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LIKE IN THE OLD DAYS

Concerning the piece ...and I need a room to receive five thousand people with raised glasses... or ...what a glorious day, the birds are singing 'halleluiah'... by Ana Sokolović¹

Abstract: The article offers a discussion of *...and I need a room...* (2013), a piece for large chamber ensemble by Serbo-Canadian composer Ana Sokolović (Ана Соколовић), inspired by songs by the former Belgrade rock band *Ekatarina Velika* (EKV, *Екатарина Велика*, EKB; “Catherine the Great”). Dedicated to the 1980s urban generations of former Yugoslavia, the work occupies a unique place in its author’s

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¹ A slightly different version of this text was presented at the forum titled *Novi zvučni prostori* (Нови звучни простори; “New Sound Spaces”), held under the auspices of the festival *Bunt* (Бунт) on 25 November 2019 at the Musical Gallery of Belgrade’s Kolarac Foundation.

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oeuvre, by virtue of opening, on the one hand, a world of memory concerning her own youth, and relaying, on the other hand, a message about the large amount of cultural capital that the music of *EKV* commands and, furthermore, about all that it represents for her. The composer's existential bond with the music made by one of former Yugoslavia's most influential rock acts informs her own creative procedures in this piece, actualizing the postmodernist principle of play, which in fact results in voiding the work's referential material of meaning by means of a procedure that simulates working in the medium of electronic music.

Keywords: postmodernism, play, simulation, Ana Sokolović, *Ekatarina Velika*

Ana Sokolović (Ана Соколовић)² lives and works among various kinds of music. Apart from the label of an *émigrée* composer who has taken her music out of its national bounds and into the wider world, what defines her as a representative of her original culture is her music. She left Serbia in the early 1990s, but the way she composes her music makes it seem as though she had never left this part of the world. Critics have speculated about the presence of “Slavic soul” in her rich compositional production, whilst emphasizing the Balkan folk tradition as an important source of creative inspiration in her music.³

Sokolović is one of those postmodernist composers who maintain trust in the vitality of musical tradition and for whom composing is always a kind of listening out, reanimating something that is already familiar. In her pieces,

² Ana Sokolović was born in Belgrade in 1968. She earned her undergraduate degree from the composition class of Dušan Radić (Душан Радић) at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad. Sokolović then joined the master's degree programme in composition in the class of Zoran Erić (Зоран Ерић) at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade and completed her degree in 1995 at the University of Montreal, in the class of José Evangelista. She moved to Canada in 1992, where she has built an impressive career as a composer and now teaches at the University of Montreal. Her oeuvre is very rich and diverse in terms of genre. She has won a number of prestigious prizes and awards. Her opera *Svadba* (Свадба, “Wedding”, 2012) for six female voices *a cappella* won the Dora Mavor Moore Award and that same year the National Assembly of the Canadian province of Quebec proclaimed her a “national treasure”, which brought much publicity to her work both in Canada and throughout the world.

³ Cf. Holly Harris, “Ana Sokolović wants you to enjoy her imagination”, *Musicworks*, 34, Fall 2019, <https://www.musicworks.ca/ana-sokolovi%C4%87-wants-you-enjoy-her-imagination>; Tamara Bernstein, “The Vocal Music of Ana Sokolović: Love Songs for the Twenty-First Century”, *Circuit*, 22 (3), 2012, 19–35. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014226ar>.

she boldly cruises between various kinds of music and erects bridges spanning huge expanses, linking different media, styles, time epochs, cultures. Participating in our culture at a 'noble' distance, in 2013 Sokolović wrote a piece for large chamber ensemble, inspired by music made in Belgrade during her youth. The work features an unusually long title: ...and I need a room to receive five thousand people with raised glasses... or... what a glorious day, the birds are singing 'halleluiah'...,⁴ in which connoisseurs of Yugoslav popular music will easily recognize verses by Milan Mladenović (Милан Младеновић) of the Belgrade rock band *Ekatarina Velika* (EKV, *Екатарина Велика*, EKV; "Catherine the Great")⁵ – *i treba mi soba da primi pet hiljada ljudi s dignutim čašama* (и треба ми соба да прими пет хиљада људи с дигнутим чашама) from their song "Budi sam na ulici" ("Буди сам на улици", "Be Alone in the Street")⁶ and *kakav radostan dan, ptice pevaju „aleluja“* (какав радостан дан, птице певају „алелуја“) from "Radostan dan" ("Радостан дан", "A Glorious Day").⁷ In addition to the title, the commentary included at the top of the score also provides a sort of guidance for interpreting the work. It informs us that the piece was inspired by musical elements extracted from two songs by the Serbian rock band *Ekatarina Velika* and that it is dedicated to "the 1980s urban generation of former Yugoslavia", in addition to the customary dedication to the Turning Point ensemble, who commissioned the work.

