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THE OEUVRE OF ISIDORA ŽEBELJAN

A Survey, Classification, Specificities, and Significance (II)

Abstract: In line with the extraordinary international significance that the oeuvre of Isidora Žebeljan commands in Serbia and abroad, the article begins by discussing the essence of that significance, highlighting the most important artistic accomplishments of Isidora's music as well as its unique traits that have played a direct role in the assertive breakthrough that Serbian music has made on the international stage. Specifically, it analyses three creative periods in Isidora's oeuvre, discussing the most important works and unique characteristics of Isidora's music and its originality, along with relevant facts from her biography.

Keywords: Isidora Žebeljan, originality, commissions, operas, unpredictable flow of musical contents, musical surprise, elements of folk music tradition, popular music

THE INTERNATIONAL (MATURE) PHASE in the compositional oeuvre of Isidora Žebeljan began in 2002 with her opera *Zora D.* and continued until the end of her life. Spanning almost 20 years, this phase saw the emanation of Isidora's mature, highly original type of compositional expression, entirely overlapping with her international career, the most versatile and significant in the history of Serbian art music. Within this phase, one may further dis-

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tinguish three subphases, each one of them marked by at least one capital, central piece, namely, an opera.

The opera *Zora D.* can and must be discussed from various perspectives, each one of them highly significant for Serbian opera as well as for Serbian music in general. By looking at this work of music in detail, from an aspect that exceeds our local context, we enter the domain of contemporary phenomena on the global operatic stage, to which Žebeljan, with her five operas composed for international productions, gave a major contribution. In 2002, along with another three works, *Zora D.* was selected for staging and financial support at a prestigious international competition sponsored by the London-based Genesis Foundation. *Zora D.* was thus composed as a commission from the Genesis Foundation, while the first staging was produced by Opera Studio Nederland and Wiener Kammeroper, with its world première taking place on 15 June 2003 at Frascati Theater in Amsterdam – an event that qualifies in Serbian music as one of its most significant international achievements.¹ In music-historical terms, this was the first opera by a Serbian composer to have its world première abroad, exactly a hundred years after the première of the first Serbian opera ever to be staged: Stanislav Binički's *At Dawn* (*Na uranku* – На уранку). The first staging of *Zora D.* was co-directed by Sir David Pountney, one of the most prominent opera directors of our time, and German director Nicola Raab. The production had more than 20 performances in five European countries. The libretto for *Zora D.* was co-authored by Isidora Žebeljan, Milica Žebeljan, and Borislav Čičovački, based on a TV film script by Dušan Ristić, with verses by Jovan Dučić, Miloš Crnjanski, and Milena Pavlović Barili. In terms of genre, the libretto is a blend of thriller, melodrama, and mystery, with a pronounced presence of fantastic elements.

The first and most prominent peculiarity about this music is its extraordinary and highly distinctive type of melodic invention. The uniqueness of its melodies is tinged with micro-elements of folk music, of Serbian (Vojvodina), Romanian, and South Balkan origins. However, these folk-music particles (modality, distinctive ornamentation, mixed/additive rhythms, melodic endings on the second degree, etc.) are fitted into the musical whole and in-

¹ The book *Историја српске музике* (“History of Serbian Music”, Belgrade, Завод за уџбенике, 2007, 457) erroneously states that *Zora D.* was premièred in Vienna. While it is true that the opera's original production had 12 repeats in Vienna in 2003, with one of them inaugurating the Wiener Kammeroper's 50th season, the world première of *Zora D.* did not take place in Austria's capital city.

corporated in Isidora's musical language in such a way that they provide it with additional peculiarity and colour, at the same time coming across as an integral part of the composer's creative being, endowed with a musical awareness of its native part of the world. A pronounced streak in the opera's harmony is the presence of peculiar diminished-fifth chords. They are a result of using folk-music scales with augmented seconds, although the latter are almost absent from the opera's melodies. The music's rhythmic-metric component is complex, but naturally derived from the melody and characterized by mixed (additive) rhythms and variable metres. The opera owes its rich rhythms to the prominent presence of percussion, whose parts are often quite autonomous from the underlying rhythm of the melodies. These rhythmic patterns in the percussion section are built into the overall musical edifice by way of sequencing multiple melodic-rhythmic tracks, or layers, in parallel, producing a multilayered sound. That is one of the most important rhythmic traits of this opera, as well as its peculiar orchestration. Very often, the rhythmic component has the character of a dance, but one can never quite recognize the exact type of that dance. Instead of resorting to usual orchestration procedures, Isidora sought to accomplish striking sound colours, thereby transferring real dramatic tension from the words to the music and especially to the orchestra, achieving a fast-paced alternation of different emotional states. In terms of internal formal structure, the opera constitutes, so to speak, an endless series of melodies. In some places, although seldom, its melodic entities exhibit the contours of an aria. An outstanding musical characteristic of *Zora D.* is so-called musical surprise, an element of Žebeljan's compositional language and script, which is seldom encountered in the literature. Abruptness and surprise are important traits in Žebeljan's music. Every emotional state in the opera constitutes a musical cluster of micro-states, different in their primary effects, but combined into a natural, organic whole.² Therefore, those listening to *Zora D.* will never, in their initial auditory experience, *hear* dark or bleak music portraying tragic or dramatic events, but will be able to *feel*, by listening to the music, the soundtrack of tragedy present in the totality of the sound offered in the work. Listeners will not pursue that track consciously; rather, they will be led by it and brought to the right emotional stimulus that they will be unable to resist by reason alone. Therein lies the wizardry of Isidora Žebeljan's music. Such an expression is a mode of musical

² Isidora Žebeljan, "O mogućem načinu komponovanja opere danas", in: *Dok slušamo muziku, sadašnjost je večna*, Novi Sad, Akademska knjiga, 2021.

fantasy, that is, magic musical realism. At certain points in the opera, that impression is achieved by means of a procedure that one might liken to Sergei Eisenstein's so-called intellectual montage, a procedure based on combining two seemingly unrelated images/motives, whose emotional conditions are not causally linked, but whose interference provokes a third, entirely new, and more comprehensive emotional state.³

Following her award at the London-based Genesis Foundation's opera competition and, in particular, after the extraordinary success of *Zora D.*, which was performed the same year on the stage of Wiener Kammeroper,⁴ the international composition career of Isidora Žebeljan experienced a meteoric rise. Already that same year, in 2003, Isidora was commissioned by the Genesis Foundation to compose a chamber music piece, its première planned for the opening of "The Passion", an exhibition of works by Bill Viola, one of the most prominent visual artists of our time, at the National Gallery in London. For this occasion, Isidora composed a quintet for clarinet and string quartet, titled *Song of a Traveller in the Night*, which became one of the most frequently performed pieces of Serbian music abroad. The work was premièred in London in 2003, by the Spanish clarinetist Joan Enrik Lluna and members of the Academy of Saint Martin in the Fields chamber orchestra; subsequently, the work became part of the standard repertoire of the renowned Brodsky Quartet. In her commentary marking the première, Isidora wrote that "the performance of the composition should create the impression of a journey, in which there is a succession of different landscapes, whereas the observer is always the same person (whose mood, admittedly, can change during the journey)".⁵ This was Isidora's first work in which the originality of a unique form, that is, structure expressing authentic musical content, manifested itself in its complete guise, which came to feature in all subsequent works by Isidora as a special, easily recognizable quality.

The essence of authenticity in Žebeljan's mature compositional style lies in the relationship between her works' musical content and form, that is, in the way their musical content shapes their musical form. In her pieces, form is entirely subservient to the *unpredictable* flow of their musical content.

³ Борислав Чичовачки [Borislav Čičovački]: "Зора Д. Исидоре Жебељан – пут ка новој опери", *Музикологија*, 4, 2004, 223–245.

⁴ The opera *Zora D.* was performed at the Wiener Kammeroper along with Sir Peter Maxwell Davies's chamber opera *Mr. Emmet Takes a Walk*. The libretto was written by Sir David Pountney, who also directed the production.

⁵ Isidora Žebeljan, *Song of a Traveller in the Night*, Milano, Ricordi, 2005.

