
CONVERSATIONS

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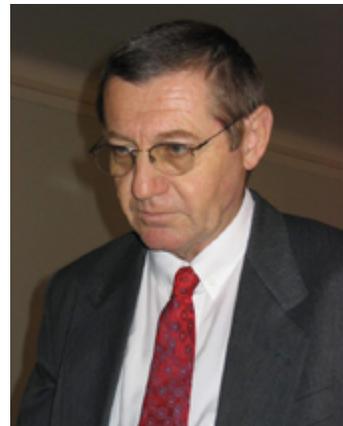
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THE WONDERFUL COLOURFULNESS OF OUR DISCIPLINE. A CONVERSATION WITH DUŠAN MIHALEK

I met Dušan Mihalek in 1968, when he was a fresher at the Department of Music History and Folklore of the Academy of Music in Belgrade, at the instigation of Prof. Nikola Hercigonja, whose lectures in the main subject I was attending at the time as a third-year student. In passing, he asked me if I had met our “first-year Jesus” and, with a mischievous wink, told me about his proposition to Mihalek to make “Music and the Bible” the topic of his seminar paper. Those who did not know Hercigonja quite well at the time were probably surprised by such a proposition from a



Dušan Mihalek

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professor whose lifelong hallmark was his Yugoslav, revolutionary, and communist beliefs, but not his students, who had ample opportunities to verify that his credo was and always remained art music. Since then, it has been more than half a century, saturated with a surplus of historical events, for which our generations were ill-prepared. Mihalek and I never lost sight of each other, either privately or professionally, collaborating especially closely as music editors at public broadcasters in Belgrade and Novi Sad, taking an active part in their development and trying to oppose retrograde tendencies, until forced, in the early 1990s, when radio stations became instruments of belligerent policies, to abandon them. Dušan emigrated to Israel and the following conversation was conducted on the Internet between Beersheba and Belgrade, once again amidst the psychosis of war, this time occurring in the country he had chosen as his refuge.

Dušan Mihalek was born in Novi Sad in 1949, to a family of musicians. Whilst still a child, he sang in a staging of Benjamin Britten's opera *The Little Sweep*. In secondary school, he founded a Music Youth Club and initiated a corn-picking youth work action to raise funds for purchasing a new piano. He published writings on music in the magazine *Index* and performed at Novi Sad's Youth Forum, collaborating with avant-garde artists. He earned his undergraduate and master's degrees at the Department of Music History and Folklore of the Academy of Music in Belgrade. He became a music editor at Radio Novi Sad in 1972 and its chief music editor in 1984. He produced several thousand radio and TV broadcasts and writings about music in Yugoslavia. At the Yugoslav Radio Television Competition in Ohrid in 1983 he won the best music broadcast award. He founded the Department of Stage Arts and Music at Matica srpska and started its periodical; he served as chairman of the Composers' Association of Vojvodina and the Music Committee of Yugoslav Radio Television. He taught as a lecturer at the Academy of Art in Priština and taught Courses for recording engineers of Yugoslavia in Zagreb. He gave talks and participated in symposia in Yugoslavia, the USSR, USA, Italy, Romania, Israel, Switzerland, Azerbaijan, Slovakia, and Canada. Since 1991 he has been living in Israel. Between 1993 and 2005 he served as director of the Israeli Music Centre, during which time he published 3,650 scores by Israeli composers. He established the Erwin Schlesinger chamber music cycle, featuring performances of music from former Yugoslavia, which he aired in broadcasts hosted by the Voice of Music Radio in Jerusalem. Since earning a degree from the Faculty of Tourism in Israel in 2005, he has been working primarily in business and tourism. In 2017 he was awarded the Is-

rael Charter for making an outstanding contribution in improving cultural ties between Israel and Serbia. In 2018 he was awarded the Pavle Stefanović Prize of the Composers' Association of Serbia for his collection of writings on music titled *Muzika i reč* (*Music and Words*; Novi Sad: Prometej, 2018).

