
CONVERSATIONS

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THE SOUND IS MY PERSONAL DIARY. CONVERSATION WITH SVETLANA SAVIĆ

“Puck. How now, spirit! whither wander you?
Fai. Over hill, over dale,
Through bush, through brier,
Over park, over pale,
Through flood, through fire,
I do wander everywhere,
Swifter than the moon's sphere –
And I serve the fairy queen,
to dew her orbs upon the green.”

(W. Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

Svetlana Savić is currently the head of the Department of Composition at the Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade, where she has been working since 1999, and became a full professor in 2020. Since 2011, this composer

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has also been teaching at the Interdisciplinary Studies Department of the University of Arts in Belgrade.

Svetlana Savić is one of our most prominent composers of the middle generation, born in 1971. She is one of an extremely talented generation of authors along with Tatjana Milošević, Anja Đorđević, Ivana Ognjanović, Goran Kapetanović, to name a few, who artistically came to the fore in the second half of the nineties.

Svetlana Savić received the “Mokranjac” Award in 2014 for her composition *Trapped* for choir and electronics, which the jury described as the “pinnacle of her creative mastery” and which was inspired by the dramatic floods that occurred in Serbia, that same year. Also, the music magazine *Muzika klasika* gave her the “Composer of the Year” award for the composition *About Wolves and Trains* for mezzo, electric cello and keyboards in 2016. It was composed to the verses of Jelena Marinkov from her award-winning poetry collection of the same name.

Svetlana Savić’s compositions have been performed at festivals and concerts in Serbia, Republika Srpska, Belgium, Israel, Austria, Germany, France, Italy, Lithuania, Russia, USA, Japan, South Africa and Namibia. She has collaborated with excellent performers, ensembles and orchestras such as the Belgrade Philharmonic, the Symphonic Orchestra of Radio-Television of Serbia, the Academic Choir “Collegium musicum”, the Belgrade String Orchestra “Dušan Skovran”, the Royal Strings of St. George, The Construction Site New Music Ensemble, The Ensemble Metamorphosis, the Belgrade Chamber Orchestra “Ljubica Marić”, the Trio “Pokret”, the Fujita trio and others.

Svetlana Savić has written for many different genres – symphonic in her graduate composition *Sustineo; Re-versions* for nonet or *Quincunx* for string orchestra. But, the pillar of her poetic world are her vocal compositions for female voice or voices accompanied by instruments and electronics, starting with an exceptional piece written while she was still a student *The Poor Sad Don Juan’s Daughter* for soloists, women’s choir, and electronics (1992), all the way to her doctoral-artistic project *Sonnets*¹ written to the poems by Michelangelo, Petrarch, Shakespeare and Baudelaire, as well as to the recordings of medieval and renaissance music, inspired by love poetry. We should mention also her composition *Songs about stars* for female choir and chamber orchestra, as well as her recent piece *Godzilla* for mezzo and accordion from 2019.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zWU3sNny8XM>



Svetlana Savić

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We shall talk about vocal music and her compositions in this field, as well as about the relationship between the electronic part and voice, with the composer Svetlana Savić.

In which way are you inspired by a voice and vocality? It seems to me that in your work the 'the otherness' of voice is more prominent, its ritual and magical features, than its beauty and warmth. A voice itself binds us to the world around us, which is often beyond the possibilities of human comprehension; a voice serving as a link between the material and the rational domain and the all-embracing realm of emotions and irrationality.

A voice is an instrument we are born with and we use it to do all we want. It is a way we communicate: asking, giving, saying how we feel. My first memories are the songs my mother sang. And she sang them, enraptured and by herself until the end of her life. She had a special song for every person she loved. My song was *Ah, Autumnal Long Nights*. Whether it was this song or whether it was because of my imagination, nights in autumn were always

magical, melancholic, full of perfumes and secrets. Earlier on, I used to write music during the night and when I got tired I would sit at the window and watch the street wrapped in fog. A voice helped me to add meaning to music, to make the sound accompanying the poetry sharper, clearer, and more resonant, to be able to reach people faster, to wake them and provoke them more readily. It was important for me to say something with my creations, maybe because I am rather a quiet person myself.

