
CONVERSATIONS

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Bojana Radovanović*

Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts
Institute of Musicology

INTUITIVE JOURNEY THROUGH VOCAL DIVERSITY A CONVERSATION WITH JUG MARKOVIĆ

Jug Marković's vocal music has been echoing in my mind since our first year, studying at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. Namely, a requirement for the first and second-year composition students is to write music for voice – one piece for choir and two for voice and piano. When the exams started to get closer at the end of the academic year, we, as Jug's colleagues, were invited to participate in an informal choir that would rehearse and record his composition *Pohvala vatri* (2011), set to the eponymous poem by the Serbian poet, Branko Miljković.



Jug Marković
Photo: Ben Viaperalta

* The author's contact details: bojana.radovanovic@music.sanu.ac.rs

Although at that time it perhaps did not seem like it, the piece *Pohvala vatri* was the seed from which Jug Marković's vocal music would grow and which would, as it seems, inform my future encounters with this exciting opus. This choral sound is instantly recognizable in *Nirvana*,¹ a piece which was written years later and awarded with the ISCM Young Composers Award (2019). A distinctive affinity towards the finest lyricism is still one of the most striking traits of his music for voice – the playfulness and explorative spirit, as well.

Jug Marković (1987) is a Serbian composer and performer based in Stuttgart, who finished his BA and MA studies in composition at the Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade, studying with Vlastimir Trajković (1947–2017) and Zoran Erić (1950), as well as BA archaeology studies at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade. After his Belgrade studies, Marković started to work toward international recognition, primarily through completed courses at the IRCAM (Paris) and the State University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart (HMDK Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Stuttgart), as well as through numerous awards and collaborations. In 2019, aside from the aforementioned ISCM Young Composers Award, he received the *Stevan Mokranjac* award of the Composers' Association of Serbia for his piece *De Rerum Natura*. He was successful in winning prizes at the New Classics Competition of the Tchaikovsky Conservatory (Moscow), the Gubaidulina Competition (Kazan), Matan Givol (Tel Aviv) and Ensemble Festival Competition (Leipzig). His piece *Vokativ*² (for orchestra) was selected as one of the "Recommended pieces" at the 65th International Rostrum for Composers.

Marković's music was performed at music festivals in Europe such as Ircam ManiFeste, DonaueschingerMusiktage, Biennale Nemo, Time of Music, Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, New Music Dublin, Festival Mixtur, and interpreted, among others, by the Ensemble Intercontemporain, the Divertimento Ensemble, Mivos Quartet, Barcelona Modern, Black Page Orchestra, Diotima Quartet, TANA Quartet, Latvian Radio Choir, United Instruments of Lucilin, Chamber Choir Ireland, Gulbenkian Orchestra, the Brussels Philharmonic, and the RTS Symphony Orchestra. He was a composer in residence at the Cité des Arts in Paris, the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, and Snape Maltings in the UK where he was mentored by Michael Finnissy. Marković's

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6BtOGObGEg>

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_5aEu6PFTQ

most recent projects include *nakraj sela* (composition for ensemble and two keyboard samplers), performed four times in four different cities as a result of collaboration of 2K+ (Novi Sad), Festival Mixtur (Barcelona), Black Page Orchestra (Vienna) and UMZE ensemble (Budapest). He is under commission by IRCAM and the Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles for which he is currently working on a composition for choir and electronics. Also, he currently works as a lecturer of composition (Nebenfach Komposition) at the HMDK Stuttgart.

Although Marković actively creates in different fields – acoustic, electro-acoustic and electronic – in this conversation we will focus on his music for voice, or, more precisely, his stance toward voice, vocal technique and exploration, as well as his works (whether acoustic, electro-acoustic or electronic) that encompass voice. The exchange is divided into two parts, “On compositions for voice and actualities” and “On voice and the compositional process”, both of which have his self-proclaimed “deliberately intuitive approach to music” in mind, as well as his interest in overcoming premediated concepts, systems, and genre restraints.

