Katarina Zdjelar (b. 1979)
- *The Opera of Things* (2019) by Jasna Veličković

- *The opera project 7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (2020) by Marina Abramović (b. 1946), invited composer Marko Nikodijević
- Opera in 17 songs *Deca* (Children, 2022) by Irena Popović [=Popović Dragović] (b. 1974)

This ‘map’ that I propose is by no means comprehensive. I offer just a brief, more or less chronological overview of several illustrative examples. Those examples are like some kind of markers on the map, typical or most outstanding ‘landscapes’. This kind of map can never be complete and completely ‘accurate’. That is not even its aim. The aim is to ‘map down’, to set down or delineate – as in a map – the scene of contemporary opera in Serbia, and beyond it. I say beyond because some of the mentioned authors and works have connections with the Serbian art world, but are or were mainly living abroad, or even those pieces were never performed in Serbia although the authors spent a significant part of their life and education there.

When old cartographers were making the maps of new worlds they did so by using incomplete knowledge collected from pioneering expeditions. My criterion for picking up the pieces as the ‘markers’ is the intensity with which those pieces resonate with important questions that are being posed in the world of postopera globally. Some of those questions are: Who can sing in opera?, Who can have a voice?, Why sing today at all?, How does the relationship between what we hear and what we see produce meanings on the stage of opera? What does it mean to sing live? How to sing opera beyond the opera house?

An analysis of my ‘map’ reveals that the profile of different operatic species in Serbia corresponds roughly to profiles found more widely in the Western world today. *Differentia specifica* would be that the operas that lean on reinventing a national heritage mostly use Serbian musical folklore and language, which is not of course the case with operas beyond the Serbian cultural space.

1. Reinventing tradition: folklore and beyond

The group of operas involved in experimental and conceptual practices is located at one end of the spectrum of the opera genre in Serbia, possibly the most innovative and challenging one. At the other end are operas that preserve some element of continuity with tradition. In some cases this means continuity with conventional operatic forms and gestures, and in other cases it is with Serbian folklore, whether in the form of traditional music or national myths/histories.

The libretto of Isidora Žebeljan's one-act opera *Zora D.* is based on a text taken from a TV script by Dušan Ristić. The authors of the libretto – the composer's husband Borislav Čičovački (b. 1966), sister Milica Žebeljan (b. 1971) and Isidora Žebeljan herself – turn to a version of the myth about the fictitious Serbian poetess Zora Dulijan, using fragments of poetry by Jovan Dučić (1871–1943), Miloš Crnjanski (1893–1977) and Milena Pavlović Barili (1909–1945). They establish the character of a mysterious poetess who burned her poems and was betrayed by her friend Vida and her fiancé Jovan. The libretto sets the events of the 1930s in Belgrade between Zora, Vida and Jovan alongside a present-day story in which Mina, who resembles Zora, investigates the unexplained disappearance of the poetess. This piece was commissioned by the Genesis Foundation and has had a considerable number of performances outside Serbia.²

At the premiere of *Zora D.* during the Belgrade Music Festival in 2004, the choice of the German language came as a surprise to me, but it seemed in tune with the author's choice of an expressionist musical idiom. In the opera's seven scenes ostinato repetition structures follow each other in the collage-stringed sections. There are frequent allusions to folk themes, though the most striking departures from the expressionist paradigm occur in the ethno-jazz fragments of the piece. Conventional operatic voices (soprano, baritone and two mezzo-sopranos) are used, as well as a conventional operatic singing vocal technique.

The logocentric structure of conventional opera (a hierarchical relation between libretto, music and staging) is deconstructed and reconsidered to a great extent when the director becomes a co-author, of equal importance to the librettist and composer. A famous example is the case of *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), where Robert Wilson (b. 1941) and Philip Glass (b. 1937) co-authored the piece. Dissecting the institution of opera on the stage, exposing how operatic texts really function, and how meaning is produced, stands in opposition to an ideology of narrative and naturalistic representation. David Pountney's direction of *Zora D.* was along these lines. "Unknown" parts of the scene are revealed as the opera progresses. The audience is placed in a voyeuristic position. The key moment is when the last curtain appears on the stage, after which part of the curtain also descends, to create a voyeuristic parting through which

² For more details about the piece, see: Jelena Novak, "The Latest Serbian Opera, An Essay on Phantasms of Tradition, Gender Identities and Representation in the Musical Theatre", op. cit.

we can see the orchestra and the director. At that moment, the opera is revealed as a “machine” that produces meaning and sense, as a self-reflexive structure in whose bare functioning we voyeuristically participate.

In my review of *Zora D.* after the premiere I wrote that this piece is significant for a local context in which national feelings are on the ascent, and that it thus establishes a kind of new national opera.³ In a wider context, its importance is different and less telling. The exoticism of a minor national operatic culture in the Balkans has a specific connotation for a Western art market that expects “exoticism” in order to place the work on the global cultural map.