And you are right, one of my favourite cognitive distortions is magical thinking. I still believe that my upright piano has whispered which keys to press and that my music has influenced events in my life. For me, writing music is a ritual for preserving my happiness and common sense. When I abstain from this ritual, I become depressed, superficial and lost. These are signs to go back to myself and to start composing again. Writing music is ingrained in my identity because when I don't work I lose the sense of who I am. All that is left are roles, and they are not enough to survive on. When I don't compose I lose my voice and I lose the power to express myself. But, I also stammer and forget words in the periods when I do write music on a daily basis... so strange.

What is a lament for you? I have noticed some sort of lamentation – a keening tone – in some of your works (for example in The Poor Sad Don Juan's Daughter, or Trapped). There is something ancient in your compositions, a connection with the otherworldly and I mean this in the best possible way. When I mention mourning or lamentation I am referring to a special power – to discern life from death, in other words, to leave that which can no longer be so as for everything to move forward.

I think that we are predestined to mourn in this region, in an almost epigenetic way. Life 'blew' me off the light subjects, soon enough. I was in my twenties during the nineties. Already in my second year of the composition course I wrote the lied *Clinical quartet*, an image of the sickness and dying of a country and its people. History repeats itself and sickness and death do not grow tired. I was especially saddened by the death of animals. We could not save and take care of them all, and many died on the streets. I myself had a strange belief that I would not 'last' into the new millennia. Death as a millennial mistake? It did not happen, but there were a few crises. I mean, life did not give up on me. I suppose I slowly spent my time, without any rush, without hope, without any particular expectations. We still live from day to day, espe-

cially now, during the epidemic. I hear my mother's voice often in my mind: "just to appear alive tomorrow".

My way of dealing with death has been through music. In my graduate composition *Sustineo* I followed the teaching of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and slowly broke its seven seals of silence. As if I understood something during that 1998, I received some kind of solace. For some time I was certain that I was no longer afraid. But that was indeed a short period – until I became a mother. Then all the themes of my life returned, and above all the fears. And, lo, the fear of illness and death returned too.

And sadness is my 'stock' emotion. I realised this recently, when embarking on instruction in transactional analysis. Since I learned early in life that anger is unacceptable, but sadness is harmless, I have been sorrowful during much of my existence. In *The Poor Sad Don Juan's Daughter* (so much sorrow in the title itself) I turned another of my beliefs into a song – "it is hard, so hard to be a girl". I 'clicked' at that moment with the poetess, Jelena Marinkov, forever. My work *About Wolves and Trains*, was written in a delirium and euphoria, to her verses. I could not sleep soundly until I finished it. I always cry when I hear it. The piece *Trapped* is based on a true story. I did not know at the time that I was living this story and that my music created it instead of me. In the last few years I have usually composed lamentations, because I mourn my mother.

Female voice – in your works it is very characteristic but also very yours in an authentic way. It stems from the depths of your personality, as it were, whether it is a solo voice or a female choir. What is it that you find in that voice?

The female voice is a voice of nature. It is my nature too, my voice, the first person singular. The female voice is caring, tender and pleasing. It can turn into a shriek (a cry) if necessary; (instead of teaching our children to be quiet, we should teach them to cry out loud, to defend themselves, to ask for help). In the voice itself there lies great force. The whole universe is between lullabies and laments. There is an invisible sign of equality between one female voice and a female choir. All for one and one for all. We are much more similar than we think, much closer than it seems. We share interchangeable experiences, joys and pains. I have experienced real female friendships in the second half of my life. Each one of them has been strong and immensely valuable. I feel that sisterhood with all women is growing each day as well as connection, empathy and solidarity. I do not wish to torture and exhaust the

female voice. I do not test how much it can handle. I write down that which I myself can sing, that which is agreeable for me to hear, that entertains me. I want to make a text comprehensible and that my music does not scare people.

Bearing this in mind, I would like to ask you a question about one of your compositions which is very close to my heart – about Sonnets. I think that this composition is one of the most striking musical oeuvres that has emerged in our contemporary music in the last decade. How do you find in the text the key for musical narration? I'll give you an example. In the movement "La vita fugge", at the very beginning, you use the text of Petrarch's sonnet Solo e pensoso to which the renaissance composer, Luca Marenzio, wrote one of his most beautiful madrigals from his famous IX Book of Madrigals. And yet, you are writing a melody that sounds very familiar, as we have already dreamt it or sang it in some kind of quintessence of Italian music both popular and artistic, which you use both for the sonnet's verses and for the initial verses of the sonnet La vita fugge in the reprise of this ternary form. Also, where do the verse by Raša Perić and this faraway echo of church chant come from? I want to ask you in which way do the text and music enter into the signifiers network, in your case it is a very complex but especially subtle one?

