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## CONVERSATIONS

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**AN IMPORTANT THING THAT WESTERN  
CONTEMPORARY MUSIC HAS FORGOTTEN ABOUT: JOY.  
An Interview with the Composer Ana Sokolović**

The oeuvre of Ana Sokolović (b. 1968) is a paradigmatic example of a very successful relationship between two distinct cultural spheres – Serbian and Canadian. For over two decades now, this artist has cultivated a successful career as a composer in Canada. She began studying composition with Dušan Radić at the Academy of Art in Novi Sad and continued her studies at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, under the supervision of Zoran Erić. She earned her master's degree in composition at the University of Montreal in 1995,

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where her mentor was José Evangelista. Today, she is considered one of the most important names on the contemporary music scene of Canada, which is attested to by awards such as the Joseph S. Stauffer Prize (2005), *Prix Opus* Composer of the Year award (Conseil québécois de la musique, 2007), two



Credit: André Parmentier

Jan V. Matejcek Awards (2008 and 2012), and the National Arts Centre Award (2009), which included commissions and a five-year lectureship. Her opera *Svadba* (“Wedding”, 2012) was nominated for Dora Mavor Moore Awards in five categories (Outstanding Lighting Design, Outstanding Production, Outstanding Musical Direction, Outstanding Performance, and Outstanding New Musical/Opera), winning an award in the Outstanding New Musical/

Opera category. The same year, the Quebec Contemporary Music Society (*Société de musique contemporaine du Québec – SMCQ*), as part of their traditional “Homage to Our Composers” event (*Hommage à nos compositeurs*), staged more than a hundred concerts of her music and other events promoting her work throughout Canada, which was an unprecedented honour in the history of Canadian classical music. In 2015, she won the Serge-Garant Award presented by the Émile-Nelligan Foundation and, in 2019, the Juno Award for her piece *Golden Slumbers Kiss Your Eyes*.

Sokolović has authored some 70 works for various performing forces, from solo to orchestral pieces, including stage music, opera, modern ballet, and film music. Her creative activities encompass a keen interest in theatre and ballet, which has spawned successful collaborations with leading Canadian arts institutions and organizations, such as the Queen of Puddings Music Theatre, Canadian Opera Company, Ensemble contemporain de Montréal PLUS, Nouvel Ensemble Moderne, Vancouver New Music, and Théâtre UBU, among others. In addition to contracts with renowned soloists and ensembles, Sokolović has released 13 CD recordings of her works: *Nouvelle musique montréalaise II* (1999), *Nouveaux territoires* (Ensemble contemporain de Montréal, 2000), *Figment* (Matt Haimovitz, 2003), *Odusia* (Mario Brunello, 2008), *So You Want to Write a Fugue* (Christina Petrowska Quilico, 2008), *Édifices naturels* (Brigitte Poulin, 2008), *5x3* (Fibonacci, 2010), *Thirst* (Mu-

sica Intima & Turning Point Ensemble, 2014), *Higgs Ocean* (Music for Gamelan and String Quartet, 2016), and *Solo seven* (Marc Djokic, 2018). The discography of Ana Sokolović also includes three CDs exclusively featuring her music: *Jeu des Portraits* (2012) and *Sirène* (2018) with performances by Ensemble contemporain de Montréal led by Véronique Lacroix and *Folklore imaginaire* with performances by Ensemble Transmission. A somewhat curious CD release, titled *New Worlds* by the Canadian label *Analekta*, was inspired by themes of migration and crossing national boundaries and features two works: Antonin Dvořák's Ninth Symphony ("From the New World") and *Golden Slumbers Kiss Your Eyes* by Ana Sokolović. But Sokolović has enjoyed success beyond the borders of multicultural Canada as well. Her works have been performed at festivals such as Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, *Présence* (Paris), Nordic Music Days (Reykjavík), the Venice Biennale, Music Biennale Zagreb, Holland Festival (Amsterdam), *MNM* (Montreal), *ADEvantgarde Festival* (Munich), *Cervantino* (Mexico City), International Diaghilev Festival (Perm), *ISCM Music Days* (Vancouver), *BEMUS* (Belgrade), while her opera *Svadba* has had an American as well as a European tour.

