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IVAN BRKLJAČIĆ: *LOVE!* – SAXOPHONE CONCERTO¹

Abstract: The text examines Ivan Brkljačić's most recent orchestral work entitled: *Love! – Saxophone Concerto*, composed in 2018 as commissioned by the Belgrade Philharmonic. *Love!* was chosen as a universal theme, but also as the moving force behind the composer's personal and creative life. The composition corresponds to the stylistic expression that is characteristic of Brkljačić. His contemporary musical language is complemented by his own quotes and unequivocal references to popular, primarily rock music, but also to pop, jazz, and other genres that have formed his artistic persona. This work will remain chronicled as the first performed concert for saxophone and symphony orchestra in the history of Serbian music.

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Ivan Brkljačić (1977) is one of the most active contemporary Serbian composers of the middle generation. He graduated (2001) and received his master's degree (2005) in composition in the classes of professors Srdjan Hofman and Zoran Erić, and he defended his doctoral art project in 2012, under the mentorship of Srdjan Hofman. His creative oeuvre so far includes works of various genres and instrumental ensembles. He has written dozens of compositions for symphony orchestra, string orchestra, choir, chamber ensembles, and solo instruments and has also contributed significantly in the field of applied music, writing for numerous theatre plays, and a film score for *Ustanička ulica*.²

Love! – Saxophone Concerto is Brkljačić's latest orchestral composition, written in 2018 at the request of the Belgrade Philharmonic. This is the author's second concert work so far and belongs to the same formal framework as his first, diploma work: *IT!-Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*. This genre also includes related works of a somewhat smaller scope and reduced instrumental ensemble: *Fliza* for flute solo and chamber string orchestra (2006) and *Cavatina* for violin and string chamber orchestra (2007).

His Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra was performed by the Belgrade Philharmonic under Russian-Dutch Conductor Daniel Raiskin at the Kolarac Concert Hall on November 16, 2018, with Serbian artist Milan Savić on the solo saxophone.

Due to the fact that this was a commissioned composition, its thematic setting – *Love!* was to a certain degree predetermined. Before starting his work, the composer received certain guidelines from the Belgrade Philharmonic program managers,³ regarding the theme and character of the work, to

² In addition to numerous performances throughout Serbia, Ivan Brkljačić's compositions have been presented in Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada, Sweden, Brazil, the Czech Republic, Italy, Austria, Slovenia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Poland, Germany, Croatia, Macedonia, France, Romania, Hungary, England, Australia, and Hong Kong. According to: <http://www.ivanbrkljacic.com/>

³ The Belgrade Philharmonic's artistic programming team, musicologists Danica Maksimović and Asja Radonjić, M. Sc., together with Chief Conductor Gabriel Feltz, work on creating this orchestra's thematic and conceptual content of the concert seasons and all other programs.

make it in line with the program concept of the Belgrade Philharmonic's concert series. The intention of the authors of the orchestra's concert programs was to provide – through the prism of a contemporary artist – one of the many possible answers to the question of how love, as an eternal human driving force, theme, and creative inspiration, has a different meaning, connotation, context, and interpretation in relation to the viewed time period.

In accordance with his individual stylistic expression, in this composition Brkljačić combines the musical language of the 21st century with certain blends, but also specific associations to pop music. Although the choice of the alto saxophone as his solo instrument complements this colorful image of sounds and ideas in an exemplary way, it is by no means a coincidence. The composer had been working on his idea of writing a concerto intended specifically for the saxophone, an instrument that has been intrinsically associated with the theme of love, especially in contemporary popular culture.⁴ Brkljačić was also motivated by the need to enrich our domestic music literature written for this instrument, especially since only one concerto had been written for alto saxophone and symphony orchestra before that. Unfortunately, that particular concerto, written in 1955 by Petar Stojanović,⁵ has never been performed.⁶

The musical language of Brkljačić's Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra is characteristic of his stylistic expression. It is a postmodern work, with clear reflections on popular music, structurally clear, with a comprehensive texture and a formal conception. As the author himself states, the form of the

⁴ Although the saxophone made its appearance in symphonic performance practice at the end of the 19th century, mostly in French music – Georges Bizet, Léo Delibes, and Gilles Massenet – it was not until the first half of the 20th century that it achieved its full application, often with key and impressive solo performances. It is often featured in the works of Richard Strauss, Béla Bartók, Maurice Ravel, Dmitry Shostakovich, Sergei Rachmaninoff, and Sergei Prokofiev, whose ballet *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most impressive examples of the use of the saxophones in classical symphonic music. In the same period, in addition to classical music literature, this instrument began to be associated with jazz and other popular genres. In the middle of the last century, it became the personification of various love contents and romantic allusions, but also an association with jazz and other popular and lighter music genres.