Another noteworthy piece from this group is the one-act opera *Svadba* [Wedding] (2011) by Ana Sokolović.⁴ It treats traditional (folk) music in somewhat unexpected ways, on the one hand celebrating it, but on the other problematizing an over-facile approach to folklore. This creates an intriguing dynamic that stretches the conventions of the genre.

In *Svadba*, six female singers (the bride-to-be and five of her friends, bridesmaids, all bearing traditional Serbian names), without an instrumental accompaniment, depict the eve of the wedding of Milica (soprano). It is the last night that the future bride spends with her girlfriends. The scenes are full of joy, expectations, and excitement, but also of melancholy, since Milica’s life is about to change. The fact that they sing *a capella* brings a particular vulnerability to this musical *Écriture féminine*. Danica, Lena (sopranos), Zora (soprano or mezzo-soprano), Nada and Ljubica (mezzo-sopranos) achieve a sagacious and surprising balance between the luminosity and brightness of the ‘raw’ folkloric female vocality and the experimental vocal tendencies of modernism and postmodernism, such as those exhibited by Kathy Berberian (Catherine Anahid Berberian, 1925–1983) in her famous piece *Stripsody* (1966). Those techniques include onomatopoeic sounds, stylized trilling and ululation, shifting vocally rapidly between different music styles, using *Sprechstimme* (‘speech-song’) etc.

³ Jelena Novak, “Politička ekonomija opere”, *Vreme*, 718, 07.10.2004. <https://www.vreme.com/kultura/politicka-ekonomija-opere/>

⁴ Ana Sokolović lives in Canada. Her opera *Svadba* was written for the North American market – and only belatedly embraced as a “Serbian” opera (and Ana as a “Serbian” composer). Namely, before *Svadba* was premiered in Serbia at the 2012 BEMUS festival, Ana Sokolović was virtually unknown in her homeland. I was lucky that Ana was my counterpoint teacher in secondary music school “Mokranjac” in Belgrade, just before she moved to Canada.



Image 1: Victoria L. Awkward as Milica with bridesmaids in the Boston Lyric Opera and Opera Philadelphia collaboration on the film opera *Svadba* (2022) by Ana Sokolović, film still.

The opera is sung in Serbian, uses both the verses and the melodies from Serbian and Balkan traditional music, and explores the bright vocal colors of folkloric female singing characterized by glissandi, singing with a somewhat stiff throat, insistence on singing together in dissonant intervals and promoting vocal techniques that often invoke nasal singing and non-vibrato. The music and poetics of Igor Stravinsky form an obvious reference point, with the title of the piece referring to his *Les Noces* (1923). The expressionist treatment of folkloric materials establishes a dialogue with Stravinskian gestures, especially in its rhythmic intensity and its ability to construct extended melodies from a tiny melodic core consisting of just a few notes.⁵

2. Postmodernist strategies: challenging the voices of conventional opera

Postmodernism in music in Serbia is quite often characterized by trying to find new ways of establishing a dialogue between popular and classical music. Both operas *Narcissus and Eho* and *Deca*, an opera in 17 songs are impor-

⁵ A Boston Lyric Opera production, co-produced with Opera Philadelphia unveiled new film opera of Sokolović's, *Svadba* debuted on January 28, 2022 on BLO's operabox.tv and the Opera Philadelphia Channel. Director Shura Baryshnikov and conductor Daniela Candillari create "a timeless, magical world based on composer Ana Sokolović's music and libretto". For more info see: Heidi Waleson, "Svadba Review: Recorded Rites", *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 2, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/svadba-boston-lyric-opera-opera-philadelphia-ana-sokolovic-shura-baryshnikov-11643841618>

tant examples of that tendency. In both cases the strongest intervention comes into the position of conventional, romantic, coloratura opera singing. Both pieces use the mosaic-like structure of the disposition of 'songs'. In the case of *Narcissus and Echo* those songs flirt both with the opera and pop song worlds, and in the case of *Deca* all kinds of vocal idioms are 'grinded' through a post-minimalist loosely repetitive music structure.

A different postmodernist tendency that challenges the operatic voices comes with the work of Marko Nikodijević where 'queering the pitch' of the voices is present and opera becomes a site of difference.