Since the opening section of this journal is titled "A Conversation with a Composer/Musicologist", I'll begin by asking about your, I might say, somewhat controversial relations with your home discipline. It's as if you've been playing, over the past few years, a game, along the lines of "I'm a musicologist – I'm not a musicologist"?

I did my B.A. at the Department of Music History and Folklore of the Academy of Music in Belgrade (1968–1972). After I graduated, the department was renamed (as well as the Academy itself) and it became possible to pursue an M.A. in musicology as well. In fact, it was only by chance that I wound up at that department. I had wanted to become a composer and I was preparing (whilst still going to secondary school) for the entrance exam. I was getting private lessons in Novi Sad from Dušan Stular. He was a very colourful kind of person. He taught me something I've used all my life. He would say: "Life is not such a serious matter anyway. One should take it with a smile"! That is likewise my message to young (and not so young) colleagues: musicology is not such a serious matter. One should take it with a smile!

Since I had shown a penchant for writing and managing the Music Youth section, they directed me to apply at the Department of Music History... However, in order to apply, I first had to sit for 11 differential exams in front of academic professors, that is, the entire curriculum of secondary schools of music, which I didn't have at my regular school. And I only had a week for that! Had it not been for Prof. Vlastimir Peričić, who literally took me by the hand from one exam to the next, I don't think I would've ever pulled it off! My body was covered with a rash due to all the stress... And only then could I take the entrance exam with Prof. Hercigonja.

He admitted six of us, but from my second year on I was by myself (my classmates had either failed their exams or dispersed to other departments). So, I had 6–8 classes with Hercigonja and Ms Stana Đurić-Klajn every week. Just me, like in a private school! It was an unforgettable experience and a great privilege. I really learned a lot from them!

At the time, "musicology" was not a widely known term. When I returned to Novi Sad, after graduating, and said I was a musicologist, people

would ask me, like, is that something you eat... And the all-knowing piano teachers (there was still no Academy in Novi Sad at the time) would say, that's the last thing we need!

What did the concept of musicology mean to you when you joined the programme in 1968 and what has changed since then? A scholarly discipline that has branched out in different directions? Has the age of redefining every concept brought about changes in the meaning of the term "musicologist"?

Musicologist – how pretentious that sounds! Immediately upon graduating, I joined the Music Section of Radio Novi Sad. Ever since, I've considered myself "a musicologist temporarily working in media".

I spent the summer of 1972, after graduating and before I started working on the Radio, in the US. Attending lectures by professors at universities in Ohio and Pennsylvania, I realised that what Hercigonja had taught me was actually anthropological musicology. Since then, to the present I have viewed music (and musicology) as an inseparable part of civilization, which is why it's nice that one can approach it from a thousand different angles.

However, working on the Radio was so demanding that there wasn't much time for genuine musicology. The kind of texts intended for the radio are quite peculiar: short sentences, emphasising important things by repeating them multiple times (like in a set of variations or a rondo form). Like a story, it must attract the listener's attention. You must pay attention to the form of your broadcast, its tempo, dynamics... An outstanding colleague of mine from Radio Belgrade would pay attention to the tonalities of her "musical numbers", even the music in the commercials. Back then there was no school for radio editors, or for technicians... We learned everything on the go and from our senior colleagues. On the other hand, the radio gave me an opportunity to keep working on the ground: in concerts, operas, festivals... Especially around our Vojvodina. We had broadcasts in five languages, folk orchestras performing and recording music by every "ethnicity", a *tambura* orchestra... Those festivals would be preceded by municipal and then regional reviews. I spent a lot of my time sitting on various juries and recording all that stuff. The Danubian Countries' Folk Music Festival in Novi Sad and the Tambura Music Festival in Osijek were top-notch festivals and unique worldwide. They gave me an opportunity to meet some of the world's leading musicologists and ethnomusicologists, such as Dieter Christensen, Erich Stockmann, Anna Czekanowska, Zemcovsky, and others.