⁵ Vlastimir Peričić, *Muzički stvaraoči u Srbiji*, Beograd, Prosveta, 1969, 535.

⁶ In Serbian music literature, there is also a Concerto for Saxophone and String Orchestra, written in 2014. Its author is Ivan Jevtić, but in the case of Stojanović and Brkljačić it is a symphony orchestra, so in that context, the abovenamed works fall into different categories.

work and its general musical progression follow the idea of a specific and very special kind of love – *inimitable, passionate, and above all crazy*.⁷ It is written as a single movement, with a mosaic structure, and on the macro level it is divided into nine parts,⁸ in which uniqueness is achieved by omitting any repetition of the musical material, in other words, by preserving a constant progression. Even though the composer himself says there is no repetition in the musical flow (but only embellishments in the constant progression), a musical material that is similar in its various components and manifestations is, nevertheless, present as a red thread that ties the work together.

When it comes to the treatment of the solo section and its relationship with the orchestra, Brkljačić's rich experience in writing for the saxophone and his long-term collaboration with soloist Milan Savić, are evident. Their cooperation lasted from the very beginning of the work on the solo part, composed specifically for this artist.

The composer treats the saxophone as an instrument capable of great virtuosity, which, by changing the character of the different sections, dominates over the musical material. The section is written in full accordance with the technical possibilities of the saxophone, and the dialogues with individual instrument groups or the whole ensemble change in relation to the presented material. Any virtuosity in the solo cadence in the tradition of classical concert performances has been avoided in this part, with the exception of a short section of *Liberamente* at the very end. However, the performer was challenged on several occasions to play virtuoso segments that would have

⁷ From the author's comment published in the Belgrade Philharmonic's program booklet on November 16, 2018 (a complete commentary on the work can be found in the preface to the score of *Love! – saxophone concerto*, Belgrade, Rights and Royalties Publishing Company, 2019). Recording is available at the YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7p0o-T3G5w&t=1279s>

⁸ The nine parts of the composition are divided on the microplan as follows: part 1 (bars 1–135) – orchestral introduction and saxophone entry, part 2 (bars 136–247), part 3 (items 248–319) – in this segment, ideas based on folklore elements / *starogradska muzika* motifs permeate), part 4 (bars 320–384) – a section in which the author presents his personal relationship to the string quartet, wind quintet and string orchestra, through self-citations from earlier compositions), part 5 (bars 385–439) – here the composer uses a model of numerous love songs based on I-VI-IV-V degree, part 6 (bars 44–467) – instead of a virtuoso cadence, in this segment of the musical flow follows the solo as a break, in the style of Sade Adu, part 7 (bars 468–561), part 8 (bars 562–599) – a paraphrase of the performance of the group *Queen* at *Live Aid*, which will be discussed in more detail below and part 9 – (bars 600–666). Taken from an interview with the author in October of 2020.

been integrated into a classical cadence, if it had really existed in its expected form and scope.⁹

The musical content of the solo part is based on passages and phrases that are repeated within each section, sometimes rhythmically, sometimes melodically, and sometimes even with several combined components, giving the resulting sound an impression of repetitiveness.

Brkljačić also fully demonstrates his knowledge of the nature of the instrument: its range, volume, timbre, and its technical possibilities, at the same time adapting them to the personal affinity of the soloist for whom he had written the work. The orchestral accompaniment lends colour to the solo section and complements it, guiding the listener through the different moods and atmosphere of each individual section, while the instruments of the symphony orchestra are placed in the service of achieving the desired effect and adequate tonal character.

The relationship between soloist and orchestra hinges on delivering the thematic material, but the author clearly gives priority to the saxophone, which, like a narrator, tells its love story, *leading* the listener through its musical flow. His narrative is multi-layered and reveals different levels of the composer's inner being. Commenting on the work and its concept, the composer himself made reference to this multi-layering. The first layer indicates the *sparks of love that can be felt at a rock concert in the rapport created between a super star and his audience*.¹⁰ Brkljačić defines the next level as an affinity to classical chamber ensembles, such as a string quartet, wind quintet, or string orchestra, which he materialized with self-citations of his *Mokranjac – Variations for String Quartet on the theme from "Njest svjat"* written in 2010, and the *Flobchoffy* for wind quintet written in 1998. The next level refers to his love of the classical saxophone, an instrument to which he has dedicated many of his compositions (*Cutting Edge* /2004/, *Quattro temperamenti* /2011/, *Saxkolo* /2015/, *Sax&Sex* /2015/ and *Peter and New York* /2020/).¹¹ As a special layer, Brkljačić states his love of the geographical space to which