Here, unpredictability refers to the abrupt or sudden way that the individual segments of her works' musical contents succeed one another, approximating the formal construction of a short story or film – a series of diverse (musical) events that lend sound to an experiential whole. That involves alternating various thematic motives. They are not transformed into themes, or positioned so as to contrast one another, nor do they originate from different stylistic epochs; therefore, the form they produce bears no resemblance to a collage. The form of these works emerges by means of connecting thematic motives, whose kinship lies primarily in their musically narrative function, capable of producing a musical whole reminiscent of a short story or film. That is why Žebeljan's music is athematic or even multi-thematic, that is, multi-motivic, with each individual motive constituting a paragraph in an imaginary novella or a film sequence. Her pieces, at the same time, feature no extra-musical programmes – their only programme stems from a unique sequence of musical motives. The structure of these motives comprises a thoroughly distinct rhythmic unit, built into an irregular (additive) and variable metric flow, itself a consequence of the melodic configuration. The origin of such a complex rhythmic texture lies in the archaic multilayered rhythmic heritage of the Balkans and even the Old World as a whole, but its concrete expression in Žebeljan's works is new and unique, inimitable. The successive literal repetition of individual motives takes this music into a relationship with the formal structure of contemporary dance music as well, thus forging another link between the past and the present. The rhythmic-melodic peculiarities of every independent motive are pronounced to the highest possible degree, while all other musical elements are subjected to their rule. That gives rise to a new type of *monody*, one that is motivically heterogeneous, that is, multi-motivic.⁶

On the heels of the Genesis Foundation commission, Isidora received another one, from the then artistic director of the Venice Biennale, the celebrated Italian composer Giorgio Battistelli, for an orchestral work, to be performed at the 2004 Biennale. For this famous festival, Isidora wrote *The Horses of Saint Mark, an Illumination for Orchestra*, which was premiered in Venice on 22 October 2004 by the Friuli Venezia Giulia Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Christoph Poppen. Today, this piece is the most frequently performed work of Serbian orchestral music abroad, with performances so

⁶ Borislav Čičovački, "Music of Isidora Žebeljan, 'The Horses of Saint Mark', orchestral music by Isidora Žebeljan", CD booklet (7776702), Osnabrück, CPO, 2011.

far by orchestras in Italy, the Czech Republic (Janáček Philharmonic), Sweden (Gothenburg Symphony), Serbia and the western Balkans, as well as Britain, where the work was performed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Michael Seal. Recordings of the composition have been released by German labels CPO and Deutsche Grammophon. A condensed form, comprising a series of shorter and longer motives, intended to provide the work with a unified narrative flow, was fully manifested in Žebeljan's orchestral music for the first time in this piece. The opening thematic section, with its hymnic character, reminds one of a Byzantine sacred chant and, given that the same section, somewhat modified, reappears right before the end of the piece, it acquires the significance of the original skeleton of the entire piece, affirming thereby the impression that *The Horses of Saint Mark* are an expression of the author's inspiration by the *spirit* of Byzantium. The listeners of this piece are not positioned as active collaborators: they are *not* supposed to *read* the events, but to *watch* them, like fantastic scenes in a surrealist film. That is why the work's formal structure is a sequence of musical thumbnails, which, each one of them individually, bear their own visual, narrative, and dramaturgical mark, but still serve the unbroken thread of the work's musical narrative. Its structure essentially rests on one of the oldest forms of folk musical practice in the Levant and beyond, in all of human civilization – the pairing of song and dance. Through a peculiar blend of archaic elements (the principle of repetition and two-part writing) and modern elements (peculiar rhythmic), the composer re-examines, juxtaposes, condenses, and expands two types of thematic sections (sung and danced), producing a musical entity reminiscent of contemporary dance music. The piece features lucid surprise elements, unexpected rhythmic and melodic twists, with which Žebeljan engenders a fantastic world of her own. Each section in the piece is accomplished by means of a brilliant exploitation of the orchestra's sound spheres, rendering each section striking in a self-contained way, and thereby the entire story as well. The coda itself, labelled a *Hymn*, employing the entire orchestra (which sounds like an orchestra *a tre*, although it is actually *a due*), is irresistibly reminiscent of a song from the wilds of Transylvania. A particular source of sonic tension in the coda comes from an unexpected piano solo set over a crescendo in the bass drums (*gran cassa*), which suddenly brings the domain of this exciting musical narration from a full shot to a close-up, like in a film.

The Minstrel's Dance, a composition for chamber orchestra, constitutes the first high point in the sublimation of Žebeljan's unique style. Commis-

sioned by the London-based Genesis Foundation, it was composed in 2005 for the Academy of Saint Martin in the Fields, who premièred the work at London's Wigmore Hall under the leadership of Isidora Žebeljan. Choosing to focus in her artistic exploration on minstrels, mediaeval travelling actors and musicians, Isidora outlined the sheer breadth of the musical domain accommodating the searching spirit of her invention, since the activity of minstrels informs all aspects of human life – subjected to their fantasy, everything becomes play. Nonetheless, Isidora did carve out the space where this play takes place into three segments, supplying the work's three movements with their titles: *In the Inn*, *Dance for the Dead*, and *In the Field*. The opening movement, featuring a series of different thematic motives, achieves a virtuosic and astonishing condensation of musical material in a unique and invariably surprising alternation of metres. Amid this turbulent musical narration, as an excellent connoisseur of various musical instruments' unique traits, Isidora exploits the abilities of each instrument to the highest possible degree, by using, for instance, prolonged glissandi in the winds and microtones in the strings, manipulating their top registers with ample imagination. Especially prominent is the complex percussion part, set on surprising slippages from the underlying rhythm, in the form of a separate rhythmic track running in parallel. The second movement was inspired by a custom still practised by the Vlach people, involving ritual graveside dances for the dead, as a remnant from their ancient Roman past. Since this section of the piece is about imitating a ritual dance with certain rules, the movement involves the repetition of individual motives, each time with some modifications, separated by a series of motives evoking a wild, unrestrained dance, at times assuming the characteristics of a ritual summoning of the dead. The third movement is a dance in an unbounded space, outdoors, in a field. That is why its thematic motives are broader, sometimes abruptly and unexpectedly repeated. Its rhythm is so complex that it reminds one of the elusive and indistinct character of rhythmic structures in Romanian Gypsy music. The closing of the movement coalesces into a collective round dance, whereas the coda itself comprises a hymnic song played by the winds, replete with the melodic essence of Romanian folk music. The coda reminds one of the closing images from Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal*, where a group of minstrels sets out on the road, leaving in their wake only the shadow of steps that form part of incantations performed for the dead.

In this subphase in Žebeljan's oeuvre separating two operas, apart from *New Songs of Lada* for soprano and string orchestra (or string quartet), composed in 2006 as a re-arrangement of her *Rukoveti*, another significant accomplishment was ***Ghost from the Pumpkin***, an *Incantation for Brass Quintet* written for London Brass and premiered in London the same year. In this piece, melodic-rhythmic-motivic density is even more pronounced, the essence of sound is even more laid bare, which was accomplished by using aliquot colouring in the brass; the unpredictable abruptness of the motives is even more assertive, as well as closeness to pagan rituals, presented here in an especially seductive way by using the highly diverse traits of Žebeljan's chosen performing forces: from a wild, unrestrained sonic frenzy to contemplative, almost transcendental sounds.

During this period in her life, having already received a commission from Bregenz Festival, one of the most important opera festivals in the world, to compose a dark comic opera, Žebeljan signed a contract with Casa Ricordi of Milan at the behest of its management, granting this publishing house, one of the world's leading, oldest, and most influential, exclusive rights to publish her scores. Also in 2005, she had an artistic residence at the Civitella Ranieri castle in Umbria (Italy), as a fellow of the eponymous New York City-based foundation for supporting the creativity of leading world artists.

The opera that marked the beginning of the second subphase in Žebeljan's mature creative period, a joint commission from Bregenz Festival and the London-based Genesis Foundation, as the first (and so far the only) stage work by a Serbian composer that this renowned festival has ever commissioned (and staged), was her opera ***The Marathon***, based on a film script and play by Dušan Kovačević. It is one of the most significant works in Žebeljan's oeuvre. The libretto, composed of excerpts taken from the play and film script *Maratonci trče počasni krug* (official international title: *The Marathon Family*), was written, like the libretto for her preceding opera, by Isidora Žebeljan, Milica Žebeljan, and Borislav Čičovački, but the characters and plot underwent certain modifications, departing from the (film) template: in order to establish a sort of balance between male and female characters, the father of the main female character, Kristina, was replaced with her aunt (alto), while, for the sake of achieving a dramatically coherent story suitable for an opera, all the episodes related to the construction of the family's crematorium facility were omitted.

In many respects, ***The Marathon*** constitutes an apex of sorts in Žebeljan's unique mode of stylistic expression; in stylistic terms, it takes its cue from

her pieces written after the opera *Zora D*. The underlying structure of musical form in Isidora's works, which essentially consist of series of longer or shorter musical motives aimed at producing a musical work with a unified narrative flow, possesses many features that call for staging, which means that Isidora perfectly adapted her unique formal expression to the condensed, fast-paced narration of this opera, whose scenes unfold at an almost cinematic pace and with a similar degree of suggestiveness. Žebeljan's ingenious feel for musical dramaturgy effectively turned this music into a crystalline grid accumulating a huge amount of energy in the form of spiritual and emotional-passionate musical joy, as well as that of life in general. The melodic-rhythmic structure of the motives in the opera is expressed with complex *aksak* (additive) rhythms in a supremely bold, daring, and inimitably authentic succession of extremely variable (asymmetric) metres, always endowed with a striking melodic component, which often discreetly relies on the peculiarities of Balkan folklore. Another striking feature of this music is that certain elements of traditional music that are present in it, without offering a key for divining their origins, create the sonic impression that the music is based on the folklore of some unidentified, imaginary peoples. That impression is certainly enhanced by Žebeljan's liberal, deft, and carefully thought out use of modality of various origins, including infra-pentatonic series, sometimes reminiscent of scales derived from folk musical practice, such as, for instance, Gypsy, Istrian, and different modes of the octatonic scale, as well as harmonic combinations that are closer to contemporary pop music, which is always subtly present in Isidora's music. Occasionally, for instance, in the scene featuring the opening of the will, the three readers/singers, belonging to three different generations of the deceased's offspring, sing, i.e. read the will in a way that, for each one of them individually, corresponds to the tradition of Serbian vernacular bourgeois songs, that is, to "their time", the time of their youth, which in the opera's structure represents a sort of psychological portrait in sound of each one of the three protagonists. Due to these musical characteristics and often extremely fast tempi, the vocal parts are all highly virtuosic, which applies both to those sections that approximate the form of aria and the opera's many vocal ensembles. One of the main ways Isidora treats the text in her vocal-instrumental works is by avoiding a literal, chronological delivery of the lines. This makes the sound of her operas, including *The Marathon*, even more flexible, because the listener's attention is constantly focused on the music and its narration. Thus in *The Marathon*, for instance, there is a section, which might be called an aria, sung by Mirko,

the main character, set on a single word: *deo* (“part”, as in his share of the inheritance)!

