
CONVERSATIONS

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REVEALING SOUND: A CONVERSATION WITH SVETLANA MARAŠ

I have never met the composer Svetlana Maraš in person, although I have been familiar with her work for years. I became particularly intrigued by her work when she was awarded the “Stevan Mokranjac” Award for the year 2020, for her electro-acoustic, radiophonic composition *Post-Excavation Activities*, which premiered on 30 May 2020 on the Radio Belgrade 3rd Programme. In their explanatory report, the Jury of the Composers’ Association of Serbia¹ pointed out that although this piece belongs to the genre of elec-



Svetlana Maraš, photo Zlatko Mičić

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¹ The Jury of the “Stevan Mokranjac” Award of the Composers Association of Serbia for the year 2020 consisted of the composers Ivana Stefanović (president), Vladimir Korać and Jug Marković, and musicologists Ksenija Stevanović and Ivana Miladinović Prica.

troacoustic music which is “oftentimes perceived as cold, impersonal, dehumanised, machinist and distanced”, it actually reveals to the listener “a powerful emotional horizon of discovery and contemplation over the fate of things that we make and try to preserve, and therefore over own our fate as a species and as individuals”.² And really, it seems that Svetlana Maraš’s virtuosic manipulation of various technological devices for the creation and reproduction of sound, in the studio and in live performance, represents only a means to an end, a medium for the solicitation of human inner being, rather than a goal in itself. Perhaps it is exactly this emotional, human dimension, which is apparent in her works such as *Desire* (electroacoustic composition, 2015), *Jezuk (The Language)*, electroacoustic, radiophonic composition (2016), *L’ampleur du souffle (The Magnitude of Breath)*, spatial electroacoustic composition (2020), *Defiance of the Glorious Children*, for symphony orchestra and tape, multichannel (2023) and others, that has contributed to Maraš’s success on the international composition scene. Or perhaps the reasons for that can be found in her playful, imaginative and boisterous communication with ‘machines’, which is particularly evident in her live performances, and immortalized in works such as *Radio Concert No. 1* (live performance /improvisation/ with EMS Synthi 100, 2018) and *Radio Concert No. 2* (2021), or in her ‘hybrid’ works such as *Wasser (Water)*, music automaton / installation / multichannel composition (2017), *Table Book*, instrument / composition for four performers (2023), and others.

Svetlana Maraš (b. 1985) has presented her work internationally, at venues, festivals and events such as: the Kunstmuseum (Basel), Haus der Kunst (Munich), Ruhr Triennial, CTM (Berlin), Ars Electronica (Linz), Wien Modern, House of Electronic Arts (Basel), Espace Multimedia Gantner (Bourogne), Musikprotokoll (Graz), Heroines of Sound (Berlin), Onassis Cultural Centre (Athens), Stadttheater (Bern), Museum of Contemporary Art (Belgrade), Izlog Suvremenog Zvuka (Zagreb), Blurred edges (Hamburg), ICMC (New York), International Rostrum of Composers (Wroclaw), ISEA (Dubai), International Music Institute (Darmstadt), Orpheus Institute (Ghent) and many other places. Her music has been used in theatre plays, experimental

² https://composers.rs/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Mokranjceva-nagrada-obrazlozenje-S.Maras_.pdf. See also Ana Gnjatović, “The Non-Existent Past of the Distant Future – About the Composition *Post-Excavation Activities* by Svetlana Maraš,” *New Sound – International Journal of Music*, 59, 1/2022, 89–103, <https://doi.org/10.5937/newso22059089G>.

and documentary films and presented at places like MoMA (New York), Aubagne International Film Festival and Bitef Theatre (Belgrade).

Maraš is Professor of Creative Music Technology and Co-head of the Electronic Studio at Hochschule für Musik FHNW, Basel. Since 2022 she has been a member of the Zurich City Music Commission (Zürich Stadt-Music Commission). Before that, from 2016–2021, she was composer in residence and artistic director at Radio Belgrade's Electronic Studio, where she established numerous programs such as artistic residencies, educational courses and most notably, the restoration of the EMS Synthesizer 100. And because of that, while searching for information about the restoration of this essential device of the Radio Belgrade Electronic Studio for the purpose of writing an encyclopaedic unit, I started my communication with Maraš which spontaneously expanded into two substantial and, for me personally, precious conversations over Zoom, which took place on 16 and 26 February 2024. I hope to continue these music encounters with Svetlana Maraš in person, sometime in the future.