⁹ Such segments can be found in the 2nd and 3rd part of the composition, in the solo (from bar 440), then at the end of the 7th part, and finally in the section *Liberamente*, which has the role of a short solo cadence (bar 648). From a conversation with the author, conducted in October of 2020.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Taken from the list of works: <http://www.ivanbrkljacic.com/kompozicije/>

he belongs and in which he lives and works.¹² This can be seen in his use of folklore fragments in the style of *starogradska muzika* (urban traditional folk music),¹³ which are not so obvious in the sound result but are noticeable at the conceptual level: in an individual motif or some passage enriched with a characteristic ornament in the solo section. Finally, by the composer's own admission, woven into the musical fabric of his works is his completely subjective and personal inclination toward the Belgrade Philharmonic – the orchestra with whose interpretations he grew up, formed his musical taste, and learned the composer's craft – as well as his personal liking of the soloist, for whom he wrote this work, and who, with his interpretive skills, represents a worthy creative inspiration.

Associations with popular music are not unusual in Brkljačić's creative oeuvre. Examples are numerous, direct and indirect, more or less subtly incorporated into the musical fabric or representing a complete leap from the genre of classical music (*Where Are the DLM /2005/, Sun King for Female Choir (Homage to the Beatles) /2006-07/, BGBA Ro(c)k /2016/*).¹⁴ These influences stem from the author's affinity for the popular genre, primarily rock music, with which he grew up first as a listener, and then as an active performer in his own (amateur) band, which has been active for more than two decades. The synthesis of these different influences, along with his classical education, resulted in very clear references to Brkljačić's musical idols – *The Beatles* and *Queen*. Thus, for example, a respite from the repetitive flow in the central section, although in fact a self-quote from a theme from the composer's *Mokranjac – Variations for String Quartet on the theme from Njst svjat*, discreetly resembles the famous Beatles hit *All You Need Is Love*. This theme presented in chords, in a classical manner, is delivered by a quartet of solo string instruments from the orchestra, to which the bass trombone and the tuba are discreetly added, introducing the listener to a new, contrasting, musical material (Example 1).¹⁵

As a direct homage to his *musical love*, in the penultimate section, the composer paraphrases a motif from *Queen's* legendary performance at the *Live Aid* concert at Wembley in 1985.¹⁶ Brkljačić takes the dialogue between

¹² Ivan Brkljačić. Op. cit.

¹³ From a discussion with author in October of 2020.

¹⁴ List of works, Op. cit.

¹⁵ The examples are based on the piano reduction produced by the author.

¹⁶ *Live Aid* was a legendary charity rock concert held on July 13, 1985 at two locations,

Example 1: Self-citation from the *Mokranjac – Variations* for string quartet on the theme from *Njest svjat*

320 *Sostenuto* ♩ = 52-56

The image displays two systems of musical notation. Each system consists of two staves: the top staff is for the Alto Saxophone (A. Sax) and the bottom staff is for the Piano (Pft.).

- System 1:** The A. Sax staff contains a whole rest. The Pft. staff begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a series of chords and a melodic line. A mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic is indicated for a section of the melodic line, and a piano (*p*) dynamic is indicated for the final chord.
- System 2:** The A. Sax staff contains a whole rest. The Pft. staff continues with chords and a melodic line. Dynamics include mezzo-forte (*mf*), fortissimo (*sfz*), and piano (*p*).

Queen frontman Freddie Mercury at the start of the song *Hammer to Fall* (through a kind of variation on the theme of the song), and hundreds of thousands of people in the stadium, and transmits it to the concert hall, where the soloist delivers the phrases, which the orchestra then repeats. Thus, the saxophonist assumes the role of a kind of rock star and the orchestra becomes the accompaniment, in other words, the audience (Example 2).

the most important of which were in London and Philadelphia. The organizers of these concerts were rock musicians Bob Geldof and Midge Ure, with the goal of raising funds to help the hungry in Ethiopia and other African countries. Over \$127 million was collected, and the broadcast of the concert was one of the largest ever realized satellite and TV broadcasts – it is estimated that it was watched live by over 1.5 billion viewers in 110 countries around the world. According to: <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/live-aid-concert>

Example 2: Paraphrase of a motif from a Queen performance at Wembley in 1985

Allegretto ♩ = 112

A. Sax. *ff*

Pft. *p*

570

A. Sax.

Pft.

A. Sax.

Pft.

580

vib.

A. Sax.

Pft.

Example 2 Continued

The musical score for Example 2 Continued consists of two staves: A. Sax. (Alto Saxophone) and Pft. (Piano). The score is divided into five measures, each with a different time signature: 3/4, 3/4, 4/4, 4/4, and 2/4. The A. Sax. staff begins with a rest in the first measure, followed by a melodic line starting in the second measure with a dynamic marking of *ord.* (forte). The Pft. staff provides accompaniment with chords and rhythmic patterns. The saxophone part features a complex rhythmic pattern in the fourth measure, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes.