The audio capabilities of the opera’s chamber orchestra, comprising 17 musicians, its wind, string, and percussion sections are used to the highest possible degree, not only in terms of using related instruments (piccolo flute, cor anglais, bass clarinet, e-flat clarinet, contrabassoon), but also, and primarily, by using unusual or previously unused instruments and sounds. In this score, Isidora makes use of ocarinas, a zurna, reed, Theremin, musical saw, as well as the noise emitted by a vacuum cleaner. In addition, *The Marathon*, for the first time, makes use of a newly conceived instrument from the oboe family, constructed, according to Isidora’s desire and conception, by Borislav Čičovački. This instrument, dubbed *oboe-sopile*, was built by combining the modern oboe with a cane reed taken from the Istrian folk instrument called *sopile*, a sort of folk oboe. The oboe-sopile has a piercing sound, like that of a sopile, but, unlike the latter, may be played chromatically, while the sound itself is almost always on the verge of non-temperament, which was, along with microtonality, Isidora’s favoured domain for sonic explorations. The opera’s orchestration assigns a very important role to two trumpets, a tuba, and percussion, which form the basis of the turbulent music of this opera, a breathless kind of music, as described by a reviewer writing for the *Neue Zeitung für Musik*:

The score of Isidora Žebeljan’s *The Marathon* sounds both contemporary and locally as well as internationally recognizable... This music is like a frenzied fantasy, shouting and weeping, sneering and hitting, celebrating and bursting out, moving between the sound of Balkan brass bands and Kletzmer music, a Gypsy idiom and bebop, between Belgrade and New York... The authentic character of this twisted mix of styles is at all times distanced from postmodern likability.⁷

Following its extremely successful world première at Bregenz Festival on 20 August 2008, the same production, staged by the German director Nicola Raab, had several performances in Vienna as well as at BEMUS festival in Belgrade.

Right before completing the score of *The Marathon*, Isidora received a commission from the International Horn Society to compose a piece for horn and string orchestra. The result was the *Dance of the Wooden Sticks*, a

⁷ Otto Paul Burkhardt, “Bestatter-Satire mit Balkan-Brass-Touch”, *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 5, 2008, 70.

piece whose music, akin to that of *The Marathon*, in a unique, virtuosic, and excitingly breakneck way in rhythmic and melodic terms, represents the main features of the central period in the development of Isidora's mature, original musical expression. This piece, which is also available in a version arranged for horn and string quintet, has been performed by some of the leading hornists of our time, such as, for instance, Stefan Dohr, the principal horn of the Berlin Philharmonic, and Hervé Joulain, the principal horn of the National Orchestra of France.⁸

This was immediately followed by another commission, from the Brodsky Quartet, the Netherlands Chamber Choir, as well as a group of co-producers clustered around the Musiktheater im Revier opera house in Gelsenkirchen (Germany), for a new opera.

The Brodsky Quartet, who had already performed, for years, Isidora's *Song of a Traveller in the Night* across the world, commissioned her, together with the University of Kent, to compose a string quartet. The result was one of the most virtuosic works in Isidora's oeuvre, *Polomka Quartet* (2009); according to the members of the Brodsky Quartet, one of the most virtuosic string quartets ever written. All the characteristics of Isidora's unique mature expression are brought here to the level of maximum virtuosity in performance. Concerning this string quartet, Isidora wrote the following lines:

Some of the traditional dances from the Balkans, especially the ones of the Vlachs (an East Balkan population scattered across different countries; in Serbia, they mostly inhabit the Homolje region, Eastern Serbia), are distinguished by characteristic movements: turns, spinning, stomping, rapid knee-bending movements, falling on one's knees and so on, all of which induce the dancers to be transported into a state of mesmeric trance. This kind of dancing represents a unity of mimicry and ilinx (imitation and trance). It is dancing to small steps with vigorous stomping on upbeats (which seems confusing to an observer), the dancers being huddled together hold each other's belts and dance for a long time, intensely and ecstatically. The steps are often simple whereas the movements of the body and legs are exceptionally complicated. Some of the dances are complex because the steps, the course of the dance and changes of movements and tempo depend solely on the leading dancer therefore representing an improvisation and a surprise. The changes between duple

⁸ The piece also exists in a version scored for cor anglais and string orchestra (or string quintet), and a recording of that version is available on *Balkan Bolero*, a CD album of music by Isidora Žebeljan released by Oboe Classics of London.

and triple time are characteristic of some of the Vlach dances. The $\frac{3}{4}$ bar is always slightly longer for a micro-rhythmic unit and the melodic system of these dances is often non-tempered. Polomka is one of the most popular dances in Eastern Serbia. The noun *polomka* is derived from the verb *polomiti* (which means: to break) therefore this dance could be described as a one in which the body “breaks” to the rhythm of a rather fast tempo and virtuoso playing, in other words – a “traditional Serbian break-dance”. This particular dance, as well as other traditional ones, contains in itself an element of pagan trance. The piece ***Polomka quartet*** is inspired by the author’s visual impression of these dances. That impression has transcended into an idea of a dance of an imaginary people, of a non-existent region.⁹

The piece was premièred by the Brodsky Quartet at a concert in Canterbury on 27 May 2009 and has since remained on the standard repertoire of this quartet as well as other ensembles, with performances across Europe and in Iran.

The Netherlands Chamber Choir, one of Europe’s most renowned choirs, commissioned Isidora to write a longer piece for their tour of Norway, which resulted in ***Latum Lalo***, her comprehensive choral suite for 12 voices (2008). On the occasion of the work’s world première in Oslo in 2010, Isidora wrote the following lines about the piece:

Latum Lalo is based on the verses or on the part of verses and refrains from old Serbian, Romanian and Gypsies folk songs. What is special and unusual with the words which are used in this music is the fact that they had completely lost their meaning in today Serbian, Romanian and Gypsy’s language. The composer took only “senseless” words from the verses so she could create a new, almost Dadaistic language, but which is completely based on the archaic words. The words were organized in the order and sections solely due to its audio characteristics. The sound of words itself was the main guidance for the author, and music was created together with “new language”. Composition is organized as a suite, but like the journey through different landscapes. Even music is modal it is possible to imagine its connection with imaginary Byzantine, or Roman street music, or with pagan pre-antique singing. Music is original and is not in the connection with the sources from any concrete folk music.

⁹ Apart from *Polomka Quartet*, Isidora wrote another two string quartets, as well as a song for mezzo-soprano and string quartet titled *When God created Dubrovnik* (2012). The other two quartets are *Dark Velvet* (2005), composed as incidental music for a Belgrade staging of Thomas Bernhard’s play *Heldenplatz*, and *Intimate Letter from the Judean Desert* (2018), composed for the Brodsky Quartet, although the latter is labelled as a piece for any four instruments or voices.

Just like in her operas, but here much more clearly and prominently, Isidora used the sound of her chosen words, refrains, as a guide in her quest for melodies and rhythms. That is why the lyrics of this piece operate as acoustic experiences that give rise to music, which, precisely due to the antiquity of these unintelligible words, reminds one of some remote and imaginary pagan archetypes, which give us a sonic experience that we recognize as spiritual closeness with Xenakis's vocal music. Nevertheless, monody, heterophony, and modality, the occasional highlighting of one or two voices, the independence of smaller ensembles and their interplay with the sonic mass of the entire choir, the differentiation of sonic spheres in a musical flow richly endowed with surprises, just like on a voyage, form the main features of this exciting and virtuosic vocal score.