Where did your interest in music come from and did you receive any encouragement from your milieu, your family or from any other source?

S.M.: My initial interest in music came through my older sister, who was already attending music school. There was a piano in our apartment and that was the incentive for me to enroll in the music school from an early age, and to start playing the piano. From that period, my earliest recollections are of listening to records at home, with audio dramas or audio fairytales for children.

How and when did you decide that composition was going to be your vocation? Did it happen immediately before enrolling in academic studies or earlier?

S.M.: I never made a specific decision because even back then, in my childhood, I was interested in music in the same sense that occupies me now. In other words, I was interested in music creativity, how music functions, how it is made, what you can do with it. I was never a very good student of the instrumental department, and in my youth I would come into conflict with my piano teacher because I improvised often! But anyway, that's when my interest in creativity, in compositions and music discovery first started. And it has continued to the present day, without any major turning points, or reconsiderations – it all happened very spontaneously.

You studied composition at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. What was it like for you, this experience? Did you already at that time become interested in sound art and the technological aspects of music composition, or that came about later?

S.M.: I have always been interested in something that I can now put clearly in the perspective of experimental music. Therefore, something that is not emphasized within our work and studies at the Faculty of Music – not even the part which has been institutionalized a while ago and known in history is taken too seriously, or at least not much attention is paid to it. And I am glad to mention in this context my professor Zoran Erić, who acted as a link between the academic requirements and my own personal interests – and these were experimental music, experimenting with electronic sound, with technology, with various things which did not fit in the framework of what was done at the Faculty of Music. I had professor Erić's support, and he provided the connection between my research outside of academic studies, in collaboration with certain musicians from Belgrade and in non-academic circles, and the curriculum of the Faculty of Music. Of course, all of that was in relation with what I do today – there were fragments which had a considerable impact on my present artistic profile. For instance, one of the important courses for me during my studies was the analysis of styles, which was taught by professor Ana Stefanović. Later, during my studies in Finland,³ I deepened this interest by taking classes in music semiotics at the Institute for Art Theory. And so, today I teach aesthetics and techniques of electronic music in Basel. It is one of my favourite subjects which connects my diverse interests, but the first 'trigger' for this kind of theoretical thought came precisely from the lectures by professor Stefanović at the Faculty of Music.

When speaking about the 'non-academic' sphere of influence, which was also very important to me, there was a group of people in Belgrade who dealt with free improvisation – these were students of the Faculty of Fine Arts, the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, also the composer Ana Gnjatović – and we gathered, improvised and talked about things. Together with this group of artists we organised events called "Interaktivni šalter" [Interactive Counter] at Students' Cultural Center in Belgrade. These events incorporated improvised music, electronic music, and we performed Pendulum Music by Steve Reich

³ Svetlana Maraš received her Master's degree at the Department of Media of the School of Arts, Design, and Architecture at Aalto University in Finland.

for the first time in Serbia, as far as I know. We exhibited various Fluxus instructions, watched films... All of that was happening in parallel with my studies and it informed my work considerably, that is it helped me discover what it was that I wanted to do – because I knew that it was music composition, but I realized that there existed more than one ‘recipe’, meaning not only what was taught at the faculty, but I had to find something ‘in between’ which would suit me.

On the other hand, there was always the festival Ring Ring – perhaps the biggest ‘school’ for me! – where one could hear things that were of interest. Later, I enjoyed great support from Bojan Đorđević⁴ with whom I began to collaborate following my studies in Finland; he became my manager as soon as I finished my studies, and that’s how my professional career was launched.

How did you decide on Finland for postgraduate studies? Were you looking for a place where you could develop your creative interests? What did this period of perfecting your craft bring to you as an artist and thinker?