Unlike the folk idiom, whose musical potentiality she often seeks to reanimate and build upon in her own musical language, for Sokolović rock music is not an obsessive concern that she often revisits. However, judging from

⁴ The piece is scored for an ensemble comprising a total of 15 instruments: flute, oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, French horn, trombone, percussion, piano, two violins, viola, violoncello, and double bass. It was premièred by the Turning Point Ensemble led by Owen Underhill on 29 March 2014 at the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts in Vancouver. The Ensemble commissioned the work with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts. In 2017, the piece was nominated for that year's Juno award, in the category of classical music. Cf. <http://www.anasokolovic.com/>.

⁵ The rock group *Ekatarina Velika* (EKV) were active in Belgrade between 1982 and 1994. It was one of the most successful and influential bands in former Yugoslavia.

⁶ From the album *S ветром у лице* (С ветром у лице, "Facing the Wind"), PGP, 1986. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUQ2ayeWoHU>. The lyrics are provided in the Appendix below.

⁷ From the album *Katarina II* ("Catherine II"), ZKP RTLj, 1984. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yA379xFM0WY>

this work, it certainly appears to be the most intimate. This piece occupies a unique place in her oeuvre by virtue of opening a world of memories concerning her own youth, a sort of initiation into (at the time) two separate worlds: those of artistic and popular music.

Born in the late 1960s, Sokolović belongs to the generation who came of age during the 1970s and 1980s, that relatively short interval of real/false stability in Yugoslav society. At the beginning of the 21st century's second decade, among the post-Yugoslav diaspora and beyond, the 1980s in particular, that final decade of Yugoslavia's existence, are often posited as a time of optimism, freedom, unrestrained by borders, whether state, national, cultural, or social.

In her endeavour to immerse herself into an individual, intimate past, Sokolović searches for a vantage point and performs her memory of Belgrade as it once was via the music of those times, which, unlike some other memory narratives, offers a more direct approach to the past. For the composer, the music of *Ekatarina Velika* is a domain of memory, a part of her cultural heritage that she harbours in her bosom as the power as well as burden of her origins. On the one hand, she uses the music of *EKV* to conceal a lot that is personal,⁸ while on the other hand, in the context of remembering 1980s urban Belgrade, the band is a powerfully marked icon of that period.⁹ It seems as if her work sought to remind us of the symbolic value of this music and all that it represents for her, as a symbol of faith in individual freedom, art, and progress. Although the band *EKV* no longer exists today and the country that Sokolović left is likewise no more, it seems as if her perception of this music had not changed at all. The deeply lived 'beauty' that she heard in the music of *EKV* almost four decades ago, her perception of the world at the time as a sort of oasis of play and freedom, a boundless place that could "receive five thousand people with raised glasses", return into an even more potent feeling of the joy of creating. Indeed, Sokolović insists that her intent behind this work was to express the ruling emotion of the period and its generation's projection/anticipation and perception of the future.

⁸ In the mid 1980s, Sokolović had a rock band of her own, *Art&Craft*, which split up after their second concert. Interestingly, at their first concert, which was broadcast on the radio, the band met members of *EKV*. From a conversation with Ana Sokolović held on 25 October 2019.

⁹ Cf. Ante Perković, *Sedma republika: pop kultura u YU raspadu*, Belgrade–Zagreb: Službeni glasnik–Novi liber, 2011.

The composer's existential bond with the music of *EKV* left a mark on her creative procedure itself, as employed in this work, which in fact actualizes the principle of play as her main creative impulse. In her own words, the music of *EKV* forms the basis for a "personal play/story" of her own, wherein she combines her accumulated memories with a digital and technologized present; as though she found herself in a Formula 1 microcosm, creating numerical, electronic music¹⁰ by *playing* with keys/switches (hence also the constant acceleration of tempo). The result of her creative play is actually a subtle emptying of meaning from the work's referential material,¹¹ by means of procedures that resemble working with a sequencer. Although it concerns here a traditional performing apparatus, the compositional procedure itself is quite similar to the structuring of sound layers in electronic music. Thus it simulates working with a sequencer, using the procedure of 'splicing' – cut & paste, openness to various kinds of effects and interventions, refracting/multiplying the material, changing the model's timbre and clarity, adding/subtracting elements, some of which may 'damage' it permanently, etc.