2.1. *Opera Singing in Crossover: "Narcissus and Echo" and "Deca"*

Narcissus and Echo by Anja Đorđević (2002) is a typical example of the post-modernist opera. The libretto is based on the well-known myth and on the poems by Marija Stojanović (b.1974) in Serbian. The narrative is fragmentary and an atmosphere of surrealism prevails. It is an opera that relies on the strategies of crossover music. It features a series of 'songs' rather than arias, sung by the composer herself, playing the role of the nymph Echo. The manner of singing is far removed from the vocal techniques associated with conventional operatic voices. The vocal material introduces some of the song-like qualities associated with operas and musicals, but the singer/composer Anja Đorđević primarily appears as a pop star singing at her own pop music concert. The role of Narcissus is sung by a countertenor, a reference to the castrato voice, while the two nymphs are sung by coloratura sopranos. This opera interrogates the border between popular and classical music, and at the same time engages with postmodernist strategies of reinvention (of the form of opera), the reinterpretation (of myth in opera), recentering (the figure of the singing woman on the opera stage) and the reformulation of the operatic genre. In 2011, the opera was presented in a film version, *Narcissus and Echo*, for which Saša Radojević, the Belgrade-based director and author known for non-institutional 'garage films' authored the script and directing. This opera-film represents a further step towards questioning the function and status of the opera today.

Several other pieces make a feature of crossover genres and popular culture. For example, the poetics of Irena Popović [=Popović Dragović] (b. 1974) may be related to dramatic and post-dramatic theatre scenes, as most of her mature compositions are written for contemporary theatre companies in the

region of the former Yugoslavia.⁶ Most often she collaborates with directors Kokan Mladenović and Andraš Urban. In many of their productions, live music composed by Popović takes centre stage and turns the entire theatrical project into a transgressive act of musical theatre that on occasion adopts the character of ‘the operatic’.

Like Anja Đorđević, Irena Popović [=Popović Dragović] is often on the stage herself playing and/or singing. Her music is typically repetitive, melodic, and tonal. It is situated on the broad horizon of post-minimalist practices in music. Vocal techniques are far removed from the sound of the classically-trained voice. Her own voice, as well as the voices of the actors that she herself trains for the performances, appear almost as a kind of “*artless singing*”,⁷ signaling the vulnerability of the human voice.

In 2022, the National Theatre in Belgrade commissioned from Popović the ‘opera in 17 songs’ *Deca* (Children), based on the novel of the same name (2021) by the Serbian writer and poet Milena Marković (b. 1974). The author of the libretto based on Marković’s novel is Dimitrije Kokanov, Igor Koruga is the choreographer, the costume designer is Selena Orb, and I myself am the music dramaturge of the piece. The novel in verse is an intimate narrative about the writer’s own life: her childhood and adolescence in a Belgrade middle-class, patriarchal family, becoming a young mother of a child with special needs, becoming an established writer and poet, establishing her own identity within a network of relations with female and male family members, lovers, friends and children, and coping with all kinds of conventions of patriarchal society against the backdrop of the disintegrating state of Yugoslavia which mobilized all kinds of sadnesses, personal and collective. The libretto depicts verses from the novel, grouping them in seventeen songs, which are in turn grouped in three parts: I Forest of Skyscrapers, II Sea of Tears, Mother’s Milk and Children’s Piss and III Wind. The three motives of forest, sea and wind originate from romantic poetry and are reinvented in the writing of Milena Marković.

⁶ In 2006, after spending some time studying at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, and inspired by the artistic but also the consumerist aura of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart that vibrates through that city, Popović created the opera *Mozart, Luster, Lustik*. The main collaborator on the project was the alternative rock band from Belgrade, *Kanda, Kodža i Nebojša*, thus resulting in a rock-opera.

⁷ Claudia Gorbman, “Artless Singing”, *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.3828/msmi.2011.8>

Taking the role of both composer and director of the piece, Popović interrogates singing techniques in opera by blending the voices of operatic singers and the non-trained voices of actors. Quite often in the opera an aria will present a non-operatic voice ‘supported’ by an operatic voice singing along with it, helping the untrained singer, but also providing an interesting vocal color. Fourteen actors that were not trained as singers, three trained opera singers and a children’s choir consisting of children from the margins of society (hor Nade) took part in this opera as its ‘singing force’. They were accompanied by an ensemble of ten musicians. A collective choral group is positioned on the stage, performing and at the same time illuminating various vocal genres – folklore singing, popular music vocals, the singing of actors, lyrical opera singing, the chanting of football fans, the vocalizations of orthodox monks, children’s voices, etc. Taken together, the singing voices of actors, the opera singers and the children living in the margins of society perform in this opera various modes of melancholy and sadness.



Image 2: From the finale of the opera *Deca* by Irena Popović [=Popović Dragović], Belgrade National Theatre, 2022.
Photo by Marijana Janković

In a musical language Popović uses repetitive motives, and repetitive grid ‘grinds’, which merge various musical languages almost seamlessly, including American minimalism, a post-minimalism close in style to that of Michael

Nyman, tunes from film musicals, Mozartian melodies, rock and punk, some subtle allusions to rituals associated with Serbian folk music and even turbo-folk. All of these allow Irena Popović [=Popović Dragović] to dissect the position of the woman, and especially the woman as an artist and mother in a patriarchal society such as that of Serbia.