S.M.: Already at that time, around 2008, it was clear to me that I was very interested in technological aspects within the sphere of experimental music. In Serbia, there were not many possibilities to learn about that. For me, the greatest source of information were various research projects and PDF files of doctoral dissertations concerning the subject which I could find online, primarily at the website of the famous NIME Conference, that is *New Interfaces for Musical Expression*,⁵ which has a long tradition and an enormous archive of all publications which were released within the conference.⁶ Because my interests were moving in the direction of technological aspects of sound, and schools called, for instance, ‘Art & Science’ and similar were not so popular at the time, there were only few of them – and one of them was situated in Finland. These studies were called *Sound in New Media* and that was fully in line with what I was interested to learn – even though it was so far away and so cold! I was a part of the first generation which focused on sound in new media, because until then they had a study programme for new media, but this new department was opened the year I went there. My stay was enabled thanks to the “Dositeja” scholarship which I had received in

⁴ Bojan Đorđević is the founder and artistic director of Ring Ring festival (<https://ringring.rs/>).

⁵ <https://www.nime.org/>.

⁶ <https://www.nime.org/archives/>.

Serbia, and at that time education in Finland was free, even for those of us from non-EU countries. After completing my studies, I stayed in Finland for another year and worked as a research associate on an important project developing an immersive interactive (virtual) installation.

The reason for my return to Belgrade was my collaboration with Bojan Dorđević, who realised that his network of festivals and collaborators could provide a good career path for me, which is exactly how it turned out. For several years he organised concerts and installations for me, and thus I started to travel around Europe and to develop this sort of activity.

In 2016 you began your tenure as the Head of the Radio Belgrade Electronic Studio. How did this collaboration come to fruition? Did you receive an invitation or was it your initiative? Did you know in what sort of condition you would find the Studio, and what sort of a challenge it would be for you?

S.M.: At the time I was probably the only one among the younger generation of Serbian composers who was interested in radiophonic composition. Elisabeth Zimmermann from Austrian Radio ORF – Ö1 Kunstradio commissioned two works from me, for her show *Kunstradio – Radiokunst*. For one of these pieces, *Jezik*, I wanted to work with the Radio Belgrade Archive. That's why I contacted the colleagues from Radio Belgrade, and I was very interested to bring these two media together – electronic and radiophonic composition. My engagement with electronic music naturally followed my interest in radiophonic composition and radio experiments which were, if we observe them from a historical perspective, always close to the origins of electronic music and early electroacoustic works. In that sense, I was, of course, familiar with the activity of the Electronic Studio – only at that time its image in my head was created from various 'urban legends', that there was a certain instrument... We all know, of course, the Studio's legacy in terms of the pieces that were created there, I am talking about the two LPs which are the most important,⁷ but I had no specific information concerning whether the Studio was currently active and what was being produced there. However, I was very active at the time and the colleagues from Radio Belgrade Third Programme saw that it was something which interested me and what I wanted

⁷ The LP records were released in 1978 and 1984. Much later, a double compilation CD was released, see Јелена Јанковић, "Trideset godina Elektronskog studija Radio Beograda. Elektroakustička muzika. PGP RTS, Beograd, CD I (2002), II (2007)", *Музикологија/Musicology*, 8, 2008, 302–306, <https://dais.sanu.ac.rs/bitstream/handle/123456789/2657/2735.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

to do. Back then there were not many composers who were active in the field of radiophonic composition, and that was probably the reason why the Third Programme, who had wanted to reactivate the Studio, reached out to me. Before that, I had never been at the Electronic Studio, and I had no idea what I would find there before I was offered the job. I said yes, and I faced the challenge head on.

On your initiative, two foreign experts, Daniel Araya and Jari Suominen, carried out the restoration of the Radio Belgrade Electronic Studio's main device, the EMS Synthi 100, which had been out of function for a while.⁸ What was the restoration like, how long did it take, and did you play a part in it?