Right after the great success of *The Marathon* at Bregenz Festival, there was a commission from the Musiktheater im Revier opera house in Gelsenkirchen for an operatic work to be performed at a special location, outdoors, at the Eichbaum (Oak Tree) metro station between Essen and Mülheim. This was an important artistic project for the Ruhr district, known for its diverse artistic events and festivals; the production also involved the Essen Theatre (Schauspiel Essen) as well as several other art organizations from Mülheim and Berlin – the project was included among the cultural events staged under the auspices of that year's European Capital of Culture project. Four composers from Germany, the US, and Serbia were commissioned to write an opera in one act each. Thus in just over six months Isidora wrote her third opera, *Simon the Chosen* (2009). The producers' only stipulation regarding the opera's content was that the plot should take place near the Eichbaum metro station and somehow relate to that locale. Finding a story for this opera that might transcend the local context was therefore quite difficult, which is why Isidora and her librettist Borislav Čičovački decided to look for a plot for this opera in mythology. They opted for the story at the heart of the Serbian folk poem *Nahod Simeun* ("Simeon the Foundling") as well as Thomas Mann's novel *The Holy Sinner* (*Der Erwählte*). The ancient Indo-European myth of the young Sun that every spring impregnates its mother Earth, widespread in Europe from Scandinavia to the Mediterranean, that is, the story about an involuntary incestuous relationship between a mother and her son (without parricide), along with atonement, is situated in this opera's libretto in modern times, among Germans who have immigrated to Germany from Russia following the fall of the Berlin Wall. At first, the authors of the opera could not find a specific link to Eichbaum metro station, but simply surmised that

such a situation – an orphaned young man leaving Russia upon the fall of the Wall and settling in the Ruhr district, where he later encounters a woman and starts a relationship with her, who turns out to be his mother – might happen there. Whilst working on the production, the team found out, much to the surprise of everybody involved, that the highrise blocks of flats surrounding the metro station housed precisely Germans who had immigrated from Russia, from the banks of the Volga.

In Žebeljan's oeuvre, the opera *Simon the Chosen* occupies a very important place due to multiple reasons. It employs a larger musical ensemble than her previous two operas: a symphony orchestra (*a uno*), choir (for the first time in Isidora's operatic oeuvre), and five soloists, along with an actor (a silent role). Another peculiarity of this opera is its almost exclusive usage of prose (as opposed to poetry) in the libretto. The condensed plotline, which seeks to accommodate a large timeframe (from the boy's birth and childhood in Russia to his early maturity in Germany and redemption, which goes on into his old age) into 50 minutes of music, set in prose, conditioned a further sharpening of the unique features of Isidora's operatic music, generating the score that Isidora considered her most expressionistic piece of music (in terms of its melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic structures approximating a certain form of neo-expressionism). Observed from the perspective of Isidora's unique expression, this means that the melodic flows are quick, short, intense, that the rhythm is therefore even sharper, more piquant, acrobatic but not jugular, that modality is concealed behind dense chords made up of seconds, that metric changes and thereby also musical surprises are more frequent, compressed, and intensive, while the orchestration puts even more emphasis on the brass, whose shrillness generates the perception of an unavoidable bleak fate. The opera's music features less conspicuous elements from folk musical tradition than Isidora's other works from this phase, and the same applies to popular music elements as well. The opera features some of the most sublime pieces of music in all of Isidora's oeuvre – the aria of a girl who is abandoning her child and the love scene featuring Ana and Simon, mother and son. The opera *Simon the Chosen*, staged by the then young German director Cordula Däuper, was premièred in June 2009, featuring the choir and soloists of Gelsenkirchen Opera (starring Piotr Prochera, a baritone from Poland, who later sang the main roles in another two operas by Isidora), the Neue Philharmonie Westfalen, and conductor Bernhard Stengel. The great success of this opera and superb reviews prompted Michael Schulz, artistic director of the Gelsenkirchen Opera, to commission Isidora to pro-

duce a large, evening-length opera treating the same subject matter.¹⁰ In 2012, responding to another commission, this time from the Swaledale Festival in the UK, Isidora used segments from the score of *Simon the Chosen* to fashion a suite for violoncello (or cor anglais) and piano titled ***Simon and Anne***.

At this time, Isidora took an active part in recording her music. Thus in 2011 the German label CPO released a CD with recordings of Isidora's orchestral music, performed by the Janáček Philharmonic from the Czech Republic and Dutch conductor, David Porcelijn,¹¹ whereas that same year the Brodsky Quartet made recordings of Isidora's chamber music for strings, published on a CD release by CPO in 2015.¹²

Immediately following the première of *Simon the Chosen*, Isidora started work on a new opera, that is, another, different version of the tale about Simon the orphan, but then received an unexpected commission from the Settimana musicale senese festival, Italy's oldest running festival,¹³ also for an opera, to be premièred at the 2012 festival. The only condition specified by the commissioning body and producing company, the Accademia Musicale Chigiana, was that it should be a comic opera. Responding to this commission, Isidora and her librettist Borislav Čičovački found very interesting and intriguing content in Thomas Mann's novella *The Transposed Heads* (*Die vertauschten Köpfe*), that is, an Indian fairytale from the ancient collection of *The 25 Tales of Betal*,¹⁴ which formed the basis of Žebeljan's opera ***Two Heads and a Girl***. Here, too, the literary basis merely served as a conceptual framework for the composer's personal sounding and experience of mythological events. Therefore in the opera's plot itself, presented in five scenes, there is no shortage of encounters between two different times – an ancient past and the

¹⁰ "Simon the Chosen by Isidora Žebeljan is a high-quality work [...] composed with genius." Mühlheimer Woche, Germany, June 2009.

¹¹ The CD release titled "Isidora Žebeljan: The Horses of Saint Mark, orchestral works" (777 670-2), featuring the following pieces: *The Horses of Saint Mark*, *The Minstrel's Dance*, *Rukoveti*, *Deserted Village*, and *Escenas picaras*.

¹² The CD release titled "Brodsky Quartet plays Isidora Žebeljan: *Song of a Traveller in the Night*, chamber music" (777994-2), featuring the following pieces: *Polomka Quartet*, *Dance of the Wooden Sticks*, *New Songs of Lada*, *Sarabande*, *A Yawl on the Danube*, *Song of a Traveller in the Night*, and *Pep It Up*.

¹³ The festival was established in 1939 by the Italian composer Alfredo Casella (1883–1947).

¹⁴ The original title of the collection is *Vetala Panchavimshati*.

present. It takes place in an indeterminate mythical era and presents a peculiar kind of love triangle featuring two young men, best friends, and a girl, with whom both youths are in love. Marrying one of them makes the girl desire the other one, which makes life so difficult for all three of them that the youths, each one of them considering himself sinful with regards to the girl and his best friend, decapitate themselves, prompting the distraught girl to obtain a permission from the goddess Kali to reattach their heads to their bodies and thereby bring them back to life. But the girl mixes up and swaps their heads, attaching them to the wrong body. The opera explores the human concept of desire, as the main driving force of the need for change (or exchange). Such a desire serves only the bodily, temporal, and, essentially, never fulfilled abyss of human passions. However, the human soul, fortunately, pursues different, disembodied concerns, forging an inextricable link with the cosmic fullness of the Spirit. And that is precisely the trinity that forms the story of this opera: the body, soul, and reason. That trinity is furnished with its human manifestations in the characters of Padma, Chandra, and Bathi, but not literally so – since all three of them are made up of an unbalanced mix of influences exerted by the inconsistencies of human strivings mentioned above. Beheading, which is often featured in Indian mythology, stands for the necessity of freeing oneself from excessively focusing on one's head, i.e. one's thoughts, ratio, and (re-)directing the focus of one's being to the heart, i.e. feelings. Precisely out of a need to reassert the “voice of reason”, the story was complemented with another character, the Narrator, who plays the important role of participating in, and often also driving or diverting, the events. Also, the Narrator is the only character who provides the link between the two times, mythological and present, the one who “pours” the myth into the everyday.

Still, in every opera by Žebeljan, key significance is attached to the sonic conception, with words serving only as its necessary verbal clarification (given the nature of the operatic genre), that is, its verbal sense. That is why in her operas the music is more important than the words, because their meaning is already contained in it. Given that in this opera the mythological content of the story is presented directly, that is, in a way that could have really taken place in its own time, the music, too, derives inspiration from local heritage, from a sort of musical archaeology or even, musical geology. Nevertheless, it is not India that forms the soil from which Žebeljan excavates her musical artefacts, but the Balkans, with all of its sonic ambiguity and rhythmic intemperance. Those are the grounds on which Isidora built the music

of her opera, wherein a representation of mythological (fantastic) events finds its expression by rising above an intuitive selection of elements from musical archaeology and synthesizing a new type of sonic authenticity, as the folk heritage of an imaginary, non-existent people. It is this kind of unpredictable selection of elements, arranged in an unrestrained and elusive combination of rhythmic patterns, generating a striking transposition of verbal mythological content to an acoustic level, so that one cannot divine the element that underpins this exciting emotional effect, one that reaches the listener not only through the sense of hearing, but also, one might say, through the sensors of her every nerve ending.¹⁵ The world première of *Two Heads and a Girl*, which was attended, among others, by the Dutch Queen Beatrix, took place in Siena on 12 July 2012, whereby the opera became the first Serbian opera to have its world première abroad, sung in Serbian. The opera was staged by the Israeli director Ran Arthur Braun, costumes were designed by Angelina Atlagić, while soloists included the baritones Piotr Prochera and Ivan Ludlow, sopranos Aneta Ilić and Aile Asszonyi, as well as actor Nikola Đuričko, accompanied by Žebeljan orchestra conducted by Premil Petrović.