Although critics often talk of a "Slavic soul" breathing in works by this composer, Sokolović's oeuvre is exemplary for its diversity of artistic expression. Her language is unique not only in terms of her approach to references such as folkloric archetypes, which she treats as work materials, but also in her view of music as an extremely abstract art that must be complemented with a verbal or visual layer to stimulate the listener/viewer's imagination – for her, an essential element of life.<sup>2</sup> For Sokolović, composing constitutes an act of research, using the entire musical tradition, whether national or global, as an inexhaustible source of stylistic formations, which she then shapes in peculiar moulds, earning international acclaim. Nonetheless, that statement would have to be qualified: the pluralist quality of Sokolović's oeuvre stems not only from its sonic spectrum, but also, as she puts it herself, from a plurality of inspiration, whether visual impressions, emotional imprints, or verbal influences. This approach to composition has been characterized as typically *Canadian* in the media (Aaron Gervais): a structural analogy between the pluralistic musical language of Ana Sokolović, based on her minimalist, neo-expressionist, and folkloric heritage, and multicultural Canada is a necessary condition for securing the status of a Canadian "national treasure".

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<sup>2</sup> According to "Portrait d'Ana Sokolovic", an interview published in *Circuit*. Last accessed 22 November 2018.

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1. *Your creative opus is already an imposing one, encompassing some 70 works, most of which have been performed across the world. That is a great achievement and it seems as if composing for you were not simply a manifestation of a natural talent, nourished and cultivated by education. For you, composing is something more than that?*

Yes, composing constitutes a type of communication.

Composing represents the composer's desire to share a part of her world with others. To offer her audience, at the same time, something that she thinks they haven't yet heard, or, at least for a short while, to enable her audience to travel to different worlds. A composer seeks to make the world a better place precisely by sharing with it their common imaginative world, which is, like dreams, for instance, quite abstract. Because music, as the most abstract of the arts, enables us to do just that.

1a. *Does every composer really seek to make the world a better place, though? Carl Orff was a Nazi. Is it possible to save today's consumer/exploitation society through music, mirroring Dostoyevsky's assertion that beauty would save the world? In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Baumgarten held that music was abstract, whereas before that, music had served the Church, while in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it served to promote the ruling class – the bourgeoisie. The more seductive music is, the more dangerous it becomes. Feminists have noted that the main subject of every half-serious opera is the demise of a woman. Up until the 1970s no one had noticed that because it was so commonplace that it seemed quite romantic and natural. Eurydice, Tosca, Madama Butterfly, Carmen, La traviata, Mimi, Aida, Gilda... they all die. Does music encourage escaping from reality? Or are there ways in which music acts to improve certain dimensions of that reality?*

Those are excellent and multifaceted questions. I'll try to be concise.

First, I think that most composers seek to make the world a better place. But defining "better" is certainly subjective.

As for Carl Orff, we don't know for sure whether he was a Nazi or not, just as we don't know that about Heidegger or Strauss. Not everything is black and white like that. But without venturing into details of that nature, it is paradoxical that very few people have made other people so happy like Orff did with his music, not only with his famous *Carmina Burana*, but also with

his pedagogical work (the Orff instrumentarium), used by every school in the world. Even if he didn't want to make the world happy, he did contribute to that with his work.

The world cannot be saved by any one thing, including music. But music can – and for that there is scientific proof – contribute to ennobling people.

Like Dostoyevsky, I also think that beauty will save the world. All people have good and evil inside them. Which one of those will develop more depends on the circumstances in which we live.

As Baumgarten said, music is abstract, and I would add that it is the most abstract of the arts. And, as Stravinsky says, it describes nothing but itself. But Stravinsky also adds: "I haven't understood a bar of music in my life, but I have felt it". It means that this type of "understanding" through one's skin is what is difficult to describe and discuss. Music and love are quite similar in terms of their abstractness. Love has started wars, as well as stimulated the writing of the most beautiful songs. And no one has yet fully explained what love is, or what music is. And yet we all feel them.

As for music, the Church, and bourgeoisie, I could say a lot about that. There's always been music and there always will be. The division of music into ritual, sacred music, etc. has existed in every tribe and nation. What we today call classical or artistic instrumental music was born in the Catholic Church. For praising God, as well as itself, the Catholic Church (and later the protestant church as well) had the monetary power to hire performers and composers knowing full well how powerful music is. Then praising God moved to praising the masters (kings, the bourgeoisie). That is, whoever could pay. Only after the French Revolution was music democratized.

When it comes to dying in operas – opera means drama. In my opinion, the death of women is especially dramatic, because it is less commonly encountered in the history of society. Unfortunately, civilization is patched together by numerous wars, where, of course, there are female casualties as well, but the dying of men is, in a way, more common.

*2. Although we just broached a provocative subject, let us move, nonetheless, to other topics, because the format of this interview obliges us to do so. Your first composition professor was Dušan Radić. Could you tell us a bit more about studying in his class, his methods and techniques of work, and could you draw a comparison with studying with Zoran Erić? What were the influences of these two mentors that made a special contribution to the formation of your musical language?*

Working with two professors was very different.