On compositions for voice and actualities

*In June 2023, a paper on your vocal music was published.³ In the first days after the publication, you noticed that the first part of the title, that is, an excerpt from your introductory note in *Ultraterreno for two voices and piano* (2017) that was partly quoted, does not sit well with you regarding your current vocal writing style. For my part, although not applicable to your (vocal) opus in general, I sought the quote that was emblematic for the problematics and vocal versatility I was dealing with. The quote was taken from your sentence: “The music is highly eclectic and polystylistic and it should be approached accordingly.”⁴ At that time, it was too late to modify the title, but that situation*

³ Bojana Radovanović, “‘The Music is Highly Eclectic, and it should be approached Accordingly’: Voice in Jug Marković’s Compositions”, *Musicology*, 34, 2023, 111–131, <https://doi.org/10.2298/MUZ2334111R>.

⁴ Full paragraph from the Introduction: “The music is highly eclectic and polystylistic and it should be approached accordingly. You will encounter a couple of different stylistical complexes and compositional techniques. Therefore you will need to approach it with different vocal and pianistic techniques. These aesthetical differences should be stressed and even exaggerated. Do not be afraid to emphasize the presence of different ‘musics’ within the music as a whole.” Jug Marković, “About the piece and notes on performance”, *Ultraterreno*, score, 2016, 9.

gave us an opportunity to begin this conversation with that discussion. Could you elaborate on how you see your vocal writing (and compositions in general) now, compared to the previous, more 'eclectic' years?

Referring to the title of the article, I have to admit I was worried that it would suggest to the reader that my music is eclectic in general – which it is not. It can be, but not necessarily. That is a huge difference. Sometimes, like in the aforementioned *Ultraterreno*, where this quote was taken from, I like to stress this eclecticism and make it clear to the performer that they have to express multiple attitudes and take different roles within one piece of music. The case of *incidAnces*⁵ is similar. On the other hand, some other compositions belong to much more closed systems, for example *Madrigal*, *Rusty Rose*, *Uspavanka* or *Dolma* (to name a few).

What is important to me is to think how I can be as free as possible. I am aware that complete freedom is not really attainable since I/we (consciously or not) operate in a specific context, but I do think about it, and I continuously try to identify the restraints. In that sense my music and my approach to making music has not changed much. It is still driven by intuition, the desire to play and the impulse to step out of the certain 'manner' once it becomes too comfortable.

Your piece Nula for six voices was performed at the Musical Biennale in Zagreb in April 2023. This is a piece for six distinct voices, namely, the ensemble Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart, created within the project "Balkan Affairs". Here, you take on the social themes of your own time, and more specifically, your childhood in Belgrade and Serbia under sanctions for the first time in your opus. What were the specific challenges in the context of this project?

The biggest challenge of this project was the task I was given – to reflect upon the breakup and the aftermath of the breakup of Yugoslavia. This theme has been dealt with by numerous artists in our region and the biggest challenge was to avoid the commonplace and escape mannerisms in addressing this issue. This is the first time I decided to take on a socio-political topic and I normally avoid doing so for a reason. Concepts are not natural to my musical thinking. They do not come easily and spontaneously – let alone intuitively. I struggle with them, and I perceive them as something which is outside the world of sound, as something that has to be artificially attached to sound. I

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mUliNDtrlnE>

have to admit, it took me more time to think about and develop a strong concept that is driven and motivated than to compose the actual music – that was the biggest challenge.

What I did, briefly explained, is that I set the text myself and grouped it into two main portions. The first was a very personal one and contained a list of objects, pictures, phrases, situations, smells and colours that I associate with growing up in Belgrade during the nineties, such as “devize, vize, dizel, marke, super, popis itd”. The second portion of the sung text of *Nula* is a rather statistical one and it speaks of inflation and uses the three largest denominations of printed dinar banknotes (500.000.000.000 for example), as well as the daily hyperinflation rate lists of December 1993.

What about working with the ensemble, the Neue Vocalsolisten from Stuttgart?

Neue Vocalsolisten were amazing singers and apart from being virtuosos they are flexible, very curious and kind, which makes them ideal collaborators to try risky and unconventional stuff. I was really excited to work with them, not only because of their reputation but because for me their group is representative both of the contemporary and the archaic. Their abilities are very versatile and their palette of vocal possibilities really is a reflection of ‘present day’ music. On the other hand, their vocal ensemble, consisting of six singers, is something that unmistakably reminds me of late renaissance madrigals (which I am obsessed with, to say the least). To me, this united polarity of two ends of one line was very inspiring.