S.M.: For Daniel and Jari – the latter I knew from my studies in Finland – it was very important to see the state of the Synthi 100 before their arrival to Belgrade. It was a large and significant part of the work – we studied the blueprints for the device which were preserved at the Studio. I was walking up and down with a camera and recording, and they were navigating me – look at this now, and now pull this out – I was sort of their ‘remote eyes’, and that’s how I learned a lot about the Synthi even before their arrival. Because of this communication they came fully prepared, they ordered spare parts in advance, and this first restoration was very efficient since they had everything they needed – had they been missing something important, it would have slowed down the process and made it a lot harder. Once they were here, they involved me throughout the restoration process, everything from vacuum cleaning together, which was a large part of the work, to remove the dust to avoid short circuiting, and they also showed me exactly how everything works and what needed to be repaired. Perhaps it is interesting to mention this detail concerning the perception of female composers in electronic music studios, in Serbia and elsewhere: when the technicians employed at Radio Belgrade came to the Studio, they only wanted to talk to the two of them, and to exclude me from the conversation – because, first, none of them believed that the device would ever work again, and second, what was I doing there?! However, Daniel and Jari, who come from a completely different world, gave importance to me and they communicated a great deal with the radio technicians through me as a mediator, which is why in the end the technicians also acknowledged and accepted me.

⁸ A detailed archive documenting the restoration of the Synthi 100 is available at Svetlana Maraš's web site: <https://www.svetlanamaras.com/ems-radio-belgrade.html>.

How did you connect the Synthi 100, as a hybrid, digital-analogue device, with contemporary digital devices in your work?

S.M.: As soon as they came to restore the instrument, these two foreign experts made a patch which enabled the MIDI standard. This made possible diverse connections between all of our devices – here I have in mind all artists who worked at the Studio, since each of us adopts a hybrid approach in the sense of combining a personal ‘setup’ with the existing equipment. It was very interesting to me because it showed the current paradigm of electronic musicians: I recently talked about it at a symposium where I delivered a keynote lecture titled “All sound is music, all technology is a playable instrument”⁹ – in the sense that nowadays everything is so connectible that musicians are mostly concerned with the ‘playability’ of all devices that we use, whereas how everything is connected, or whether something is analogue or digital is not so important.

It is interesting that, observing from the outside, we always perceived the Synthi 100 as an incomprehensible device situated at the Studio, while today, perhaps more than ever before, it is seen first and foremost as an instrument, a sound source which can be used just like any other instrument.

S.M.: Exactly – at the time when it was first constructed, this instrument was intended to be a ‘workstation’ on which much of the studio work would rely. Today, for instance, you have different programmes, ‘plug-ins’ in the computer, and you use all of them to create a composition. Synthi 100 was thus envisioned, however, when we restored it to an operational state, to become just what you say – an instrument. It is no longer a device which does most of the work, but it is rather used as part of a certain ‘setup’. And what is also a bonus, and what reflects the state of electronic music today, is the fact that many musicians in residence used it as an electronic instrument in live performance, or as an element of live performance, and this is something that was not planned for this instrument!

For instance, the earlier production of Electronic Studio was presented within the Belgrade Music Festival (BEMUS)¹⁰ in the form of recordings, because it

⁹ The keynote lecture took place at the Porto Electronic Music Symposium (PEMS) on 15 December 2023. See <https://casadamusica.com/pems-porto-electronic-music-symposium-2023/#item-speakers>.

¹⁰ The Radio Belgrade Electronic Studio presented its productions at the Belgrade Music

was not possible to 'export' the signal from the Studio. Later, when 'live electronics' were introduced, it relied on computers, and not on the Studio sound in live performance.

S.M.: That's right, and we wanted to show with the reopening of the Studio in 2018, which went completely live, the possibilities of using the Synthi in live performance. It was an idea that occurred spontaneously. It is interesting to see how the manner of using the device/instrument has changed over time, regardless of what it can offer.

What was your reaction to the sound of the instrument once it was restored – was it a surprise for you, and did it open some new paths of creativity?

S.M.: It was great. I even have a recording of the moment that we produced the first sound with it! I didn't have previous experience with it, unlike my colleagues from abroad who had already worked with the instrument. I mastered working with this instrument gradually, with the help of Paul Pignon's manual, and it took time for me to spend with the instrument to figure it all out. Now when I remember the period of working with the Synthi, it is something really special – despite all technology which is now available to me – because it was constructed a long time ago, in the early 1970s, with certain limitations that we must consider in order to use it today, but these limitations create an immense richness of results and sounds which are impossible to create in any other way. Later in some of my installations I used certain sound materials of the Synthi which are simple, but they would be impossible to produce otherwise.