I think that nothing is random and that I worked with each of my professors at the right time.

With Radić, I learned, or, rather, confirmed that intuition is very important and that cherishing our own thoughts and tastes should be our guiding principle (the heart).

With Erić I complemented the teaching that reflection, planning, and good organization do not hamper intuition but, on the contrary, push it ahead and complete it into a creative force (the brain).

I must add that I also learned a lot about creativity from Zora Bokšan Tanurdžić, my drama studio professor. She taught me that the artistic obstacles or challenges we set to ourselves are actually quite important, if not the most important thing in creativity, because they get the imagination going. And imagination is the most important thing in creativity.

*3. In 1992 you moved to Montreal, where you began and completed your master's degree, with Prof. José Evangelista. I would assume that your first encounter with the society and culture of Canada was a drastic change from the atmosphere of Yugoslavia at the time. In concrete terms, what was it that attracted you to Canada? What was the difference between studying in Montreal and in Yugoslavia?*

The overall difference in studying is huge in terms of the organization of the programme, the exams, the possibility to choose your courses, and the general organization of group teaching.

But when it comes to one-on-one composition tutorials, there's no real difference there. It is all a matter of perception, every person sees the world in their own way. Thus composers, too, having different priorities, teach their students in their own way. That's why I think it's good that students don't study with the same professor for too long, but enrich themselves with comments and perceptions from various angles. That applies especially to higher education. What I will always remember about my professor José Evangelista is the generous support he gave me to develop my own musical personality.

*4. How would you describe your musical language? What is it about it that you would label unique?*

It's difficult to talk about oneself. What's interesting is that I don't have, unlike most of my colleagues, a developed harmonic or rhythmic system that I

might use for composing. For me, each work is a new project and entails a new research endeavour, so I'd be hard-pressed to classify all of my works into "my style". In fact, I'm happy that I feel no fetters of any kind, precisely because I live in "the new world", so I can allow myself to explore and try out various techniques and approaches to composition. I'm talking about Canada as this "new world" because in Canada, tradition runs very short, while the European tradition, which is accepted, does not constitute the natural or only source of inspiration or impose the "duty" to continue the tradition. The European tradition is the basis, an inspiration, but for that same reason sometimes also a limitation.

*5. In a 2011 interview you gave for the Canadian newspaper The Globe and Mail, you underscored that at the very beginning of your career as an independent composer you did not use the musical heritage of the Balkans, but that your listeners identified a "Slavic soul" in you. In your opinion, is it indeed that melodic heritage, from this part of the world, which you later started using consciously, that which makes your works communicative for listeners and critics in Canada? What is it, in concrete terms, that's brought you such coveted awards, most notably the declaration of your work as part of Quebec's national treasure in 2012?*

I've spent a lot of time analysing my own music, trying to identify what it is that my Canadian listeners have recognized in it as its "Slavic soul". Its melodic and modal qualities are of an entirely secondary importance, if not tertiary. I think what's prominent in my music is first and foremost character: a cohabitation of finesse and boldness (coming from its dual Mediterranean-carnavalesque nature), then rhythm (stemming from Serbian language/speech), and play, in terms of playing and dancing alike. As well as another important thing that Western contemporary music has forgotten about: joy.

*6. Your oeuvre encompasses various genres: opera, chamber music, theatre music, solo works, etc. Do you cherish special affinities for certain genres in particular? Which medium would you consider the best suited to your brand of musical expression?*

"The stage is my playground." I'm attracted to whatever takes place on a stage, from the visually simplest and artistically most abstract (musicians on a stage) to the most complex (opera). I'm especially attracted to opera precisely



due to the sensory complexity it engenders, as well as to the way it combines all those different arts.

7. *Given that you pursued a career in acting while you were still living in Yugoslavia and that you are an avid lover of drama and theatre direction, do you perhaps perceive that other arts, especially stage arts, influence your creativity? Where do you find inspiration?*

I must admit to you that I do not compose like a composer, that is, like a person who has only musical ideas in her head. When composing, I maintain an insight into the work in its entirety, as a dramatic event, which in fact may apply to any work of art where *time* is an important parameter (theatre, film, music). And music, as the most abstract art, is well-suited to playing precisely with time, where we, composers, try to have fun with the perception of time, trying to fool our audiences by repeating sequences, returning to places we've already been to, but differently, and in other ways that are known only to us, composers (she smiles). And the most important thing, in my view, is precisely the dramatic event and its staging. And how to achieve a genuine dramatic event in time? I often quote my favourite filmmaker, Werner Herzog, who, responding to a question from a friend of mine, a young Canadian filmmaker, *how he made a fantastic scene in one of his films*, said that the question was wrong. The question should've been: "What happened an hour and seven minutes before that scene occurred?" Of course, this is a story about timing or form. In other words, it isn't just about writing notes that will sound good, but finding the right spot for them in the piece. It's a perennial struggle for me...