Then, right after her première in Siena, Isidora received another two commissions: one from the Brodsky Quartet and the other from Bregenz Festival. At this time, the Brodsky Quartet had devised a music-poetical cycle under the title of *Trees, Walls, Cities*, involving authors (poets and composers) from nations (ethnic groups) with a difficult common past. Eight composers from across the world were commissioned to write music for this cycle, that is, a song for mezzo-soprano and string quartet, and Isidora was one of them. The city that was allocated to her as the source for exploring its poetical possibilities was Dubrovnik. Examining works by poets from Dubrovnik and poetry written about the city, Isidora opted for the poem *When God created Dubrovnik* by the Dubrovnik poet Milan Milišić. From that poem she selected several lines that she found the most striking and musically promising, and only then did she learn that Milišić, an ethnic Serb poet from Dubrovnik, was one of the first victims of the Yugoslav war. He was killed in the early days of October 1991 in his home in Dubrovnik, by a shell fired by the Serbian army. Isidora wrote a bravura song, featuring a quick, virtuosic succession of striking melodic-rhythmic motives and metres, with a somewhat more pronounced use of Istrian scales. The world première of

¹⁵ Borislav Čičovački, “Due teste e una ragazza, opera nuova di Isidora Žebeljan”, in: *69a Settimana Musicale Senese*, Siena, Accademia Musicale Chigiana, 2012, 35–44.

When God created Dubrovnik (2012) took place at the gala opening of the 2013 City of London Festival, in June of that year, broadcast live on BBC Radio 3, performed by the mezzo-soprano Loré Lixenberg and the Brodsky Quartet, with subsequent performances at numerous concerts in Europe and Israel, and a recording released by Chandos Records from Britain.

Sir David Pountney marked his final season as artistic director of Bregenz Festival not only with his spectacular staging of Mozart's *Magic Flute* on the festival's main stage on Lake Constance, but also with a specially designed gala opening of this major festival. Namely, Sir David commissioned four composers who had left an artistic mark on his time at the helm of the festival to compose orchestral pieces that would thematically relate to Mozart's *Magic Flute*. The four commissions went to the German composer Detlev Glanert, British composer Judith Weir, Russian-British composer Dmitri Smirnov, and Isidora Žebeljan. The result, in 2013, was Žebeljan's piece *Hum away, Hum away, Strings!*, a *Metamorphosis on Themes from Mozart's Magic Flute* for symphony orchestra, premièred on 17 July that year at the Great Hall of the Festival (Festspielhaus) in Bregenz by the Wiener Symphoniker and British conductor Paul Daniel. The audience included the entire political and cultural elite of Austria (the President, Chancellor, minister of culture, leading members of the clergy), while the festival opening was transmitted live by Austria's public broadcaster, ORF. Isidora derived the themes of this orchestral miniature from the openings of the slow and fast sections of the Overture to *The Magic Flute*. The chords right at the opening provide an illusion of dramatic events due to their makeup involving seconds, but then launch the music into a quick staccato movement, which gestures toward the model only with its opening melody and rhythm. This gives rise to a plunging sort of dance, replete with unpredictable changes of metre and juggling rhythms, coming to a head in an ecstatic finale. The work's title itself, as a sort of homage to Isidora's artistic connection with Bregenz Festival, stems from the title of the literary template for Kristina's aria in the opera *The Marathon* (likewise commissioned by the festival), itself borrowed from a late 19th-century collection of poems by anonymous poets from Vojvodina. It quickly became one of the most frequently performed orchestra pieces by a Serbian composer, including performances by orchestras in Europe and America, such as, for instance, the Moravian Philharmonic Orchestra from the Czech Republic and Louisville Orchestra from the US. In 2014, for the Stift Chamber Music Festival in the Netherlands, Isidora produced a version for violin and piano as well.

The opera *Two Heads and a Girl* and several works that followed in its wake marked the end of the second subphase in the mature creative phase of Isidora Žebeljan, whose main characteristic was the accomplishment of a unique tone of personal sonic expression coupled with exploring the liminal domains of expression, which entailed increasing the intensity of all parameters of Isidora's music, first and foremost the succession rate of motivic entities and that of condensed and complex rhythmic structures amid breakneck irregular metric changes, along with a striking, modally based melodic-harmonic component (with more or less pronounced presence of elements from traditional music of various, typically imaginary origins), often saturated with clusters of intervals dominated by seconds in a quick succession of surprising sonic events.

In the third phase of her compositional oeuvre, Isidora maintained her interest in incidental music, but with less regularity than before, with music for theatre plays almost becoming an exception in her work, especially after 2003. She worked only with those theatre directors who were a strong source of inspiration for her, especially Dejan Mijač, with whom she collaborated on several cult plays, such as *Skakavci* ("Locusts") by Biljana Srbljanović, which won Isidora her third Sterija Prize, and Thomas Bernhard's *Heldenplatz*, which included the piano miniature *Dark Velvet*, one of Isidora's most frequently performed pieces. Still, the most inspiring, versatile, and intense collaboration during this period took place with the internationally renowned Slovenian theatre director Tomi Janežič. Unlike almost all of her previous experiences working in theatre, Žebeljan's artistic contribution to his plays rested on music as an integral, inseparable segment of the play, one that does not serve as an ornament but a structural element of the staging, as important as the words spoken onstage. Together with Janežič, Isidora produced several internationally renowned cult plays, beginning with Shakespeare's *King Lear* at Belgrade's Atelje 212 theatre (featuring Ljuba Tadić in his last theatre role), moving on to Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus* at the Ivan pl. Zajc Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka (Croatia), where she was able to use the entire musical potential of the city's opera in live performance, culminating with several legendary plays that garnered a superb international reputation, such as a production of Chekhov's *The Seagull* at the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad, for which she wrote a 40-minute suite for vocal soloists, choir, and chamber orchestra, and a theatrical adaptation of *Doppler*, a novel by Erlend Loe, produced at Trøndelag Teater in Trondheim, Norway, in 2016, widely

regarded as one of the greatest theatrical accomplishments in Norway during the last decade, and also Isidora's last compositional endeavour in theatre. At this time, Isidora was also busy arranging her incidental music written for theatre plays into vocal-instrumental concert suites, which quickly attracted the interest of musicians from Serbia and abroad. The most frequently performed of these suites include *Three Goat's Ears*, *Leonce and Lena*, *Tears are O.K.*, *The Mousetrap*, *Two Songs of the Bride of the Wind*, and *Leda*, while her two piano miniatures derived from her incidental music, *Sarabande* and *Dark Velvet*, as well as the song for oboe and piano *The Miracle in Shargan* have established themselves as frequently performed concert pieces on every continent.

In addition, in 2006, at the age of 39, Isidora became a corresponding member of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, as one of its youngest members in history and certainly as the youngest woman admitted to that institution. In 2012 she became a full member of the Serbian Academy (again as its youngest member) and the same year she was admitted to the World Academy of Art and Science, as the only Serbian composer in the history of that institution.

Isidora completed her most extensive and comprehensive work, ***Simon the Foundling***, a two-hour long opera in three acts with a prologue (10 scenes), in early 2015, which marked the beginning of the final subphase of her mature creative period and was premièred on May 29th the same year at Musiktheater im Revier in Gelsenkirchen, Germany. As was already mentioned above, the opera was fashioned as a full-evening version of her earlier opera composed for the same house, *Simon the Chosen*. However, both the libretto and music of this work are entirely new, constituting an independent operatic work that shares with the earlier, shorter opera essentially nothing except the main story or plot. Therefore, the story of Simon the Foundling, the one told in the Serbian folk poem and Thomas Mann's novel *The Holy Sinner*, forms the basis of this work's dramatic-musical plot as well. But the libretto and music depart from the previous opera with the same topic, and the performing forces are different as well. The main difference between these two operas in terms of the plot is the increased number of situations that Simon must navigate before encountering the woman with whom he will fall in love and then realize that the woman is his mother. Thus in the earlier opera, upon his arrival in Europe (Germany), already in one of his first jobs, at a factory, Simon obtains the address of a woman who rents apartments, whereas in ***Simon the Foundling***, the main hero truly wanders from pillar to

post: his unconscious quest takes him to a car mechanic's shop, then to an old lady in the countryside, then to a factory, and a bakery, where he learns the address of his future landlady. Throughout the opera, there is regular alternation between scenes representing realistic events and fantastic scenes.¹⁶ The redemption of sins is thus presented as a phantasmagoric dream, similar to the one described in Mann's novel. Another difference concerns the two operas' respective time periods: in the earlier opera this is undoubtedly the present (i.e. the opening decades of the 21st century), whereas in *Simon the Foundling* the time period of the plot is not clearly determined and refers potentially to an epoch in the development of humanity that featured, for instance, cars and television, but is not the present. The third major difference is the structure of the libretto, that is, its literary genre: whereas in the earlier opera the libretto featured spoken text almost without exception, the later opera is exclusively in (free) verse and prose verse, approximating the poetics of Vasko Popa (the libretto was authored by Borislav Čičovački). The final major difference concerns the makeup of the performing forces. The score of *Simon the Foundling* was written for 20 vocal soloists, a large mixed choir, children's choir, large symphony orchestra and band, i.e. an onstage ensemble comprising five instrumentalists (folk wind instruments, clarinet, saxophone, oboe, cor anglais, oboe-sopile, accordion, double bass, and percussion). Viewed from the music-historical perspective, this sort of pairing involving two operas with the same subject matter constitutes a unique example in all of operatic literature: it is difficult, if not impossible, to find two different operatic works treating the same topic, written by the same librettist and composer.¹⁷

All the main musical traits of Isidora's mature compositional expression are present in this opera amid a large sonic space and to a high and significant degree. Isidora's musical lyricism, represented by striking authentic melodies in the arias and arioso sections, typically with modal accompaniment played by only a handful of instruments, comes to the fore especially in the

¹⁶ See note no. 2.