I came to appreciate this wonderful colourfulness of our discipline. “Let a hundred flowers blossom!”

The history of Serbian sacred music will always remember your discovery of the first Serbian Liturgy setting, which the Italian composer Francesco Sinico (1810–1865) composed for the choir of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Trieste.

I’m really glad that I found that manuscript in 1986, again thanks to my work on the radio and a meeting with the editor of the Serbo-Croat programming at Radio Trieste, Đorđe Milošević. At the time, it was known that the Serbs did have choral settings of the Liturgy even before Kornelije Stanković. Today we know a lot more about that. But this setting by Francesco Sinico from 1840 is a source of pride for the Trieste Serbs. I transcribed it into modern notation, staged a choral performance, sang in the choir, made a radio recording, published texts about it at Matica srpska; thus I covered the topic entirely. Some parts of that Liturgy were still alive in church choirs around Vojvodina. I was lucky in that the tradition of “old Vojvodina” hadn’t entirely disappeared yet. I spent time with people who still remembered Isidor Bajić, Petar Konjović, Svetolik Pašćan Kojanov... Ms Stana Đurić-Klajn spurred on my desire to engage in archival research. Even today, I’m still allergic to book dust! The harmonizations of Tihomir Ostojić helped me understand the logic of melodic voice leading in the Octoechos monody of Serbian church folk chanting.

You’ve built your explorations into the history of music in Vojvodina, with emphasis on the multicultural, in accordance with this mixed, dynamic environment, and in close collaboration with institutions such as the Radio Television of Novi Sad, Matica srpska, various ensembles, folk societies... When speaking of musicology, one should not forget that its “extended arms” comprise applied musicology, musicological analysis and approaches in various media and organising formats. It is interesting that in your work on the radio you also pursued creativity in composition and performance, as well as pushed the boundaries with Serious, Entertainment, and Folk Music, which were, until recently, strictly separate and delimited fields, at least on the radio and television.

As I was saying, there was precious little time for doing serious musicology, given everything we had to do at the radio. I got married as a young man,

right after graduating, we started having kids – our first child, then our second child, then the third, then the fourth. The only time I had for musicology was at night, after my wife and I would put them to sleep. I became a graduate student of musicology. My topic was symphonies in Vojvodina. Herigonja had retired by that time, so I worked with that wonderful and generous man, Vlastimir Peričić.

Matica srpska had founded its Department of Stage Arts and Music, and I was made its secretary. I'm really glad that I was able to gather in the Section's Committee musicologists from Belgrade, both from the Faculty of Music and the Musicology Institute of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, who didn't really collaborate much at the time. Along with Prof. Božidar Kovaček, I started a periodical, the Proceedings of the Department, and got musicologists from 12 different countries to write about Serbian music. We started doing fieldwork, recording folk music around the country. The first book we published was a study of Serbian and Romanian music by the ethnomusicologist Nice Fracile.

At the time, there was a rapprochement between the East and West, and Novi Sad became a sort of bridge for the European Broadcasting Union. To mark UNESCO's International Year of Music and Youth (1985), we staged the EBU's four biggest events: for the first time, we presented to the world the then-young Croatian composer Ivo Josipović, whose concert was broadcast live by 256 radio stations from Beijing to New York; we organised a concert of European jazz orchestras (including, for the first time, trombonists from Bulgaria), then a rock music festival (premièring an ensemble from the USSR), and a folk music festival, featuring an ensemble that for first time included performers from newly independent Estonia. In an age when there was still no digital technology, we produced a joint broadcast with Radio Baku (Azerbaijan). In "real time", our two orchestras, from their respective studios, performed a piece specially written for the occasion, and we broadcast its final realisation.

Your musicological insights and interests in contemporary music had a springboard at Radio Novi Sad, where you worked from 1972 to 1991, first as a member of its Art Music Department and then, during your last five years there, as its editor-in-chief. It was a time of sizzling creativity for the Radio as a whole, a time that ended for you in an especially dramatic fashion, with the breakup of Yugoslavia and the first armed conflicts. I reckon you might be satisfied with the mark you left there.