8. *Your latest project is your incidental music for the theatre play Margarites. Could you tell us a bit more about that project and your collaboration with the Montreal-based Théâtre Espace Go?*

It was a very interesting experience. The project included not only working with a playwright/dramaturge, but also with a choreographer. This was the famous danseuse Louise Lecavalier, who has definitely changed the course of modern dance worldwide. The wider audience remember her by dancing with David Bowie in the 1980s, but her true mark is her immense energy, which totally pushed the boundaries of the human body and its abilities. Even now, in her 60s, she continues to dance and inspire.



On the other side there were Stéphanie Jasmin, a dramaturge, and Denis Marleau, a famous Quebecois theatre director.

My work was complex because I had to collaborate with all three of them, who had a shared vision, but their paths to that vision were not always the same. It was extremely interesting to observe them and, with a lot of respect, to try to understand them. I'm really happy with the result.

*9. You often receive commissions to write new works, not only from solo performers, but also from ensembles and numerous Canadian institutions. Do you see a challenge in that? What is the most difficult aspect of composing a commissioned piece? How do you treat the demands that are set before you at the outset: do you see them as facilitating or limiting factors?*

For me, commissions are definitely facilitating factors. I must stress that I choose projects that are closest to my heart, but the more detailed the commission I get, the more natural it feels to compose for it. Like Stravinsky would say: "Give me a lot of restrictions so I can feel free!"

*10. Your opera Svadba, which, apart from performances in Toronto, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Nantes, Perm, Luxembourg, and other cities in Europe and North America, has also had its Belgrade première, was commissioned by Toronto's Queen of Puddings Music Theatre. It was a big success and even seven years after its première, the opera has remained current, with performances in Montreal, at Théâtre Espace Go, and the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts in New York. In your opinion, what is the secret of its success? What is it that makes it so attractive to today's audiences? Is it about the universality of the subject you chose, or is there something more to it?*

I think its audiences have understood that I address them personally and that all of the Serbian influence present in the opera is actually just a way of telling a universal story. The opera is in Serbian, I play with words and syllables, I use the Serbian alphabet as a weapon in a fight, and, ultimately, everything is clear even without translation. I sought to use a local tale to tell a simple universal story, as Tolstoy might say: "If you want to be universal, tell us about your village". Serbian audiences will understand maybe 5% more than other audiences will, but no more than that! With my opera I'm not addressing just a local, Serbian audience. I'm addressing a global audience, which includes Serbian audiences.

11. *What kinds of problems do composers face today?*

The same as before: how to write a good work and be relevant.

Today it's interesting that there is no one musical centre, like Paris was, or Darmstadt or New York. Today, owing to technology, there are micro-centres scattered across the world. The path to the audience is changing, as is the way of life. The arts are combining in new ways and composers are trying to adapt... But not to worry, it's not the first time in the history of humanity, or the last.

12. *Recently you've received a commission from the Canadian Opera Company, the largest and most influential opera house in Canada, to compose an opera for its 2019–20 season. You are the first female composer who has received a commission from them. In your view, is that a sign that women composers are marginalized on today's arts scene? Is there a difference in the treatment of composers based on gender?*

I actually don't see a gender difference in the treatment of men and women composers. But one shouldn't forget that composing is not a "managerial" occupation, where, I think, it's still more difficult for women. For instance, women conductors have it harder than men.

13. *You teach at the University of Montreal. Can you tell us a bit more about your methods of work? What do you insist on? Do you afford your students more opportunity for creativity and freedom than you had? What kinds of things do you encourage in them and do you find satisfaction yourself in your pedagogical work?*

Already in my first year of teaching, I combined my two loves in order to offer my students what I wanted to have as a student: I designed my curricula so as to allow my students to collaborate with the school of modern ballet and, together with choreographers, dancers, as well as instrumentalists from our school, to write ballet music. On the other hand, similarly, although that's a bit more complicated, I put together an opera composition course.

In my individual work with students, I insist on three things I learned from my three professors: the importance of intuition, good organization, and cultivation of one's own musical personality. But probably the most important thing – and this will probably sound sentimental – is that I as a professor should help those young people, who will perhaps work as composers one day, become good human beings.