In interpreting this piece, it is therefore necessary to adjust one's vision to Sokolović's poetics and construct a specific strategy for reading her re-interpretative, postmodernist procedure.¹² The musical reminiscence of the two *EKV* songs in this piece stems from her 'natural' approach to music as a building material for making new music. As we are about to see, like a lamp, the compositional procedure applied in this piece illuminates only certain elements of the original context, whose assumed totality thus remains out of reach. As her building material, with which she subsequently works and makes it fit into the tissue of her own musical text, Sokolović selects several characteristic elements from the songs: their motivic material, scale passages as a trademark of the band's keyboardist Margita Stefanović Magi (Маргита Стефановић Маги), an active rhythm as a signifier of the Yugoslav New Wave's raw, vigorous energy (rebellious against all constraints). At the same time, the composer manages to strike the right balance, preventing that rela-

¹⁰ From a conversation with Ana Sokolović, 25 October 2019.

¹¹ In such situations, "the quotation actually leaves the level the signification referencing the specific source" and transforms "into many other entities that can act as further signifiers, even signifiers of musical and aesthetic milieus that essentially contrast with the initial, classical icon". Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, "The nature of post-modern classicality in European music", *International Magazine for Music New Sound*, 39, 1/2012, 55.

¹² For a more detailed discussion, see: Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman, *Fragmenti o muzičkoj postmoderni*, Novi Sad, Matica srpska, 1997.

tionship between the sample and its reinterpretation/elaboration/sublimation from morphing into a sort of sentiment(ality).

Although the music of *EKV* informs its basis, this piece nonetheless cannot convince the listener about its potential signified. The *EKV* songs are not used as quotations, but are re-signified from the composer's own perspective and, as such, processed through the filter of her own creative habitus, they may be recognized only as an echo, a treacherous landscape whose contours may be gleaned in the work's simulating procedure, which produces a *surplus*, i.e. *difference* between the past and the present that emerges from their blending and makes this piece so alluring [*izazovno*] for today's listeners. Although their causal origin may be determined, none of the elements mentioned above are outlined specifically enough, but appear in stylized, reshaped forms. In that sense, it is possible to understand the piece without its sample as well.

The piece consists of three elided segments, performed *attacca*, back to back. The opening segment begins with a statement of a 'hybrid' theme in the French horn and trumpet parts, which contains elements from both *EKV* songs. The fanfare, parade-style trumpet sound that issues a motif from the first verse of "Budi sam na ulici", dominated by a rising fifth leap, as well as its constantly pulsating line, evoke the energy flow of youth and rock 'n' roll. The point of this opening theme is that of a pattern of sorts, a sound concentrate that subsequently informs every individual piece of material.

Following a *tutti* tremolo in the entire orchestra, which will come to signal every change of sound image/model throughout the piece, from bar 7 onwards the oboe and trumpet parts present the main motif (Example 1).¹³ Sokolović's method of working with the rising fifth motif simulates the sequential functioning of a sound-processing programme. The musical flow unfolds across multiple layers, with constant repetition and orchestral variation of the model by using cut/paste commands. With every repetition the main motif is modified (the place of the cut changes every time), like a mutated gene that keeps replicating itself, generating new mutations. The connective tissue is provided by the bass line, a constant rhythmic background based on the rhythm of "Radostan dan", which highlights the fluidity and keeps upping the tension. In the opening movement, the model is deformed several times, diverging from its original form. The piano part plays a prominent role; it frequently resurfaces from the monotonous lines of the winds and strings, which are intertwined and elided. The many arpeggiations, scales, and octave doublings generate a striking effect alluding to Magi (Margita Stefanović).

¹³ Sound example is available online at the official New Sound YouTube channel: https://youtu.be/lh-T1R10_Q8

Example 1: A. Sokolović, ... and I need a room..., bb. 5–8

CONDUCTOR : SIGN II CONDUCTOR : STANDARD CONDUCTING

Fl. *ff* *f* *mp* *p* simile

Ob. *ff* *f* *mp* *p* simile

B♭ Cl. *ff* *f* *mp* *p* blow through instrument with fast key clicks / slap note

B. Cl. *ff* *f* *mp* *p* reed half out, blow air and key claps / simile

Bsn. *ff* *f* *mp* *p* reed half out, blow air and key claps / simile

Hn. *ff* *f* H.V. (half valve)

C Tpt. *ff* *f* *p* > *pp* *p* > *pp* muted harmon / airy flatt. blow air through instrument / simile

Tbn. *ff* *f* *p* > *pp* *p* > *pp* airy flatt. blow air through instrument / simile

Perc. *ff* snare drum / ratchet

Pno. *ff* *mp* gliss. lh with the forearm while keeping all notes

From b. 204 onwards it is as if the sequencer had been set to accelerate, culminating at the very end with the accumulated energy bursting in an explosion.¹⁴ Following this condensed and emotionally heightened opening movement, the second movement (b. 230) almost appears to step out into another, ‘mythical time’, a domain of silence that produces its own sound and

¹⁴ The rhythm that likewise originates from “Budi sam na ulici” keeps accelerating until it explodes.

has an expressive tension of its own. Like the surface of a body of water, silence operates here like a mirror reflecting the atmosphere following the explosion. The material we heard in the first part is now developed in blocks, again in a sort of automatic movement, but this time resembling a winding mechanism.¹⁵ Each one of these monochrome blocks (the strings and the woodwinds/brass) brings a different kind/colour/timbre of silence, which is thus woven into the musical tissue itself, lending it a specific rhythm. This movement reflects the composer's refined sense of nuance and the aesthetic effect of sound. A sense of transparency and sonic fragility is achieved by using various sound effects in the softest dynamics.