Here at the Hochschule für Musik FHNW in Basel we have the earlier, smaller versions of the Synthi which, when connected, have almost the same features as the Synthi itself – but, it is not quite the same thing, among other reasons because of this physical, spatial aspect. Because an instrument is usually something small which you can move, play, connect, while in this case you are *accessing* an instrument, you're moving around it while working, and this is a process which we don't have with anything else that we use in our work. Especially now, when we are working with computer technology in which everything is 'mini' and small, so this physical spatiality of the Synthi is an important feature. Also, the spatiality in terms of sound, of what can be

Festival within six dedicated concerts which took place in 1974, 1975, 1976, 1981, 1986, and 1988. See <https://www.bemus.rs/sr/arhiva-bemus.html>.

done with these 12 oscillators which possess this incredible power of analogue sound, and the impression created by these enormous loudspeakers in a tiny studio. These loudspeakers are excellent and we also restored them to optimal condition while fixing the Studio. They make a really great combo with the Synthi.

Was it difficult for you to part with the Studio? You have moved on to a new stage of your life and career. Do you feel that you miss it, and do you plan to ever come back to it?

S. M: It was a truly special experience. I think that the social aspect was also very important – what it meant for the Third Programme, for the local community, how we managed to integrate all that during a short period of time, and there is certainly some nostalgia about that time. I hope that the Third Programme will show hospitality and invite me to produce another work there! Actually, I do have that in my plans, to continue with the idea of radio concerts, since after the first one I made the second, so I could do the third as well!

You realised the project EMS SYNTHI 100 on the Web with a group of collaborators.¹¹ What was the idea of that project and what is the purpose of the website which resulted from it?

S.M.: At the Studio I found a ton of millimetre paper where it was written how to produce a certain sound used in a composition, so the idea of the website was to find a way to write down these ‘patches’. Our primary motive was to demonstrate the notation of these electronic sounds, because at the time a developed system of notation did not exist. I think about it a lot because today the notation of electronic sound is losing its significance, since live performance is a dominant paradigm of working with electronic sound. The composers themselves are most often also performers, therefore any form of notation is more of use to them than to someone else. Also, the database on the website contains the sounds which resulted from these inscriptions. The purpose of this website is educational above all.

After five years of working at Radio Belgrade Electronic Studio, in 2021 you relocated to Basel where you work as a professor at Hochschule für Musik and

¹¹ <https://synthi.radio/about>.

as co-head of the Electronic Studio. How did this work opportunity present itself to you?

S.M.: Over many years I travelled frequently across Europe, performed my work, created installations, gave lectures, coincidentally usually in German-speaking countries. In Basel I gave a guest lecture and several concerts, and there I met former students of the Hochschule, as well as the head of the whole Sonic Space Department. Subsequently, the school contacted me and informed me that there was a job opening for Professor of Creative Music Technology, and that I should apply in case I would be interested. Therefore, everything happened quite spontaneously, just like other things in my life!

Concerning your pedagogical work, it is interesting to hear about the teaching process in Basel. What are your students like and what abilities do they possess at the beginning of their studies? How do they absorb information, and how do they reflect lessons in their work? Are these students of composition or of various departments?

Our department is situated within the Institute for Classical Music, which is on an exceptionally high level in this respect – the students-performers are already professional musicians who participate in eminent festivals. In this sense, the requirements placed before our students concerning the fields of solfeggio, music theory, and analysis are enormous! When talking about the field of creative music technology, when I arrived here three years ago, I encountered a certain state of affairs which was largely directed towards technical, engineering work. The changes in curriculum which I am currently introducing – which was expected from me when I started working there – are moving in the direction of obtaining an artistic aspect of creativity in the sphere of contemporary music, in the sense of electronic music composition, live performance of electronic music and sound art, sonic installations and similar formats.