¹⁷ There are operas by the same composer, even under the same title, sharing the same leading characters but with different plotlines. For instance, such a pairing includes the two operas titled *Anacréon* by Jean-Philippe Rameau from 1754 and 1757, respectively. Also, there are operas that are almost identical in content, but constitute another version of an earlier piece by the same composer. Examples include Rossini's operas *Maometto secondo* and *La siège de Corinthe*, and *Mosè in Egitto* and *Moïse et Pharaon*, with the later versions of both operas made for Paris by expanding their original versions.

opening scene of the Prologue (the aria of a girl who leaves her child to the river), then in the Bird's aria, as well as in Simon's arias, which typically occur at the very end of the scene, when he resumes his travels. Unlike Žebeljan's previous operas, where scenes involving a single singer – arias and ariosos – are relatively rare, allowing the dramatic flow to unfold at an especially quick pace, in this opera the scenes are longer, with a particular focus on the arias, i.e. solo scenes featuring almost all of the main protagonists, which, in fact, shape and narrate the plot. Nonetheless, the uniqueness of Isidora's expression in the quick, surprising succession of (musical) situations is manifested in each individual scene in a way that corresponds to the events depicted therein. Thus the scene at the Car Mechanic's shop is dominated by a trio (Simon, the Car Mechanic, and his wife) comprising three melodic, rhythmic, and metric flows that are musically entirely different, as well as the powerful and exciting aria of the Dog, while the scene at the Old Lady's focuses more on the rhythmic and harmonic peculiarities of authentic Balkan traditional music, above all its folk scales (Istrian), as well as structures built on infra-pentatonic series. The factory scene foregrounds the huge difference between fragile lyricism (the Foreman's aria) and the rough, almost neo-expressionist treatment of the factory workers' choir. A certain neo-expressionist sharpness informs the bakery scene as well, anticipating, like a premonition, the looming incest, committed without knowing. The most virtuosic part is assigned to the instrumental band, which is assigned, like an interpreter and partial protagonist, what are probably the most breakneck sections in Isidora's entire oeuvre, constituting thereby both a sonic surprise and wonder, as well as a musical tool for representing the supernatural or fantastic in music. The only shared musical link between *Simon the Chosen* and *Simon the Foundling* is the mother and son's love scene – the only music that Isidora, according to her own words, could not compose twice, in two different versions. The reasons involve the extreme emotional demands of such a creative endeavour as well as, certainly, the special, delicate way of forging a sonic link between these two operas by means of such an exciting musical situation. Also, the scene provides for one of the most emotional musical experiences in Isidora's music. In addition, this opera assigns a highly demanding role to the choir as well, especially at the very ending, when the entire work concludes with an ethereal unison that is almost floating in sound. The children's choir, whose melodies almost exclusively feature indeterminate pitches, brings one of the most moving moments in the opera – children mocking and sneering at Simon as a boy. The world première of

Simon the Foundling, as well as subsequent performances (which took place in front of a packed auditorium with 1,000 seats), were performed by the choir and soloists of the Gelsenkirchen Opera, with Piotr Prochera in the leading role, the Neue Philharmonie Westfalen, the Children's Opera Choir from Dortmund, and a band featuring Bogdan Ranković, Borislav Čičovački, Aleksandar Stefanović, Boban Stošić, and Aleksandar Radulović, all of them under the leadership of the Finnish conductor Valter Rauhalampi.¹⁸

Two years before the première of *Simon the Foundling*, Isidora received one of her most important commissions – a work for an instrumental octet (Schubert's ensemble – clarinet, horn, bassoon, and string quintet), from the Berliner Philharmoniker Foundation. This was the first time in the history of Serbian music that the best and most renowned symphony orchestra in the world had commissioned a work by a Serbian composer. For that purpose, Isidora composed a piece in two movements titled *Needle Soup, a surrealist fairy tale for octet*. The very title and subtitle point to a feature of Isidora's works that gained full clarity in the final subphase of her mature creative period. It concerns extra-musical contents (that is, templates), which, in her works written in this subphase, hails exclusively from fairy tales and their world. Thus in her commentary on one of her most virtuosic and exciting chamber works, Isidora wrote the following lines:

The title itself, *Needle Soup*, is the same as that of an old Balkan tale about a hungry traveller/vagrant, who outwits an old miser. The traveller fools the miser by telling him that he can use needles to make the most exquisite soup. And whilst cooking the broth, he sweet-talks the miser into supplying him with more and more exquisite ingredients (which were not needles), eventually making a delicious, rich, and above all tasty soup. A composer-traveller-inventor enchants her miser-ego, so that the latter sets free her intuition by identifying the most exquisite emotive-musical ingredients. And thus telling her musical story, the composer fools the ego, so that both of them may entirely yield to the Spirit. In other words, a single initial idea sets off a chain reaction of unpredictable musical ideas and events – and the result is a “stream-of-consciousness piece of music” with elements of musical mystical surrealism.

In this commentary there is an inkling of the secret that characterizes this piece: namely, in this work Isidora used several musical themes/situations from her earlier pieces, as a sort of homage to her musical journey up to that

¹⁸ Dušan Mihalek, “Premijera fantastične opere *Nahod Simon* Isidore Žebeljan”, in: *Muzika i reč*, Novi Sad, Prometej, 2018, 336–339.

point, sensing, perhaps, that its conclusion may not be far off. This intimate creative procedure may be likened to certain examples from earlier epochs, such as, for instance, fashioning a musical subject by using the letters of a composer's name (B-A-C-H), or structuring a musical work by using musical themes from earlier pieces (e.g. Shostakovich's String Quartet No. 8). Memorable musical ideas from some of her earlier pieces, mostly operas (although we even find a modified quotation from a solo song she wrote as a first-year composition student), in an entirely new guise, almost entirely unrecognizable, constitute a part of the sonic adventure of this piece, wherein, apart from the acrobatically seductive ending, the moving, painful, dark viola and lower instruments' solo from the first movement makes for one of the most exciting passages in Isidora's entire oeuvre. The superb performance of the Berlin Philharmonic Octet at the work's world première on 17 October 2015 at the Berlin Philharmonie was one of Isidora's greatest triumphs – ovations for the composer went on for the duration of the interval between the two halves of the concert, which is a compliment that only a few contemporary composers have received, while the queue for autographs extended across the entire hall. "You are the only composer who made the Berlin Philharmonic dance" was one of the comments heard on that occasion. Very soon after the première, *Needle Soup* quickly found its place in the concert programmes of major ensembles in Europe (Germany, Spain, Finland), Canada, and Australia.

This was a time in Žebeljan's life that saw numerous commissions for new concert works, as well as large-scale projects for many years ahead, which, sadly, failed to materialize. Out of six planned and agreed concert works (one each for clarinet; violin; horn; violin and cello; string quartet; and piano), Isidora wrote two, for clarinet and violin, respectively. *Pipe and Flamingos* (2016/17), her *Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra*, is based on an extra-musical template, a fairytale about "the pipe in this concert-tale has a power to unveil the biggest secrets of a heart, but its song is not understandable to no one except – the flamingos. They are the only one who understand it due to an infinite flamingos' love for dancing, which makes them open hearted. Therefore, it, the pipe, like the antique Kassandra, tells the truth, but only flamingos still believe in it."¹⁹

This powerful, moving, and virtuosic piece, whose orchestral part is as demanding and complex as that of the solo instrument, appears to constitute the apex, that is, a sort of final statement of a refined, specific, and unique

¹⁹ From Isidora Žebeljan's commentary written for the work's world première.

expression. Its division in three movements is primarily articulated by drastic changes of tempo, although the movements are meant to be performed back to back, *attacca*. The almost impressionistic opening of the work, dominated by brass timbres, rhapsodically takes the instrumentalists and listeners into a whirlwind of Isidora's melodies and rhythms, in a characteristically abrupt alternation of states and musical "events", making way for the suggestive and emotional slow central movement, whose main theme is based on the melody of the opening aria from Isidora's opera *Simon the Foundling*. The third movement is an unrestrained, inexorable, orgiastic dance involving the soloist and the entire orchestra (with numerous percussion instruments), based on motives made up of elements from authentic traditional Balkan music, which are also somewhat related to various segments from the opera *Simon the Foundling*, but are taken here to an extreme degree of sonic and kinetic ecstasy. The world première of *Pipe and Flamingos* took place at the Auditorio de Galicia in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, featuring the clarinetist Joan Enric Lluna, for whom the concerto was composed, and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of Galicia, under the leadership of the British conductor Paul Daniel.