[...]
I am sad but I keep talking
I never stop talking
if I would stop
a bear would catch me
and sit on my chest
a wolf would catch me
and grab my back and my neck
crows would peck me
[...]⁸

These are verses from Milena Marković's novel *Deca* that find their way into the libretto. The aim of the opera's 'performance of the novel' is not storytelling, but polemics and the construction of signs. Sadness is used as a vehicle for connection and inclusion in performance, and as the aim and experience of collective performance through singing and song. The political status of identity codes and positions are also illuminated in this piece, for example: who are these people who sing opera but do not read music (actors and children), who are the people (children from the margins) who sing in national opera, but do not have their own home? Who are the performers/actors/singers/dancers who do not represent sadness and its narratives but perform them? The intimate and narrative atmosphere of the novel are used in the opera as an archive of social and poetical codes that further play with identity politics – class and gender identity, sexual identity and biological status. Marko Nikodijević is also interested in the operatic questioning of the identity. He does that by rethinking the gender roles and vocalities of the characters.

⁸ My translation. From the libretto of the opera *Deca*, see: Dimitrije Kokanov, "Libretto for opera *Deca*", in: *Deca*, opera in 17 songs, program booklet, Belgrade, National Theatre, 2022.

2.2 Queering opera: “Vivier: A Night Report ”

Vivier: A Night Report (2013–14) by Marko Nikodijević⁹ is a poetical archive of protocols, experiences, concepts, memories, fears, desires, and sorrows connected to the Canadian composer Claude Vivier’s (1948–1983) unusual destiny.¹⁰ Nikodijević was inspired by the ‘myths’ surrounding Vivier, and these are by no means myths of power and grandeur. Rather they are ‘myths’ of sorrow, of insecurity, of the quest for identity, and of the struggle with emotional pain and rejection. Those are the subjects that Vivier, as a homosexual, both symbolized and questioned.

All the characters from Marko Nikodijević’s opera originate from Vivier’s life and works but they are re-indexed or re-enacted differently. The countertenor voice of Vivier is what primarily sets him apart from all the other characters. Vivier represents a symbol for the vulnerable (especially LGBTQ) minorities. In addition, the countertenor voice associated with the character of Vivier questions the typical voice-gender relations in opera and beyond. This voice sings beyond gender; it shows that voice-gender relations are not a fixed category. The specific colour of the countertenor makes it easily recognizable, so that Vivier’s voice on one hand makes it impossible not to notice him. On the other hand, he is also symbolically isolated from the rest of the community (and the other members of the cast in this opera). This decision about how to represent Vivier vocally truthfully transposes his eccentric figure from the ‘real world’ to the singing world of opera.

When I asked Marko Nikodijević how he made the decision to give the character of Vivier to a countertenor voice, he insisted on speaking about that high voice as a color in an opera that did not rely on the timbre of high-tessitura instruments. He actually compared composing to the act of painting:

That chamber opera is orchestrated without any high instruments such as violins, flutes, oboes or trumpets. This was a conscious reduction that enabled me to produce an entirely different kind of orchestral sound image. It is a kind of deliberate reduction, reductionism as a paradoxical means of generating complexity.

⁹ Here I draw from my previous text: Jelena Novak, “Vivier Reenacted: Singing beyond Masculine”, *International Journal of Music New Sound*, 45, I/2025, 139–150. <https://www.newsound.org.rs/pdf/en/ns45/11Novak.pdf>

¹⁰ Subotica-born and raised in Serbia, after finishing his studies in Belgrade Nikodijević moved to Germany and there started to develop an international career. His opera *Vivier* has not been staged in Serbia. At the time of writing this text, Nikodijević moved back to Belgrade to teach there a one-year course at the department of composition of the Faculty of Music.

It's similar to the composite palettes of 1950s structural painters, who worked with a few primary colours: a pixel of green, a pixel of yellow, a pixel of blue, and a pixel of red each, with a huge number of combinations obtainable from those four colours. I pre-compose by excluding things because composing is not about what you add up but what you exclude.¹¹

The role of the male chorus in this opera is also significant: it acts as a reference point like the chorus in Greek tragedy, commenting on the 'drama'. It also wears different musical 'masks'. For example, there is Gregorian chant, and at the end of Scene 2 the music resembles the singing of the Orthodox Church, although here accompanied by the electric organ and strings. This reference to Orthodox Church singing does not come as surprise since in some of his other compositions Marko Nikodijević also refers to Serbian music. An example is "GHB / tanzaggregat" (2011), in which he presents the famous Serbian folk song "Lela Vranjanka" in an intriguing way. I perceive those reflections of the traditional music of Nikodijević's homeland as some kind of perpetuated dialogue of his own musical (and other) identity. Reinventing the role of masculine vocality in opera, and creating an opera about the composer who composed operas, all establish intriguing standpoints for the reinvention of operatic conventions.