In July, Neue Vocalsolisten performed Nula at the Sommer in Stuttgart Festival. After the Zagreb premiere, was there a need for any changes? In Zagreb, just hours before the concert it was announced that one of the singers was unable to perform, so the Stuttgart premiere was the first occasion to hear the full ensemble perform the piece. From your perspective, what were the differences between the two concerts in terms of arrangement and the piece itself, in terms of the ensemble and the quality of the performance, and regarding the overall result of the “Balkan Affairs” project?

Yes, there was a need for changes after the premiere, though that didn’t have anything to do with the inability of one of the singers to perform. ‘Opening’ the score after the first performance to give it a final set of changes and modifications is a common procedure in my case. These modifications very often mean reducing (as I am prone to overburdening), even cutting out some

parts and throwing them away. A good time to make such ‘hard’ decisions is after I have heard the music in its real context. Very often that comes when a certain amount of time has passed after the premiere, and when I am able to have a ‘colder’ look at the music. For example, just as I am doing this interview, these days I spoke to Vladimir Blagojević about *Fleece Beats* (an accordion solo piece he commissioned and premiered in April 2023), and I told him I thought bars 21 to 46 should be removed (six months after the premiere). I am sure he wasn’t surprised.

Regarding the inability of the Baritone to perform at the Zagreb premiere of *Nula*, there was not much one could do about it. I tend not to be shaken or dramatic when things like this happen. Musicians are not robots. It’s a normal thing to be unable to perform, to be ill, etc. I did not adapt anything for this specific situation, I just left it as it was, and Neue Vocalsolisten sang magnificently with one voice less (five instead of six). The complete second premiere (with all six voices) in Stuttgart, a couple of months later, was certainly a better experience and a more faithful representation of the score, especially bearing in mind that they already knew the piece and had had time to become comfortable with it.

One of your last pieces that includes voice, Psalm for voice and flexible ensemble, deals with some vocal techniques that were popularized in spheres of more extreme music, namely, extreme metal music. I had the pleasure to consult with you about the extreme vocal pedagogy during the composition process.

As you said, in *Psalm* the singer is required to use an extreme metal vocal technique called scream, more precisely “fry scream” or “false chord scream”. My affinity towards this particular vocal expression is no coincidence and it does not come as a fascination with the ‘exotic’ genre. On the other hand, metal, and specifically black metal, was an important part of my maturing and its aesthetics were as ‘default’ to me as was classical singing (something the two of us share). Knowing that you, Bojana, have been affiliated with this topic through your musicological research and your doctoral thesis but also as an aficionada of metal music, I was free to ask you a million questions in numerous voice messages we exchanged (many of which included actual ‘screaming’). Your guidance in this topic was precious and it showed me how to approach a classically trained singer and explain in a precise way what sound I want to achieve and how to get it, while avoiding vague descriptive terms. *Psalm* is my first work that pursues the implementation of ‘scream’ in

a thorough and organized way, and the first work that offers a set of vocal coaching instructions on how to achieve it. And it only scratches the surface to be honest. Now that the door is open there is the possibility of digging much deeper into it.

Maybe, at a certain point, *Psalm* will be sung by a metal vocalist. I would love this to happen!

So, you are open to non-classical musicians performing your pieces? Is there any other occasion in your opus where this could happen?

Absolutely. *Defiant walks barefoot* and *Psalm* are the two most obvious pieces where non-classical musicians can take part. They were both composed having in mind the possibility of non-classical musicians performing them. Apart from those two I can already say that I have imagined *Serbian Love Songs*⁶ being sung by a singer from the domain of musical theater or pop-music. *IncidAnces* also occurred to me, though in terms of the complexity of the score they could be tricky for a singer who is not comfortable with reading new music scores. But concerning the voice type, vocal technique, color and expressivity this would be amazing and would totally work.

To realize how good this alliance potentially can be, one only needs to listen to the performance of Gorecki's *Symphony No. 3*, sung by Beth Gibbons of *Portishead*. This is an extraordinary example of how much potential these kinds of collaborations can have and how beautiful the result can be.

Your new audio installation, HoME (premiered in October 2022 in Barcelona), as well as the composition for ensemble and electronics nakraj sela (premiered in September of this year in Novi Sad, and performed in Vienna, Budapest and Barcelona soon after), drew attention from the perspective of voice. Here you also worked with voice in a particular way. This continues the thread you've very successfully begun with the piece Defiant walks barefoot for voice and live electronics, which was composed for the IRCAM course and premiered in Paris in 2021. Is there a path to be recognized from one piece to the other – given that they both use and work with voice in some ways – even though they are fundamentally different in their genre and performative appearance?