Indeed, I find my melodies in dreams, they almost fly in from some past times, maybe from my childhood, maybe? This one you mentioned is light, wistful, in d-minor, as that old one "Where is this little yellow flower?". I think that I am repeatedly writing my life story, just not with words but with sound "alone and pondering, in a slow stride". I think that the key to my musical narration is in a strong urge to find the meaning and resonance of (my) life in words and music. My composition is my mirror, my exact image in the very moment of its creation. It is not anything more than the essential need for self-expression. I have no ambition to leave something important and worthy, but to live by means of the creation itself. The compositional form also follows my daily life, memories, events and expectations. By using verses of the poem *Holy incense* I pray for the life of my mother who suffered a stroke. I shed tears while I compose; it is not the first time I do that. The sound is my personal diary. When I hear what I have written, I can reconstruct every hour of every day I spent composing that piece. The verses "life passes and death is following me in its long stride" I naturally assign to the same melody as "solo e pensoso", just this time it is fractured, like it is out of breath, and quitting. All of this is part of a 'bigger picture', because the subject of loneliness and

death have been part of my music for a very long time. I believe one can feel them and recognise them, even though I put them in different, colourful wraps, gentle harmonies, agreeable melodies and leisurely rhythm.

Electronics – it somehow supplements your sound universe which is supernatural, extended and imaginative. In which way do you use it and what does the electronic component in electroacoustic music mean for you? Which sounds are you particularly attracted to?

The electronic part of a composition is omnipotent – it can hold the past, the ancient past, an unfathomable past, the present moment and future time. Why so much past? Well, that is something we know, something I can explore, where I can find something to borrow and reconstruct the sound. That which is 'now' while I compose music, will become the past when we reach the performance, and then even that future will be turned into the past. This is why I love fixed electronic, since I am comfortable to have something reassuring in the composition. Something that will not become unrecognisable (maybe a little because of the loudspeakers or space itself). The spectrum of sounds that I am interested in is vast. Currently I like to record in public transport. I like 'dirty', imperfect sound. I like distortions, noise rhythm, all frequency ranges of noise too. I avoid cleaning up or polishing my samples. The sound is OK for me in its rough state, when it is rudimentary and 'in your face'. I want it to stay alive, natural and untidy. This is the way I fight against perfectionism.

The electronic part is me, the narrator. All that I know how or am able to say. Another protagonist. Someone who will bind, interpret, lead, launch, delight, comfort or support others. I sometimes see images and colours when I write music. And sometimes it is more akin to a film or video game.

But I find some playfulness in your work. I don't know exactly how to describe it, but amidst all the seriousness and your specific introspection into the deepest layers of human existence and beyond, your focus is always slightly distorted, with hints of something ludic, more than ironic I would say. And this strangeness makes us better understand the very in depth verticality of your poetics. Is there some puckish effect in your music? Does your music have a certain fairy quality?

A sense of humour is not something I possess in real life. Or it is rather childish (i.e. only my daughter understands it). I was a highly adaptable child and

in that serious world of responsibilities and duties there was no place for a joke. It is possible that it somehow 'slips in' my music, because it makes it easier for me to distance myself from reality and worries. Nature is entertaining and funny. It would be therapeutic to notice her more, on an everyday basis, with each of our senses. Her imperfection is jolly. I compose music the best when my work turns into play, when I derive joy from it. It is not good when I think too much and when I try to think up something new. When I expect too much or when I know what others expect of me. I try to direct my students towards the moment when they recognise their enjoyment in writing music. Our job does not have to be difficult or excruciating, maybe some of its phases, but that's the way to grow up together in music, to discover lightness and joy.

In the composition About Wolves and Trains we go through the whole spectrum – from the game, both linguistic and musical, through almost radiophonic interventions in the narration/meaning of the text in the song Hala 2, towards intimacy of the unaccompanied solo voice who addresses the listener in a direct way. I feel that with a certain ease, when you start to play, you design these complex forms, which are made of multiple songs, moods, poetical worlds that say much in a short time span. I believe that your musical form is one made of multiple universes, multiple segments apparently brought together in a linear assembly, but which in fact exist in parallel, outside of the mere linearity of so-called musical time.