Žebeljan's *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra Three Curious Loves*, composed in 2017, was her last extended work. It was commissioned by the Eduard van Beinum Foundation for the British-Dutch violinist Daniel Rowland and the Stift Chamber Music Festival.²⁰ The orchestra comprises a wind quintet, piano, percussion, and strings. Although the concerto's underlying formal structure is tripartite, the work creates the impression of a four-movement piece, due to the third movement, which opens with an extended section in a slow tempo. In addition, the piece hints at certain new peculiarities in Isidora's expression: its motivic structure is not as variable and surprising as it was in earlier works from her mature phase; certain motives acquire some characteristics of a theme; the length of individual motives is, therefore, extended, although there is no motivic or thematic manipulation involved, all of which creates the impression of a calmer and more contemplative musical flow. The slow, ethereal opening movement, entirely set in the high registers of the violin, softly, with a discrete, translucent accompaniment provided by the strings and piano, seems to float over the listeners, like an aura of

²⁰ The Dutch Eduard van Beinum Foundation (*Stichting Eduard van Beinum*) provides commissions (financial support) to foreign composers for writing new works for Dutch musicians and concert performances in the Netherlands.

sound or a waft of a touching sonic scent. The stormy, almost wildly ravishing second movement seems like a tempestuous and triumphal sum total of the potent and unique type of musical expression dominating the mature phase in Isidora's oeuvre. By contrast, the third movement serves as the ground for expressing unvarnished lyricism right from the start, with evocations from the solo horn seemingly arriving from other, close but unknown expanses of sound. In the opening part of the movement, where love is presented in every dramatic moment within a musical flow fashioned with a patina of nostalgia, a new sort of lyric opens up, which seemingly stems from the immense dignity of the experiences of old age, like a farewell accompanied by a gentle smile, before the second part of the movement, unrestrained, implacable, and daringly virtuosic, transforms the entire piece into a fairytale, where deliverance is available only in laughter and tears. One of Isidora's most intimate and moving pieces, the *Concerto for Violin and Orchestra Three Curious Loves* was premièred under the auspices of the Stift International Festival at the Grote Kerk in Enschede, the Netherlands, on 24 August 2017, by the violinist Daniel Rowland and the Stift Festival Orchestra, conducted by David Cohen.

Just a few days later, on September 2nd, at the Vredenburg Hall in Utrecht, the Netherlands, under the auspices of the Utrecht Early Music Festival, Isidora's choral setting of *Psalm 78 (Salmo 78)* had its world première. It was performed by the Netherlands Chamber Choir under the leadership of Peter Dijkstra. This was part of an artistic project involving four internationally renowned chamber choirs – the Netherlands Chamber Choir, the Choir of Trinity Wall Street in New York, the Norwegian Soloist Choir, and the Tallis Scholars from the UK – with the aim of performing all 150 Psalms in settings spanning a timeframe of ten centuries, starting from those of Hildegard of Bingen all the way to contemporary composers, and touring Europe and America (White Light Festival, New York). Seven composers selected from across the world were commissioned to write a new work each, setting those Psalms that had not been set to music before. One of these composers was Isidora Žebeljan. She chose Psalm 78, but, on account of the sound and melodic beauty of that language, decided to set the Portuguese version of the text. Ethereal, touching, tender music with post-Messiaenian flashes beneath its refined melodic line, typical of Isidora's slow movements, and with a mild flavouring of folk music from the Banat region, almost like a farewell kiss, forms the content of this piece by Isidora, with which she said goodbye to a life made of and lived for music. So, although she did write a few more shorter

pieces – *Intimate Letter from the Judaeian Desert*, *Bagpiper's Vitrage* – and composed an entire concerto for horn and orchestra (which she did not get to write down), Isidora's musical farewell to this world, which she indebted with her musical genius, her fight for music, and her passion for the vocation that was her allotment from God, was a setting of the following lines from Psalm 78:

For their heart was not steadfast with Him,
Now were they faithful in His covenant.
But He, being full of compassion, forgave their iniquity,
And did not destroy them.
Yes, many a time He turned His anger away,
And did not stir up all His wrath;
For He remembered that they were but flesh,
A breath that passes away and does not come again. (37, 38, 39)²¹

In addition to her huge commitment to composing, Isidora was active as a performer as well. She regularly performed her own pieces as conductor and pianist, as well as those by other, mostly Serbian composers. As a pianist, she performed and recorded her music with the Brodsky Quartet, and she also performed music by Ljubica Marić and Vlastimir Trajković.²² Among other occasions, she conducted concert performances in Belgrade, London (the Academy of Saint Martin in the Fields orchestra at Wigmore Hall), and Amsterdam (Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ). Her repertoire included, apart from her own pieces, works for string and chamber orchestra by Ljubica Marić, Ludmila Frajt, Vasilije Mokranjac, Aleksandar Obradović, Dušan Radić, and Vuk Kulenović. Her première performances of several works by Mokranjac and Radić constituted a particular curiosity in Serbian music.²³ Also, she conducted performances of works by Dutch composers, including Marius

²¹ Psalm 78, <https://www.bible.com/bible/114/PSA.78.NKJV>.

²² Especially noteworthy is her studio recording of *Verses from "The Mountain Wreath"* (*Stihovi iz "Gorskog vijenca"*) (Verses from "The Mountain Wreath" – "Стихови из Горског вијенца"), a piece by Ljubica Marić for baritone and piano, the only existing recording of that work, which Isidora made with bass-baritone Bojan Knežević for Radio Belgrade in 2003.

²³ The pieces mentioned above are *Plane Trees (Platani – Платани)* by Vasilije Mokranjac for chamber ensemble, premièred in 2012, as well as three concertante pieces by Dušan Radić: *Pastorale* for flute and strings; *Fantasy* for violin, violoncello, and strings; and *A House in the Middle of the Road (Kuća nasred drumа – Кућа насред друма)* for oboe, violin, and strings, performed in 2010.

Flothuis, Guillaume Landré, and Bertus van Lier.²⁴ She founded the Žebeljan Orchestra and Žebeljan Ensemble, who chiefly perform music by Serbian composers; so far, they have performed in Italy, Austria, the Netherlands, Israel, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, and Montenegro, and made CD recordings of works by Isidora for CPO (Germany) and Oboe Classics of London. She was likewise proactive, courageous, and tireless in protecting Serbian art music heritage in her capacity as the chairwoman of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts' Committee for the Preservation of Serbian Musical Heritage, during which time a large number of Serbian musical scores were collected and archived, many concerts took place, and ten CDs were released, featuring important works of Serbian music that had not been recorded or published before.

In addition, Isidora was a highly successful professor of composition at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. She was the first woman to teach composition at a Serbian university (from 2002, first as an assistant professor, and from 2013 as a full professor). Her composition class spawned several artists who belong today among the most significant young and middle-aged Serbian composers, some of whom teach as assistants and professors at the music academies (faculties) in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Kragujevac, and Kosovska Mitrovica. Ordered by age, the most prominent among them include Draško Adžić (shortlisted for the Gaudeamus International Award in Amsterdam, winner of two Sterija Awards and a commission from the Belgrade Philharmonic); Milica Đorđević (a laureate of the Siemens Foundation Prize and a number of major international commissions); Vladimir Trmčić (a laureate of the City of Belgrade April Award and the 2016 Best Composer Prize awarded by the *Musica classica* magazine); Luka Čubrilo (the winner of the 2008 Art-Link Most Promising Young Music Artist in Serbia Award); Marko Kovač (a winner of commissions from BEMUS, Kotor Art International Festival, and Cello Fest); Ana Krstajić (a winner of multiple prizes at international competitions, such as the 2014 Women's Work Award in the US and the 2016 De Bach du Jazz International Competition in Paris); Igor Andrić (a winner at the Im Treppenhaus chamber orchestra competition in Hanover and multiple international commissions; his works are published by Universal); and the brilliant Veljko Nenadić, one of the most daring and authentic Serbian composers, with the highest number of international awards of all Serbian

²⁴ Marius Flothuis (1914–2001), Guillaume Landré (1905–1968), and Bertus van Lier (1906–1972).

composers, including some of the most prestigious prizes ever awarded to Serbian composers (such as, for instance, first prize at the 2019 Ennio Morricone International choral music competition in Florence, first prize at the 2022 Bartók World Competition and Festival in Budapest, first prize at the 2022 Luigi Nono international chamber music competition in Turin, first prize for an orchestral work by the Jeunesses Musicales Bruxelles in 2021; his works are published by the Dutch publisher Donemus).