The third movement resumes the quasi-sequencer play. In this procedure one recognizes the voice(s) that 'infiltrated' the main motif from the opening of the work. The composer describes this movement as a grotesque Frankenstein play, in which the big Other 'is pulling the strings' In the end, the spectre of the hyper-world explodes in a piece of quasi-computerized sound processing. A highly active and nimble texture consisting of blocks of sound with allusions to motives from Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* generates an impression of tension. Constant linear additions, new layers, thickenings and thinning of motives stimulate wakefulness, structural fragmentation and wasting away, all the way to b. 415, when all the instruments come together in unison, whereupon the entire process slows down. The quasi-sequencer has overheated and finally, to put it colloquially, 'crashed'. The final tonal steps in all the instrumental parts correspond to the note *a*. The ending may seem like a sort of 'farewell', complete with an element of staging, just like the opening of the piece. Whereas the trumpet and horn players are instructed to play the opening six bars standing up, before the conductor mounts the podium, at the end, each performer is instructed to stand up and play the note *la* (essentially tuning up!). The last to go is the trumpeter, who (after tuning up) seems about to start the piece again, but the conductor signals and the lights come off. It seems as though these subtle elements of staging that emerge in three spots were 'celebrating' the work's playful aspects, which are likewise secured by the compositional approach and one text interfering with another.¹⁶ At the end we actually hear the beginning of some other music that never gets to be

¹⁵ In the opening of this movement the conductor plays the role of a metronome. In bb. 240–248, s/he is instructed to spin while conducting.

¹⁶ Cf. Niall Lucy, *Postmodern Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1997, 15.

played. In addition to referring to a focus on future, the work's open ending is actually an invitation to another creative game and an invocation to keep developing and accumulating the totality of the experience of music.

What is the meaning of this simulation of sampling and automatic procedures? And do these processes outline a sort of Belgrade experience or, more specifically still, a more personal experience on the composer's part? It is precisely the method of presentation that is obvious here and mysterious at once. It is as if everything in the music were transparent, and yet simultaneously unclear; as if the whole procedure were halfway between neutralizing sound into 'mere tools' and a desire to communicate. On the one hand, the sequencer does what 'the system' commands, while on the other hand, the expressive power of the subject comes through at certain points and we clearly recognize the primary signified – the music of *EKV* and a condensed, 'zipped' emotion of the joy of living, cheerfulness and optimism, which speaks from the structure of the work itself and constitutes the quintessence of the composer's youthful perception of the world of future. One might even say that the procedure that Sokolović applies here closely resembles the work of a historian, who keeps moving between the past and her attempts to bring it back to life, to construct and reinterpret it today.

The world that this piece pries open seems to 'float' in time, removed into an elusive domain of memory, play, dreams. We may also conceive of the sampling procedure as a tool for modulating affects, living fragments of the past that keep pulsating in our own time, which the composer attempts to invoke by playing with them. Simulating this procedure, Sokolović strikes a distance from her own past, which is faded beyond recognition, beyond her reach. It seems that only in this way, paradoxically, the composer could connect the past with the present, highlighting the unavoidable dialectic in which the past and the present are both entangled, recording one of the ways in which the music of *EKV* also made an impact on her personally.

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Appendix: The lyrics of the two *Ekatarina Velika* songs

A Glorious Day

What a glorious day
The blacks are singing halleluiah
What a glorious day
The birds are singing halleluiah
You have your fear
You have your fear of yourself
You have your waist
Poignée d'amour
You used to like my *Weltschmerz*...

Be Alone in the Street

I need a world
Open to gazes
Open to running

And I need a room
To fit five thousand people
With raised glasses
With raised glasses

Chrystal is breaking
Glassy sparks are glittering
Under our feet

Like total strangers
With glass in their hearts
With glass in their eyes
On their faces

Be alone in the street

Be alone

Be alone in the street

Be alone

I need a world

Open to gazes

Open to running

And I need a room

To fit five thousand people

With raised glasses

With raised glasses

Chrystal is breaking

Glassy sparks are glittering

Under our feet

Like total strangers

With glass in their hearts

With glass in their eyes

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Be alone in the street

Be alone

Be alone in the street

Be alone