I enjoyed working there. It was a great team, both at Novi Sad and other radio stations. It was the golden age of Radio. It was the golden age of Vojvodina, when, along with Slovenia, it served as the “engine” of progress in Yugoslavia. Our conditions of work were, so to speak, ideal – at the Radio, at Matica srpska, at the Music Centre of Vojvodina (the opera and the philharmonic), at the Academy of Arts...

And then came the downfall and rude awakening from this sweet dream. I wrote at length about that in my text “Strogo kontrolisani radio” (A Strictly Controlled Radio).²

Back then, 40 years ago, you said: “The time is coming when we, musicologists and intellectuals, will be something like a sect, guardians of the flame”. On 19 January 1987 a resigned Hercigonja said: “It’s happening...”

Sometimes it seems as though you had an intimate connection with your preferred topics, that is, their protagonists, in a way that ethnomusicologists who do fieldwork often do. In short, your “informants” become your friends for life. Thus following your interest, at university, in Russian music (Prokofiev), you returned to Russian contemporary music after 1981, when, as a member of a Yugoslav Composers’ Union delegation (which included, apart from you, as representatives of Yugoslavia’s constituent republics and provinces, Dimitrije Bužarovski, Jani Golob, Bashkim Shehu, Zoran Erić, and Zlatko Tanodi), you found yourself in Moscow at a conference of young Soviet and Yugoslav composers titled “The roles of young composers in the development of contemporary music culture”.³ This was shortly after Tito’s death, there was much turbulence in the air throughout Yugoslavia and the USSR was seeing the final year of Brezhnev’s rule. What are your memories of the atmosphere in Moscow at the time and, especially, of this encounter between young musicians? You returned from Moscow with names of composers that were new in our part of the world, such as Viktor Ekimovsky (1947–2023), Dmitri Smirnov (1948–2020), Nikolai Korndorf (1947–2001) and others.

I consider my friendship with Viktor Ekimovski and other composers (members of ACM-2)⁴ and participants at the Moscow Autumn festival, the best of

² Dušan Mihalek, “Strogo kontrolisani radio”, https://www.academia.edu/43550953/Strogo_kontrolisani_radio

³ The Bulletin of the Yugoslav Composers’ Union, No. 73, January 1981.

⁴ ACM-2, founded in 1990 and modelled after the 1924 ACM, an alternative composers’ association; the first president of ACM-2 was the composer Elena Firsova.

my life. The rapprochement between the East and West, the fall of the “Iron Curtain”, allowed for improved circulation of information and freer creativity in the countries of the Warsaw Pact. Unfortunately, as we see today, it didn’t last long. Barriers are coming up again, even wars are being waged... But, at the time, I felt my duty was to help these Soviet composers, who were completely unknown outside of the USSR. Their professors and champions of the musical avant-garde had made their way onto the global stage (Denisov, Schnittke, Pärt, Kancheli, Gubaidulina, etc.). But I wanted to help this younger, as yet unestablished generation, from the bottom of my heart. And I still do. My powers were slight, but my commitment was boundless, bordering on fanaticism and walking along the edge of the regime’s wrath – on both sides. My best account of that is in my essay “Jugoslovenska veza” (The Yugoslav Connection).⁵ The lines that Nikolai Korndorf sent me in 1999, during the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, two years before he died, sort of became the recurring rondo theme of my life: “No words can describe what I feel for you and your loved ones... We are grieving with you, may God give you strength to see it all through, may your loved ones stay healthy and unharmed. You are perfectly right: there is no end in sight. And the way out of this complex situation is entirely unclear. We may only pray and hope”.

The violent destruction of Yugoslavia forcibly separated you from Novi Sad, as well as many other musicians from this part of the world. In Israel you faced problems, the language barrier, having to adapt to the different conditions of a luxurious, multicultural, but also commercial music scene, as well as with broader professional challenges and new areas of interest. As the director of the Israeli Music Centre, you participated in its rise, but also witnessed its demise. You were involved in the compilation of a database of Israeli composers, you studied the music of Yugoslav Jewish authors, you promoted authors and performers from Serbia. Continuity amid discontinuity!