THE INTERNATIONAL SIGNIFICANCE of Isidora Žebeljan's oeuvre lies above all in the uniqueness of her personal type of musical expression, which, as such, constitutes a unique peculiarity in early 21st-century music. This extraordinarily clear personal expression, which informs Isidora's oeuvre as a whole and is easily recognizable in its phenomenal specificity – just like in all those composers whose oeuvres are characterized by a refined, memorable, and highly individual and inimitable original artistic language – has enriched the musical art of Western European civilization, in particular this most personal expression of Isidora's sonic cosmos.

Some of the leading artists among Žebeljan's contemporaries have spoken and written about their experiences of her unique originality, right from the outset of her international career, starting from her opera *Zora D*. Thus Sir David Pountney, one of the leading opera directors of his time, already upon encountering Isidora's music for the first time, stated the following:

When I was trawling through the entries for the Genesis Opera Prizes 1, amidst an absolute welter of indistinguishable representatives of what one might call 'academic modernism', Isidora Žebeljan's music struck me immediately as something original, fresh, and above all emotionally expressive - a rare commodity, but an essential one for interesting theatrical story telling.²⁵

The unique originality of Isidora's music and its creative and performing potentials have been discussed by many other artists and music producers as well. Among others, they include John Manger, formerly the general manager of the Academy of Saint Martin in the Fields, who has remarked that Isidora Žebeljan possesses "a genuinely original voice and a truly impressive talent. The musicians of the Academy who have worked with her cannot praise her highly enough. Her professionalism and craft are amazing, and her original talent is of the first order."²⁶

²⁵ David Pountney, *Zora D. und Mr. Emmet takes a walk, Musiktheater heute*, Wien, Wiener Kammeroper, 2003.

²⁶ Quoted from www.genesisfoundation.org.uk

Multiple prominent musicians, whose work has left a deep mark on contemporary art, such as the conductor Sir John Eliot Gardiner and oboist Han de Vries, have described their experiences of Isidora's music in the following terms: "I am much impressed by the skill, craft and imaginative range of music by Isidora Žebeljan [...] What attach me to this music is its kaleidoscopic range of timbres and, indeed, its many moods", Sir John wrote in a personal letter to Isidora.²⁷

Han de Vries, one of the 20th century's most prominent oboists, wrote the following lines concerning Isidora's music: "I am deeply impressed by both the compositions and the playing that is about the loftiest and deepest emotion. This is not playing, singing and composing to impress, but music of a heavenly atmosphere [...]"²⁸

The originality of Isidora's music, the peculiarities of her expression, her melodic and orchestral writing have been discussed mostly by foreign critics, who thereby asserted the significance of her music for contemporary art:

"In many ways, Serbian composer Isidora Žebeljan might be called the Ottorino Respighi of our time. Ms. Žebeljan is a fascinating instrumental colorist." Houston Radio, USA

"Her music spins off impetuously, unpredictably, with an unshackled verve [...] It's fascinating to hear the confidence and imagination with which Žebeljan was throwing about rhythms..." Gramophone, UK

"Her music is a totally unique musical language which is deeply affecting and wildly exciting [...] she has an unforgettable voice that is totally compulsive." Musicweb-International, UK

"Serbian composer Isidora Žebeljan is justly celebrated for her music's intense originality and fiery emotional expression [...]"²⁹ BBC Music Magazine

In 2009, *Der Freitag* magazine from Berlin named Isidora one of the ten most promising personalities in the world, whereas in 2013 she became the only

²⁷ Sir John Eliot Gardiner, a letter from 29 December 2014.

²⁸ Han De Vries, "Balkan bolero", in: *Double Reed News 109*, London, 2014, 33.

²⁹ David Hurwitz, "Isidora Žebeljan – The Horses of Saint Mark", in: *Classics Today*, USA, 2011, online edition.

Kate Molleson, "Žebeljan", in: *Gramophone*, London, January 2016, 54.

Steve Arloff, "Brodsky Quartet plays Isidora Žebeljan – review", in: *Musicweb International*, London, February 2016.

Kate Wakeling, "Žebeljan", *BBC Music Magazine*, London, March 2016, 90.

Serbian artist to win a Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean Award for making outstanding achievements in art.

In addition to the uniquely recognizable originality of her musical language, there is another part of Isidora's oeuvre that commands further significance. That part comprises her works for oboe. Like few other contemporary composers, with her 20 pieces for oboe – solo, chamber, and concertante – Isidora Žebeljan made a great contribution to the existing literature for oboe and related instruments. However, this concerns not only the sheer number of pieces, but the creation of a new type of sonic expression in music written for these instruments. This different, peculiar kind of sonic expression faces the performer with exacting demands, especially in terms of timbre and dynamics, whose unusually wide ranges give rise to different qualities of sound in the instruments themselves. This is especially true of her music written for oboe and cor anglais, with the latter effectively multiplying the instrument's technical capabilities in an entirely new way. Isidora uses unusual modes of producing sound (playing on the reed, flutter-tonguing, glissando, harmonics, etc.), combining them with one another as well as with the sound of folk instruments from the oboe family (the zurna and oboe-sopile) and other instruments: percussion, accordion, harp, and double bass. That is why Isidora's music for oboe has enticed performers from across the world, including some of the most prominent oboists, from the most senior ones such as Han de Vries, via the most active oboists today, such as the British oboist Nicholas Daniel, all the way to young stars such as the German oboist Viola Wilmsen and American oboist Nancy Ambrose King. The extraordinary peculiarities of Isidora's music induced the legendary oboist Han de Vries to remark that no composer since Bach has improved the sonic expression of the oboe more than Isidora Žebeljan.³⁰

Nevertheless, one particular feature of Isidora's composition process itself formed the practical and essential basis for the free manifestation of her original expression's sheer power – this was her creative intuition, that is, that strongest sense of connection with her Vocation, giving rise to different, previously unknown (sonic) worlds by a powerful (ur)feeling.

The immense significance of Isidora's international artistic voice is not confined to the musical accomplishments of her works, but also extends to the historical juncture of her appearance on the international stage, at a time when our country, its values and accomplishments were scorned and neglected in most of the world, due to the deadly force of dirty political games.

³⁰ From a pre-concert address by Han de Vries, given in Amsterdam in March 2017.

On all continents, Isidora's art, knowledge, virtuosity, and wisdom spoke quite differently about the spiritual power of our people, whereby Isidora played a major role in allowing Serbia, in artistic and cultural terms, to gain permanent and precious respect throughout the world. Therein lies the patriotism of all great artists: in placing their country and nation on the maps of civilization's major accomplishments.

As for us, Isidora's contemporaries, our task is to amass the courage to be aware of the uniqueness that such great artists as Isidora bequeath to humanity, including ourselves, whether we realize it or not, and to allow her music to be an eternal contribution to our spiritually unique place among the peoples of this Earth.

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Summary

Isidora Žebeljan (Serbian Cyrillic: Исидора Жебељан, b. Belgrade, 1967–2020) was one of the most original classical music composers of the early 21st century. That is why she is the most frequently and diversely performed Serbian composer abroad, commanding the most prominent presence beyond Serbia. She first came under the attention of the international public with her opera *Zora D.* (Зора Д.), which was commissioned by the Genesis Foundation of London and premièred in Amsterdam in 2003. From that point on, Žebeljan enjoyed a steady stream of commissions from major institutions and music festivals, such as the Berliner Philharmoniker Foundation, Venice Biennale (*La Biennale di Venezia*), Bregenz Festival (*Bregenzer Festspiele*), Musiktheater im Revier Gelsenkirchen, the Netherlands Chamber Choir (*Nederlands kamerkoor*), Accademia Musicale Chigiana in Siena, the City of London Festival, etc. Žebeljan has composed music for major ensembles such as the Vienna Symphony Orchestra (*Wiener Symphoniker*), the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields, Brodsky Quartet, and London Brass. Her oeuvre, divided in three creative phases, comprises around a hundred pieces, including five operas (written for opera houses in the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, and Italy) and incidental music for 38 theatre plays. *Zora D.* was the first Serbian opera premièred abroad (in the Netherlands), while *Two Heads and a Girl* (*Dve glave i devojka* – Две главе и девојка) was the first Serbian opera that was sung in the Serbian language at its world première (in Italy). Some of the most renowned contemporary musicians and ensembles have performed around 70 of Isidora's pieces on concert and opera stages in 37 countries on every continent. The originality of her language arose from her authentic ability to forge organic links between musical elements originating from different spheres of influence (ranging from old Balkan folk music traditions to rock and pop music), which she achieved by blending, amalgamating, and combining these originally divergent musical elements into new and previously unknown contexts of sound. In her pieces, form is entirely subordinated to the unpredictable flow of their musical contents, leading to unexpected, sudden shifts between individual segments in the work's sonic content, approximating the shape of a short story or film – a series of divergent (musical) events giving sound to a single perceptual whole, similarly to the way magic realism does in literature. A unique specificity of her music's originality stems from her unusual and quite peculiar melodic and rhythmic invention.