



The Power of the Elemental

The first impression is that of a deep, almost wild seriousness. Potentially untameable forces thrust the sounds into emergence, immense energies drive their developments along, and nervous tension maintains the internal pressure. Though the surfaces of Milica Djordjević's pieces present themselves as aloof and thoroughly abstract, though they rigorously avoid any allusions or semantically charged gestures, one encounters an immediate sensuality in their fluctuating textures and rhythmic pull. This may be one reason why even relatively short works for small formations such as the wind trio *Phosphorescence* (2015) seem almost monumental: they are forceful and uncompromising, stripped of anything decorative.

It has become a worn-out cliché to speak of someone having their unmistakable 'own voice' - but perhaps it is justified for a change in Djordjević's case. What one hears in the young Serbian composer's works is a throaty voice that openly admits to the physical efforts of its production, one that is strong yet vulnerable. A voice with a 'grain', almost in the sense of Roland Barthes's reflections on singing. And here it seems as if Djordjević's music were not even transporting 'art' so much as directly listening to nature itself - not the bucolic and picturesque, symbolically-tamed nature of the occidental tradition, of course. Instead one finds the ripples and movements of the air, whose dancing gas molecules can constantly mix anew and form a whirlwind at any time. But most of all the sonorous emanations of the earth, from whose deep layers heat rises while all manner of creatures rummage through the porous crumbs directly under the surface. Rough, often even raw in its manner, Djordjević's intensely vital sonic language does not so much reject harmony and euphony as provide - with evident relish - an experience of the elemental, the richly physical. This often pushes the musicians to the limits of instrumental and breathing possibilities: effort and even exhaustion, as extreme expressive situations, are an essential part of the experience.

Certainly the musical sounds themselves, the finely-graded scale of grinding, fluttering and hissing sonorities from voices and instruments in a state of constant flux, have long been part of the inventory of advanced composition. Milica Djordjević does not, however, content herself with exploring their sensory charms. In *Sky Limited* for 19 strings (2014), for example, she meticulously organizes a supposedly static ensemble sound that trembles as if from within. It consists throughout of sounds produced in a great variety of ways, with constant changes of balance and spatial effect. The resulting timbral counterpoint is not only transparently constructed in the vertical dimension; through a precise calibration of parametric degrees and a strict self-discipline in the formal development, the polyphony is dynamized in such a way that a directly appreciable trajectory results. This then leads to the final intensification, where the music seems to rush at full speed against a blunt barrier. While Djordjević strives intensely to develop tangible processes, she repeatedly opens up her formal conceptions to spontaneous decisions along the way: even extremely technically controlled sound ultimately remains living matter that demands to be handled intuitively.

The propensity for extreme tension with a tendency towards excess, as revealed in such works as the ensemble piece *Rdja* [Rust], premiered in 2015 – probably the most colourful of Djordjević's recent works – testifies to the existential dimension of a compositional practice which is as far as possible from the self-referentiality of *l'art pour l'art*. Discussing the dramatic escalation processes in her music in an interview, Djordjević once stated: 'I put my dark and anxious side on paper'. She said it with a loud laugh. For her art in particular, of course, is neither narrative nor simplistically autobiographical – and certainly not a psychogram. On the other hand, the dark, inwardly turbulent passages in her scores are not there by coincidence. It is surely more than an anecdotal detail that the decision of the multi-talented young girl from Belgrade to devote herself entirely to music was made during a time – the year was 1999 – when NATO bombs were falling on her home town, that this choice matured in the weeks when the schools were closed and there were no other activities open to the 15-year-old than practising the piano for hours behind shuttered windows, which in turn enabled Djordjević to put together the programme for her entrance examination. In Serbia, a country shaken by several civil wars, she received a technically thorough, but aesthetically very conservative compositional training. When she began a postgraduate

course in Strasbourg in 2007 at the age of 23, initially with the help of private patrons, this marked the start of the busy years in which she worked under high pressure to find her footing in the Western European scene.

Presumably Djordjević already realized at the time that developing her own voice would also entail recognizing her own cultural roots. Both the rough timbres and the particularly narrow melodic range of her lines have direct parallels in the traditional songs of her native country. It is well-known that Serbian is a 'tonal' language: on stressed syllables, a raising or lowering of the spoken pitch changes the meaning of otherwise identical sounds. It is therefore advisable to listen very closely. It is not only what you say, but also how you say it...

Anselm Cybinski
Translation: Wieland Hoban