3. Conceptual and experimental approaches to opera

This group of pieces, which lean on a tradition of experimental and conceptual art, comprises the smallest number of works. However, their range is the widest and their content the most diverse, since the composers, directors, and librettists stretch the conventions and boundaries of 'the operatic' to the greatest extent. Three different tendencies by composers within this category emerge: a reliance on a tradition of experimental musical theatre and opera, 'curating' an opera, and installing the operatic

3.1 Reliance on a tradition of experimental musical theatre and opera: "DreamOpera"

In 2001, *DreamOpera* by TkH and Jasna Veličković appeared on the horizon of a post-socialist Yugoslavia.¹² The work calls into questions opera as an

¹¹ Jelena Novak, "Music as an Aggregate of Colors, Conversation with Marko Nikodijević", *International Journal of Music New Sound*, 57, 1/2021, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.5937/newso2157001N>

¹² TkH, short for *Teorija koja Hoda* (Walking Theory) was founded as a group for artis-

institution, and specifically its confinement to the opera house. The lack of institutional support of the opera house opened up possibilities for developing larger horizon of the opera poetics, as these were not pre-conditioned by the rigid opera rules. This is an opera that denies elitism that is perceived to lie at the heart of the operatic world. It shows that in an age of media and advanced technology it might be enough simply to watch an opera on the screen. In this way the institution of opera is transformed into its social opposite, becoming in effect readily accessible, affordable, and unglamorous. *DreamOpera* also reinterprets the institutions of performance art and lecture-performance, and it converts art theory into theatre with the help of live painting and video, involving a collage of photographs, diverse images, and film fragments.

DreamOpera's libretto is a fragmentary text spoken in both English and Serbian by the TkH members. It includes phrases (often slogans) from the theory and philosophy of art and from the world of marketing, such that the meaning of the text is constantly in flux. It re-examines and problematizes the very context in which the opera was created and performed—a post-socialist society and the IDEA New Moment marketing campus in the Slovenian city of Piran. At certain moments, the libretto's structure simulates the structures of the different opera ensembles, such as the duets, trios, and choruses. In other words, the self-referentiality of opera is foregrounded.

There is no live singing in *DreamOpera*, which uses an electroacoustic medium for the most part. Despite the fact that this opera lacks 'live singing' the layers of vocal materials from historical operas were imported into its musical tissue to serve as a kind of meta-singing, singing about singing. This might lead to interpretations of this opera being rather conceptual, than actual opera. At the beginning of the work, a sinusoidal tone, the sum of all frequencies, is emitted as a signifier for singing as a practice. That artificial voice – a kind of a mechanical cry – wonders if singing is still possible in opera. Rather than (singing) operatic characters performing a role on the stage, the opera features only (speaking) artists and theorists. The electronic

tic and theoretical research in 2000 in Belgrade. Its founding members were Miško Šuvaković, Bojana Cvejić, Ana Vujanović, Bojan Đorđev, Siniša Ilić, Jasna Veličković, Ksenija Stevanović and Jelena Novak. Since 2002 TkH platform operates as an independent organization: TkH-center for performing arts theory and practice. The group also established the TkH journal <http://www.tkh-generator.net/portfolio-type/tkh-journal/> and realized together number of lecture performances, exhibitions, performance art pieces and other performances one of which was *DreamOpera*.

music is partly of a vocal origin, based on musical motives that were taken out of context from various historical operas and rendered almost unrecognizable. Arias are reduced to the spoken text units that mimic coloratura; they are often brief advertising slogans that, like coloratura, can be repeated indefinitely. With their references to the stereotypes of the art market, they effectively question the power of capitalist institutions.

3.2 'Curating' an opera: "Operrrra is a Female" and 7 "Deaths of Maria Callas"

Somewhat related to *DreamOpera* conceptually is *Operrrra is a Female* (2005), directed by Bojan Djordjev (b. 1977). Djordjev treats the institution of opera as a museum. In this work he sets out to 'exhibit' several existing musical compositions that were not previously considered to be operas, but pieces of music including singing: *Sažeti prikaz neumitnog i tragičnog toka sudbine koji je krhko biće Male Sirene odveo u potpunu propast* [A Brief Account of the Inexorable and Tragic Course of Destiny which Led the Little Mermaid's Fragile Being into Total Disaster] (1994) by Goran Kapetanović (1969–2014), *Classifieds* (2005) by Anja Đorđević, and *Untitled* (2005) by an Irish composer Jennifer Walshe with whom Djordjev had previously collaborated. Director Djordjev acts here as a curator. The figure of the composer is no longer the key authorial voice here, a tendency that has been seen on the general scene of opera ever since Robert Wilson and Philip Glass co-authored *Einstein on the Beach* back in 1976. Each of these depicted compositions becomes an act of an opera. Djordjev displays several works featuring operatic elements and allows them to form a new piece, proclaiming the outcome as an opera. This strategy is an early example of 'curating an opera', while at the same time exemplifying a site-specific composition. *Operrrra is a female* was performed in the unfinished building of the Botanical Faculty in Belgrade, housed within the Botanical Gardens Jevremovac. Being performed in a skeleton of a building that is not connected to opera or a musical institution, this piece symbolically negates the opera institution. Being site-specific emphasizes its experimental character.