Let me first explain what is specific about *nakraj sela* and *HoME* installation. Namely, in both works I use the human voice (both speech and singing) as the initial material to create the electronic layer. Most of the electronics in both

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpD9aCVAAsc>

pieces are generated through various manipulations of the human voice. In that sense, the voice is embedded in the electronic layer even though it is not present on the stage. In the case of *nakraj sela*, it is played through one of the keyboard samplers. To the Serbian audience, the famous title taken from the traditional song “Na kraj sela” comes from those embedded voices, more precisely from a group of children whom we recorded, singing in the town of Novi Bečej, and whose singing was in real time, transformed into electronic sounds.

There is really no conscious trajectory to be identified, at least not that I am aware of at this point, though there are two things that *Defiant walks barefoot* and *nakraj sela* share. The first thread that connects them are the tools used for developing the electronics, more precisely the tools for processing the voice. Many things I tried in *Defiant* regarding live electronic treatments of the voice are reapplied in *nakraj sela*, many of which were further expanded and used in a more frivolous, improvisatory and exploratory manner. The second common thing for both pieces is a slightly “clubby” feeling, aesthetics that sometimes flirt with popular electronic music. This emulation of a different genre is not foreign to my work and in these two particular cases, employing gestures from “clubby” electronics and pop music is something that has particularly interested me in past years.

On voice and the compositional process

Given that voice holds a special place in your opus, it would be interesting to hear about what it means to you. How does composing for and working with voice differ and stand out in comparison with other types of work?

Voice is an essentially organic instrument. The real primordial tool we can produce music with. To me, this is fascinating and magical, and deserves special attention. It's as simple as that – though I have to admit that this infatuation with voice came slowly and progressively. My early musical obsessions, as initially, in adulthood, were always with the piano and its vast repertoire. I could never have foreseen that the human voice would preoccupy me so much in my work if you had asked me 10 or 12 years ago. It happened so that I happily accepted some early opportunities to write for voice, and I did so without any preconception or premeditated goal to profile myself in that field. I just went for it with a good feeling and, as time went on, the beauty of working with voice and discovering its possibilities opened up to me more and more as I gave it space and attention.

Your works with voice distinguish themselves not (only) in number or percentage compared to other authors, but also – and mainly, I would say – in the uninhibited research of vocal (and therefore bodily) possibilities and potential. Where does the inspiration for the diversity of vocal technique and style come from, for you?

I suppose it comes from the listening experience, my listening affinities and most importantly the music I grew up with, particularly in my late teen years. I already mentioned the important role of black metal during that period.

It's important to understand that the voice in metal music, a voice that one might call "extended" in today's contemporary music terms, was not at all extended for me (nor for other metal heads), nor did I perceive it as anything out of the ordinary. It was normal, regular – just a way of singing, another option of how to use your voice. I could fall asleep while Ihsahn from Emperor or Abbath from Immortal screamed into my headphones (I still can, btw).

I believe that an inclination towards the diversity of vocality came from an intuitively formed feeling at that time (not from verbally articulated thought as I explain it now), that there was no such thing as a default singing voice in regard to which other vocal techniques were usable deviations. These are probably the roots of my "uninhibited research of vocal techniques", as you nicely put it in your question.

One of the strongest features of your vocal works is the careful choice of the poetic texts the music is composed to. Since these are often poems and other texts you've known for a long time, what would you say comes first, the music or the sound? Do you read and text 'sounds' to you, or does the idea for the music come first and you look for verbal content based on its sound? I suppose both approaches are valid, but it would be interesting to see if there is any special difference between those two for you.

First of all, I have to say that I believe that the relation between text and sound is arbitrary. Their connection works on a subjective, unconcrete, intuitive and above all mystical level. The connection between the sound and the verbal content is not absolute, though in the case of good music this bond appears to be strong and unbreakable.

There is no rule as to how I start the process of composing with the text. As you said, both approaches are valid. Sometimes, I let the text and inflexion of the words take me in a certain direction, sometimes I sing and hum it to

generate the ideas, and sometimes I force it and pack it into a preconceived sound world (and, of course, adapt it in order to be able to do so). Very often the text has a certain “vibe”, a certain atmosphere that a composer can choose to follow or not.