I have been concerned for a long time by my own 'great expectations,' voices that have been questioning me: am I sure, is this good enough, original enough, smart enough, characteristic enough, complex enough...? When I discovered that I could let myself go and be playful, and the end result was all the same mine, authentic, sincere and powerful, I succeeded in quietening these voices. From today's vantage point I admire my past self a lot and I love to listen to my old compositions. All the imperfections are dear and close to me, I would not change a thing. Our remains from the past, all the way to the point where we are now, are proof of multiple universes in which we dwell. In that way we alone have more dimensions, vibrations, variations, all crammed in one splinter of a cosmic puzzle. Each of its fragments carries the image and sense of the whole and one without the other cannot survive.

Music started the game with time and space a long time ago, so even I today perceive it as an object which makes time flow freely or makes it stop.

As for myself, my time is quickening ever more and I don't want to waste it in vain. I suppose this is the reason why my musical form became more compact. It is important to me to say a lot, but in a precise, clear way, that can be remembered easily. Linearity and continuum are safeguarding the text, as well as the tone colour, the emotional tone, similarities (close and far) and the fluid tonality.

In your opus poetry has a rarified place. How do you choose your verses and which poetry is close to you – how do you find, in other words, your 'poet'? And what do you think about the connection between music and poetry, about their synergy?

Poetry just happens to me. I take some time off to go to a bookstore. I reach for a book, take a peak and a verse finds me. I open (one decent) daily newspaper, with a book review section, and there is a poem! I think that words on paper have their vibrations. I hear them as tones and they seduce me somehow. It seems to me that they jump out on me from a book, they wave and touch me. I cannot sleep because of them either, I shiver and they are inscribed in my mind. They offer me a motive and they seek a melody, they stretch, squirm and blend into it. I have to reject some of the verses because they are trying to break free. And then I fear that the poet will get mad at me because of it. I hope for forgiveness. Their words are living creatures for me, we play, we quarrel and we embrace for days. Some of them want to, and some others refuse to step into music. And this is all right, I let them choose.

Poets I got to love, I love forever. I bought the most beautiful poetry books in Knez Mihailova Street for one dinar (in the past century) or I received them as gift. It is not easy to find a good book. In bookstores colourful fiction is beaming from the shelves. It seems to me that I read less and less, more and more often because I find empty and banal words in books. This is the reason why poetry does not fail. I found the first book by Jelena Marinkov *Night in Zebra* almost 30 years ago. She received the "Branko" prize for it. She gave me *Wolves and Trains* and *Sugarfree* as a gift (and I hope she didn't regret it). I bought all of the books by Božidar Milidragović in existence because I lost one when I moved. I read the first song by Nedeljko Terzić in the *Novosti*, I searched for it in bookstores but there was nothing... I reached the publisher and they gave me Nedeljko's phone number. I mustered up the courage in a few days to call him. "You know, I would like to buy Your book, but I don't know how and where". He explained to me that he gives away all of his books to libraries. Who reads contemporary poetry anyway?

We can also wonder who listens to contemporary music today, anyway? How do you see the composer's place in today's world of plentitude and nothingness? And what if this pandemic year, or maybe even period, has brought forth the possibility to face ourselves, to face the way our arts exist, namely music which demands direct contact, a performing situation and communication with the public – vitality and life. Your compositions, in this regard, bear a strong performative potential, through their enigmatic, surrealistic narrativity and specific gestural expressivity. What is your experience of this moment and music in these times?

Who listens to us? People who are deeply invested in it, and there are few of them, but they are immensely important. Musicians, who are initiated into our world and those who become enchanted by chance or on purpose. Children also listen, they are open to new experiences, since they hold no prejudices. Exclusivity was always a feature of contemporary art, and today's consumerist world is not a very friendly place for something special, different and esoteric.

I know for sure that composers in this silence create great works. Students are writing excellent compositions. Difficult circumstances make new maturity and perception possible. In the beginning of the pandemic I thought that I had additional time to compose, but this was just an illusion. Deadlines for commissioned works were extended, but then I also slowed down. My day became shorter and I got tired quickly from every day chores. I am longing to get back my time for composing music, to be free of thoughts how to simply survive. I painfully miss live sound, performances, the *Review of Composers*, crowds, the audience and embraces. There were many times that I did not go for the customary drinks after a concert and I regret it now deeply. Contact, conversation, friendship with colleagues are my great inspiration.

I am eager to write something big – an opera, a ballet, a symphony. To work with a lot of people, to push each other, to wave, shout, laugh... I have a great need to move and to create, and what is most important: "I have a need, a vital need, I need to take a breath, without delay".