I am under the impression that the field of experimental music is unlimited. For a while it was believed that everything was over, that it was impossible to go further, only to repeat and recycle what was before and to bring it into new contexts. I think that at the present moment such an attitude has been overcome, and that you and your creative output, as well as other composers who work in the same field, keep showing that it is possible to go beyond and to deviate from what was previously achieved.

S.M.: You can also observe it historically – that experimenting has always been present, and it still is, only perhaps at certain moments it was not so significant, or so visible, but it has always existed as a rule. This is something that I talk about a lot during my lectures, and how I contextualise my pedagogical approach in Basel. When speaking about experimental music, we are considering a field which does not have a referential framework in a classical sense. My approach is to determine something that works as a ‘default’ in this sphere of contemporary creation, and to observe why this most progressive, experimental part represents a deviation from certain standards and norms. It is always an interesting starting point for discussion, that is for questioning how much we move away from set parameters in a certain field of activity – why, but also how, and in which manner we move away from them. There are various processes and methods and artistic techniques which enable us to shatter clichés and thus arrive into the field with fewer established determinants.

Even though you are still young, you won the “Stevan Mokranjac” Award, the highest recognition for composers in Serbia. What else do you perceive as key moments and accomplishments in your professional career so far?

S.M.: I have never strived towards recognitions, but somehow spontaneously certain situations ‘judged’ that I was at the right place, or rather on the right path. When I was very young, these were, for instance, going to the festival *Bang on a Can* where I studied with David Lang, and other opportunities to learn and improve, for example going to Columbia University for a summer course. Later, invitations to perform concerts, which were numerous – these are all important things to me because they confirm that people trust my work. For instance, last year I received an opportunity to create an installation at the Kunstmuseum in Basel, with enormous support from the team behind that project. They enabled me to spend time in the building almost every day for two weeks until I developed an installation titled *Improbable Resonance* (2023), which was very successful and had many visitors. Also, the piece *Defiance of The Glorious Children* (2023) for symphony orchestra and tape represents another important milestone in my career. To me, these are recognitions of success, this confidence that people have in me to let me do certain works on a larger scale.

What is it that occupies you currently in your work as a composer, and how do you see your further creative path?

S.M.: My work is shaped in several fields – composition, performance of electronic music, installations, as well as pedagogical work. All these things develop equally, and they have already reached a more elevated stage where I am receiving support for my work – which is very important. As artists, in any discipline, nothing is possible without other people, without ensembles that we work with, foundations which support our work, festivals which promote it. I am very glad that I have the opportunity to work with fantastic people. For instance, most recently a work which is very important to me, *Firekeepers* (2023/2024), premiered at the Eclat festival in Stuttgart, performed by the ensembles Pony Says and Ictus from Belgium.¹² It was an ambitious project and something that presents a ‘milestone’ in the development of my compositional thinking, notation, and combination of electronic and acoustic sound. The whole piece is largely inspired by working with electronic sound and systems of sound objects which I have developed, but that would be a topic for a whole other conversation!

You mentioned the question of notation. Do you use traditional notation as well when working for other ensembles and performers? How do you shape your work so that other performers can interpret it?

S.M.: Ever since my studies I have been developing a form of aleatoric notation which communicates really well with musicians. I think that all of us who deal with classical music must take note of the question of notation. Just like other contemporary composers, I have a highly individualised approach to this aspect of compositional work.

What inspires you in your creative work? Is it people, events, books you read, or something that you find within yourself?

S.M.: My work contains very few ‘non-musical’ elements. To me, the inspiration comes from thinking about the structure of sound, also about composing with sound, but also about composing the sound itself. A lot of it comes from thinking about the form, including theoretical reflections – I have already mentioned how important the field of semiotics is to me, and also certain art theories. These are the fields which inform my work.

¹² The concert took place on 1 February 2024 (<https://www.eclat.org/konzert/ictus-feat-pony-says/>).

What is your preferred technological environment right now?

S.M.: It changes constantly, from one work to another, and it does not determine my work at large – I rely on different technologies both in the sphere of installations and in the sphere of performance. I experiment a lot and test the latest technologies. I benefit a great deal from the support of the Hochschule in Basel in developing my artistic work, which means a lot to me.