There is really no system behind it and I approach each text in a very individualistic way. My approach can even vary within one piece, let alone between two different pieces.

Feeling, intuition, and hunch have a major role here (as they always do).

*Usually, when the composer finishes the piece, the performance is dependent on the performers. If the author is not performing, the performer’s voice temporarily overtakes and represents the composer’s voice, to use the terms Edward Cone set up decades ago. The question of ‘control’ is an important one; in the moments of performance, the composer surrenders control in sounding out the piece to the performers. When the composer is present on stage, the situation is somewhat different. However, this giving over of control is reassumed by you (as a fellow performer, but also the authority) in *Defiant walks barefoot*, where you control the performer’s voice directly on stage. In the premiere performance, *Thea Soti* is on stage with you, and she completely relinquishes the control of her own voice (as a symbol of subjectivity) to you and your electronics. How do you see this complex and inspiring relationship?*

For an electronics performer (in this case myself) to have control over a “direct sound” (which is how we call the amplified sound of a musician who does not feed any electronics but goes directly to the speakers and audience) is not a common practice, I have to admit. The direct sound is usually set during the sound check and is further taken care of by the sound engineer at the mixing board. In *Defiant walks barefoot* I decided to take over control of the “direct voice” because I wanted to mix it live with a certain effect. For example, the entire “direct sound” was compressed most of the time and I needed control in order to mix the compressed and uncompressed sound during the performance. Or, for example, live cross fade the distorted vocals and clean (effectless vocals). For all those manipulations I needed the control of the voice to be with me on the stage and not fixed and immovable back at the mixing board like it would be done normally. Therefore, my need for control came from technical needs, ideas about electronic effects and how to make them work as I had imagined.

I have to say that I am, in general, very happy about giving control to the musicians finally when the performance is about to happen. Or even earlier, during the rehearsals. It is a huge relief for me to hand over control, actually. I don't think my music is only mine and I don't bear the whole responsibility for its presentation and its existence. When I was younger that troubled me a lot, to be honest – the inability to control everything. Nowadays, it is a completely different story, I can't wait to share the responsibility and unburden myself.

Defiant walks barefoot was really a particular situation in every sense. Unlike Thea, who has owned the stage for many years now, for me, this was the first time in many years that I took part as a performer of my own music (probably since the last time I publicly played some of my piano pieces such as *Fantasia*, or *Nocturne for Cila*). I would never have decided to perform on stage if it had not been for Thea's friendship and her uplifting and reinforcing presence. So I would say that, in the end, there were no power dynamics in this collaboration. On the contrary, it was based on trust, and that trust included letting each other into domains that are normally off limits (such as the question of "direct sound").

Will you explore these power dynamics with vocal performers further, in the future?

Yes, but in the direction where I give as much control as possible to the performer. This seems considerably more appealing and fruitful to me, at the moment, than micromanaging.

Do you have any specific plans and ideas for the next vocal exploratory compositional project?

I am very happy to share that I am currently working on *Stabat Mater* – for baroque choir and electronics, commissioned by IRCAM and the Centre de Musique Baroque de Versailles. The premiere is scheduled for April 2024. I am incredibly excited about this project since I have been wanting to write *Stabat Mater* for ages and was always in love with other composers' "Stabats". I will not reveal too much, but what I can say is that in this project I treat the voices in a rather traditional way and exploit what baroque singers do best – create a beautiful, serene, clear and straightforward sound. In terms of the complexity of the electronics, this will be my most ambitious work so far and my first multimovement work (8 or 9 movements) since *incidAnces* in 2017.

Looking back to Serbian Love Songs (2016), one of your early pieces for voice and even Uspavanka (2012), written during your composition studies, how do you see the trajectory of this “vocal” journey, Stabat Mater and beyond?

To be honest with you, Bojana, these numerous talks and exchanges that the two of us have had about the topic during the last year, and especially the interviews, have made me look at my own trajectory systematically for the first time. Taking a step back from the present moment, the dearest things to me are those that contained rather risky compositional choices and those where, without thinking too much, I impulsively went for what I like. I guess I will keep that in mind for *Stabat Mater* and beyond. *Summa summarum*, it seems to me that I have had fun and a good time with the human voice.

For a more serious answer and insightful take on this question I would leave it to you, your colleagues or anyone who might be interested to explore.