The piece examines the forms and functions of the female voice in opera, as well as interrogating the status of opera as positioned between 'high art' and 'popular art' in digital age. The *mise-en-scène* of this opera is 'technological' and delays the presence of the performer. The scene is a screen that does not offer a smooth illusion, but confronts the audience and the opera's

working machinery, it is opera's "erased space".¹³ During the entire opera, the performers are located behind the screens – either textile screens that reflect shadows, or electronic screens on which recordings are broadcast and edited. However, the voices of the performers, as surrogates for their bodies, are constantly present during the opera. Djordjev controls the visuals of this opera along with the members of his team, allowing the audience to see several situations that occur outside the visible scene, but under the watchful eye of the camera. Playing and singing musicians, collages, and live-painting are combined with the previously recorded videos. The effect completely erases the boundary between live performance and its delayed broadcast.

Curating an opera reaches a new level in the piece *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* (2020) by Marina Abramović.¹⁴ The form of this opera is simple: seven arias are selected from the mainstream operatic repertoire, arias that were interpreted by the soprano Maria Callas in an unforgettable manner. The seven sopranos are engaged, each taking one of the leading roles from the following operas: *La Traviata* and *Otello* (by Giuseppe Verdi), *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly* (Giacomo Puccini), *Carmen* (Georges Bizet), *Lucia of Lammermoor* (Gaetano Donizetti), and *Norma* (Vincenzo Bellini). The arias are separated by electronic interludes (sound designer Luka Kozlovački; composer Marko Nikodijević) and there is also an Introduction and "The Eighth Death" composed as well by Nikodijević. While the singer is performing an aria on stage, a short silent film (directed by Nabil Elderkin), is projected on the stage as a music video. In those videos, Abramović and the actor Willem Dafoe comment on the operatic deaths in the surreal, spectacular, and sometimes absurd, scenes. Unexpectedly, the arias are heard as a film music sequence.

It may seem that the focus of *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* is the life, the voice, and the career of Maria Callas, but first and foremost this piece is autobiographical. Abramović reveals that she has been fascinated by the character and work of Callas since her childhood, when as a young girl in Belgrade she discovered Callas's voice and fell in love with her interpretations:

¹³ Ana Vujanović and Bojan Djordjev, "A Conversation on the Margins of Operrrrra", in: *Operrrrra is a Female*, program booklet, Belgrade, Belef, 2009.

¹⁴ Opera *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* had its world premiere on September 1st, 2020 in Bayerische Staatsoper in Munich. It was performed there during the COVID pandemics and that required respect for special required rules for the performers and the audience. One of the performances was transmitted online. Aside from seeing it that way, I attended live performance of *7 Deaths* in Amsterdam's Royal Theatre Carré on November 4th, 2022.

I only remember having breakfast in my grandmother's kitchen when I was fourteen years old. We had an old Bakelite radio, and I remember I heard this voice coming out of the radio. I had no idea it was Callas, and I didn't know what she was singing. I didn't understand the words – it was in Italian – and I remember that I stood up, feeling the electricity going through my body, and with this incredible sensation of emotions passing through me. I started to cry uncontrollably, and it was such an emotional effect that I have never forgotten it. After that I wanted to know whose voice it was, who this person was, and I really wanted to know everything about her. Her voice has such an enormous emotional impact, and it had some kind of electric energy passing through it, a gift that very few people in the world have.¹⁵



Image 3: Marina Abramović and Willem Dafoe in a video still from the trailer of the opera project *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*

As time went on, the relationship between Marina Abramović and Maria Callas grew more complex. Abramović realized that she and Maria had much in common, that they even looked alike, and that unhappy loves are some-

¹⁵ Jelena Novak, "The Curatorial Turn and Opera: On the Singing Deaths of Maria Callas. A Conversation with Marina Abramović and Marko Nikodijević", *Sound Stage Screen*, 1 (2), 2021, 195–209. <https://doi.org/10.54103/sss16640>

thing that marked both of their lives.¹⁶ It might be claimed that this opera is primarily about Marina Abramović, depicting her art, status as a diva, her rise on the international art scene, ego, pain, suffocation, motionless waiting, undressing, youthful looks, and her unhappy relationships. And these ‘motives’ from her life are also present in her art. The institution of opera with its background of romantic heroines dying onstage becomes a convenient ‘container’ that keeps all those romantic and expressionist motives together,