The dialogue between Freddie Mercury and his audience ends with the singer's witty expletive and a tentative musical victory of the audience, while the soloist and the orchestra in Brkljačić's score conclude their contest without a winner or a loser, diving together into the final section of the composition. Their parting is sudden and cordial, leaving the feeling that new dialogues are yet to follow.

In addition to this, in the musical flow there is a very clear and unambiguous echo of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, which is also not an isolated case in the work of Ivan Brkljačić, bearing in mind that in his early creative phase he paid direct tribute to the great composer in his "Summertime", *Variations on Gershwin*. In his *Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra*, he makes a clear musical allusion to the famous opening solo in Gershwin's original played on the clarinet, whose timbre and performance style are suggestive of the sound of the saxophone. Today, this phrase is associated with the atmosphere of New York's Broadway and jazz standards from American musicals, of which Gershwin is one of the most famous representatives (Example 3).

Ivan Brkljačić's *Love! – Saxophone Concerto* represents a valuable contribution to Serbian concert music literature, especially music intended for wind instruments. In the history of Serbian music, this achievement will be recorded as the first performed concerto for saxophone and symphony orchestra.

Viewed from the aspect of the composer's individual oeuvre, *Love!* represents the personification of Ivan Brkljačić's path of life and artistic creation so far. It presents the synthesis of the acquired knowledge, experience, and skills of a mature composer, but it also represents all the external and internal, visible and invisible layers that make up a modern man. Brkljačić's *Love!* is not hermetic, nor quasi-academic; occasionally it sounds popular, but never trivial or with the intention of instantly currying favor with the potential

Example 3: Tonal allusion to the famous passage from Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: A. Sax. (Alto Saxophone) and Pft. (Piano). The saxophone part is written on a single staff with a treble clef. It begins with a series of notes marked 'Improvisatolo' and 'Glissando', with a dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo). The notes are connected by a long, sweeping line that suggests a glissando effect. The piano part consists of two staves (treble and bass clefs) with rests in all measures, indicating that the piano is silent during this passage.

listener. It is a sincere testimony of a composer and a man who communicates openly with the environment he is addressing, hoping that anyone who so desires can connect with the emotion that the work conveys. That is precisely why this authentic statement guarantees the Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra something that every great artistic work aspires to achieve – a long life on the concert podium.

Translated by Bojan Drndić

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Summary

The text deals with the latest orchestral work by Serbian composer Ivan Brkļjačić: *Love! – saxophone concerto*, which he wrote in 2018 as commissioned by the Belgrade Philharmonic. The work premiered at the end of the same year and was the first concerto for saxophone and symphony orchestra in Serbian music history.

Love, as an eternal and always current theme, which has occupied artists of different historical epochs to this day, was the inspiration for patron and artist alike to create this composition. The work is postmodern. Its contemporary musical language

is complemented by self-citations and unequivocal references to popular, primarily rock music, but also to pop, jazz, so-called old-town music, and other genres that formed Brkljačić's artistic persona. In creating the composition, the author worked closely with the soloist, which resulted in an expertly written saxophone section, fully in tune with the capabilities of the instrument and its potential players. The formal concept of the Saxophone Concerto is mosaic-like, and the musical flow brings constantly new thematic material, while avoiding repetition. Nevertheless, the similarity in the thematic and motivic work results with the sound impression of repetitiveness. References to popular music are clear: as a direct dedication to his musical love, Brkljačić paraphrases the dialogue between *Queen* frontman Freddie Mercury and hundreds of thousands of people at the legendary *Live Aid* concert at Wembley Stadium in 1985, transferring it to the concert hall in the form of a dialogue between the soloist and the orchestra. Also, the work contains an echo of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* in the form of a musical allusion to the famous opening clarinet solo in the original, giving the composition a discreet jazz sound and Broadway atmosphere. Finally, it is important to mention the application of self-citation in the work, in which Brkljačić returns to his earlier works, *Flobchoffy* for wind quintet and *Mokranjac – Variations* for string quartet on the theme from *Njest svjat*, which, in the context of the Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra, represent a respite from the constant musical progression.

The composition *Love!* is the personification of Ivan Brkljačić's path of life and artistic creation so far. It is the synthesis of the acquired knowledge, experience, and skills of a mature composer, but it also represents all the external and internal, visible and invisible layers that make up a modern man. The authenticity of the artistic expression that the Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra guarantees something that every great artistic work aspires to achieve – a long life on the concert podium.