Trying to save our eldest, visually-impaired son’s life, at the beginning of the Yugoslav wars, with no preparations or expectations, my wife and I, along with our four children, found ourselves in Israel in 1991, owing to my wife’s ethnic background. In my view, the greatest achievement of my life was winning the competition to become director of the Israeli Music Centre. I was

⁵ <https://dokumen.tips/documents/jugoslovenska-veza.html>

selected from among 40 doctors of musicology (mostly from the former USSR) and served in that post for the following 13 years. I found myself at the beating heart of a “giant” on the world’s music scene, in a “dwarf” state.

I worked with some of the world’s most renowned musicians (Mehta, Maazel, Penderecki, Gergiev, Perlman, Barenboim, Pogorelić...). During my 13 years there, I published more than 3,600 scores by contemporary Israeli composers and marketed them to performers... I also continued working on the radio there. I produced hundreds of broadcasts dedicated to the music of my native country, Yugoslavia. For years, I organised a concert cycle featuring Yugoslav artists. I even managed to get a Jewish choir (made up of religious Jews) to perform the Liturgy of Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac.

In addition, in Israeli archives I found score collections and information about Jews – composers and musicians – from the territory of Yugoslavia. They were wise, sending copies of their works to Jerusalem. The Nazis murdered them in the Holocaust, but their scores were saved. One of the greatest achievements of my life was discovering these scores, publishing them, staging performances and recording sessions. Owing to that, the Nazi idea of the “final solution to the Jewish question” did not succeed: Jewish music lives on!

To mark the 50th anniversary of publishing texts on music, in 2018 I compiled them in a book titled *Muzika i reč* (Music and Words), published by Prometej. The book was launched at Radio Novi Sad’s Studio M.

Recently, as your second profession, you’ve established yourself as a tourist guide in Israel. Do you get the impression that throughout your entire career, led by curiosity and a nomadic nature and empowered by musicological and cultural insights, you’ve actually worked as a guide through various ages and expanses of music, from composers to performers and back, on radio waves and other frequencies, in and along various kinds of networks?

The time of my arrival in Israel coincided to that of neoliberalism’s onslaught on our civilization. My destiny was likewise affected. Since [Benjamin] Netanyahu came to power, thousands of teachers have been fired and government funding for culture has suffered severe cuts. Protesting that culture belongs to us, we were told that nothing belongs to anybody. Fortunately, Israel is a rich country, with a large class of cultured and wealthy people. Their donations have saved Israeli culture. However, contemporary music was beyond the scope of their interests. I had to work more and more for less and less. I had to help my children, who were starting to have children of their

own, my grandchildren. There was no other way for me but to change my profession. Moving from musicology into business and then on to tourism, I started earning seven times as much and for the first time in my life, I had a stable income. Also, working in tourism leaves me enough free time, so even today, I still seek to help our beloved art with my texts. Money spoils people, but improves one's mood.

Since 7 October 2023 – another war! This time in Israel, against the background of the Russia–Ukraine conflict. Another dis/continuity in “music, which knows no borders”. And this is something that one can certainly not accept with a smile, like you advise young musicologists!

Moving to Israel initiated my “second life”. Moving into tourism initiated my “third life”. I enjoyed it until January 2023. As a result of that subversion of Israeli culture since Netanyahu came to power, the country has slid from democracy toward religious totalitarianism. Corruption has found its way into every recess of the state, even the erstwhile untouchable army. That led to 7 October 2023, when terrorists from Gaza murdered the eldest of my ten grandchildren, while he was out dancing at a concert. Back in the day, we managed to save our son, but our grandson got killed. The outlook is entirely uncertain. I can no longer take life with a smile. I dedicate these lines to the memory of our beloved grandson Mor Cohen.