The composer of the Introduction, Interludes and “The Eighth Death” in this opera is Marko Nikodijević. Against the background of the electronic Ligetian ‘clouds’ in the interludes, Abramović narrates the texts inspired by operatic heroines and their deaths. Here, the disquieting, almost frightening music of Nikodijević and Kozlovački seems to draw a lot in its expression from transformed vocals. Towards the end of the opera, in “The Eighth Death”, Marina Abramović appears on the stage, as Callas is shown dying in her Paris apartment. In the final moments, Abramović is on stage in a glittering golden dress, enacting slow, deliberate movements. The singing voice of Maria Callas is eventually heard, and the live, golden figure of Marina becomes like a doll. Abramović pays homage to Callas with this opera, celebrating her unique capacity to connect the body and voice into a single spectacular whole.

3.3 *Installing the Operatic: “AAA (Mein Herz)” and “Opera of Things”*

In an intriguing text written by Milena Medić about the composition *Little Mermaid...* by Goran Kapetanović, the author refers to the piece not as an opera, but as a work that contains operatic elements (Medić 2001). By locating those elements, Medić tries to define the essence of “the operatic” and to reveal its true meaning – that is to define the main features of a discipline by using an example that lies outside it. However, there is a growing number of pieces situated in the world of the visual arts that use opera as their theme and/or material.¹⁷ These pieces, too, can form useful laboratories for defining ‘the operatic’, as seen in *Opera for a Small Room* (2005) by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller, *An Opera of Prehistoric Creatures* (2012) by Marguerite

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ For the world of installations that use opera as a subject and/or material see more at the program booklet of the exhibition *Postopera* co-curated by Kris Dittel and Jelena Novak in 2019, Rotterdam: TENT and Operadagen Rotterdam festival. https://www.tentrotterdam.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/PO_BookletB5_DEF.pdf

Humeau, and *Sun and Sea* (2019) by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė and Lina Lapelytė. Here, I refer to two pieces by artists related to a Serbian cultural space that likewise tend to question what the notion of the operatic means by problematizing its elements within the world of the visual arts: *AAA (Mein Herz)* (2016) by Katarina Zdjelar and *Opera of Things* (2019) by Jasna Veličković.

The four-minute-long video piece *AAA (Mein Herz)* by Katarina Zdjelar shows a close-up shot of a young woman, the vocalist Barbara Kinga Majewska, directly gazing at the camera, as if aiming to hypnotize the viewer. Majewska performs the piece, assembled from fragments of four compositions, each drawn from a different cultural and historical context. Vocal idioms from the classical Lied, an operatic aria, a folk tune, and a pop song succeed one another, seemingly at random. The four pieces and their distinct temporalities merge in this demanding vocal performance, switching languages, musical idioms and vocal techniques. The singer's soprano voice alters and travels between them effortlessly. Her motionless face appears as a screen on which different forms of the 'operatic' are presented. What remains constant throughout the performance is the materiality/corporeality of the singer's voice. This singing face displays various identities, with any corporeal dimension carefully concealed. The de-synchronization between the singing voice and the cybernetic-looking face begs the question of who sings, how, and why. This reinvention of the relationship between the singing body and the voice is the motor that drives the opera beyond generic borders, and in this case, it is a clear sign of the reinvention of the operatic.

Another work that deals with questions of the voice and of the operatic beyond opera is Jasna Veličković's *Opera of Things*.¹⁸ The title of this work alludes to the concept of the 'Internet of Things', which involves extending Internet connectivity beyond standard devices into any range of common objects, such as a lamp or a thermostat. Veličković's *Opera of Things* extends the concept of the voice beyond its conventional connection to animate beings. She is interested in producing the sounds that are triggered by the electromagnetic fields of everyday electronic devices, thus giving them a 'voice'. This piece was commissioned and first performed by/at the exhibition *Post-Opera* (2019, TENT, Rotterdam) in two forms: as a three-part sound installation including the Velicon, an instrument invented by Veličković; and as a

¹⁸ See the excerpt of Jasna Veličković's *Opera of Things* here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFRKYofcQ9I>, Accessed on January 9, 2023.

live music-theatre experience performed on several occasions. At different times the installation performs an ‘intervention’ in the exhibition with three short compositions, referring to the elements in an opera: there is an aria, “Beauty 3.2 Volts”; a duet, “Diva and the Beast”; and a female quartet, ‘Ophelia’. The ‘voices’ we hear are invoked by the objects on the display – two groups of power adapters and a Velicon.



Image 4: Barbara Kinga Majewska in Katarina Zdjelar’s, *AAA (Mein Herz)* video still

Conclusion

While working on this text I was also conducting research for my new book project with the working title *Opera in the Expanded Field*. I mention this because it was interesting to look in parallel at transgressive opera pieces on the global opera scene and in Serbia. In the book, by leaning on the concept of ‘sculpture in the expanded field’ established by Rosalind Krauss.¹⁹ I discuss how opera extends beyond its borders – beyond liveness, beyond human, beyond drama, beyond opera house, beyond West, beyond composer and beyond operatic. In discussing the institution and definition of opera there,

¹⁹ Rosalind Krauss, “Sculpture in the expanded field”, *October*, 8, Spring 1979, 30–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778224>

I depict pieces that have a tendency to break the rules and conventions. However, while looking through a large number of works to find those that are the most transgressive, I began to understand that the construct of three categories of pieces I establish in this text – I Following tradition / National themes and idioms, II Postmodernist strategies: challenging conventional opera, III Conceptual and experimental approaches to opera – is applicable to the global opera scene in general. Thus, this map of the contemporary opera scene in Serbia is not dramatically different conceptually from what happens, for example, with contemporary opera in The Netherlands or in Portugal, to depict two countries whose scenes I have already followed for a long period of time.

The difference would primarily lie in the strength, richness and speed of institutions that are ‘in the game’. Thus, for example, The Netherlands is home to several contemporary opera festivals, its main opera house has a tradition of commissioning opera pieces from contemporary composers, and in general the contemporary music scene is very well developed and the audience educated to be able and willing to follow this kind of repertory. None of this is the case in Serbia: there is no opera festival there, commissioning pieces of contemporary opera and music is still the exception rather than the rule, the contemporary music scene struggles to find support and institutionalization, and the general audience is neither willing nor educated to follow this scene. Despite all this, the map of operas I established in this text is quite rich and diversified. When we look closer, the truth is that most of the pieces I discussed here were either produced out of Serbia, often by artists who belong to its cultural space but mostly live and work outside of it (Nikodijević, Veličković, Sokolović, Abramović, Zdjelar) or supported by at least some foreign institutions (as in the case of *Zora D.* by Isidora Žebeljan). Only in some of the cases mentioned here, notably *Narcissus and Eho* by Anja Đorđević, *Operrrrra is a Female* by Bojan Đorđev and *Deca* by Irena Popović [=Popović Dragović], have Serbian institutions stood behind the projects. Of course, there is a much larger corpus of pieces than the one I decided to represent in this text. When I look at all the pieces I could find information about, the majority are those that extend traditional values, a smaller number are those that develop postmodernist strategies and smaller still are those that adopt an experimental approach to opera. Thus, the conclusion is that the identity of the contemporary opera scene in Serbia mirrors what happens on the global contemporary opera scene, that substantial pieces that can be discussed within that scene originate and are supported from abroad, and that

despite the lack of institutional support, and money in the artworld, there is great enthusiasm that makes the scene unique and diversified, despite institutional limitations.

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Summary

The twenty-first century saw an abrupt and remarkable resurgence of activity in the contemporary opera scene in Serbia. In particular, three new operatic works appeared around the turn of the millennium: *DreamOpera* (2001) by the group TkH (*Teorija koja Hoda* [Walking Theory]) with Jasna Veličković, the chamber opera *Narcissus and Echo* (*Narcis i Echo*, 2002) by Anja Đorđević, and the opera *Zora D.* (2003) by Isidora Žebeljan. Those three works exemplified three different attitudes to opera in Serbia: (1) a reliance on and reinventing of conventional operatic protocols while drawing inspiration from national heritage, folklore and tradition (Žebeljan); (2) various post-modern strategies calling into question the conventional form, way of singing and content of opera (in the case of *Narcissus and Echo* by Đorđević, this meant exploring crossover music); and (3) a conceptual and experimental approach to opera (TkH and Veličković).

The three groups of pieces that I consider in this study correspond to tendencies exemplified by Žebeljan, Đorđević, and TkH and Veličković. In the first part of the text – Reinventing Tradition: Folklore and Beyond – I examine how elements of folklore and tradition remain to be used (*Zora D.* by Isidora Žebeljan) and reinvented (*Svadba* by Ana Sokolović). The second part of the text – Postmodernist Strategies: Challenging the voices of conventional opera – brings considerations on balancing between the worlds of popular and 'classical' music, opera form and singing. I zoom in on *Narcissus and Echo* by Anja Đorđević and the opera in 17 songs *Deca* by Irena Popović. Deliberations about queering opera arrives in the last section of this part of the text relating to *Vivier: a Night Report* by Marko Nikodijević.

In the third part of the text – Conceptual and Experimental Approaches to Opera – I discuss: 1) Reliance on a tradition of experimental musical theatre and opera (*Dreamopera* by Jasna Veličković and TkH), 2) 'curating an opera' (*Operrrra is a Female* by Bojan Djordjev and *Seven Deaths of Maria Callas* by Marina Abramović), and 3) Installing the operatic (*AAA Mein Herz*) by Katarina Zdjelar and *Opera of Things* by Jasna Veličković.