

INTERSECTION OF IDENTITIES IN CONFESSIONS BY MILICA PARANOSIĆ*

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Abstract

During the 1990s, with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the civil wars and the economic crises, many young intellectuals and artists emigrated from Serbia to the countries of the western Europe and north America. Thus, since the 2000s, the musical world of Serbia was shaped and considerably influenced by young composers who built their careers abroad. Among them is Milica Paranosić, currently working as a teacher of composition and music technology at The Julliard School (New York). She is possibly best known as a performance artist, regularly creating performances that deal with different aspects of her personal lives. One such work is *Confessions*, a “musical blog” of the composers, comprised of different elements like Serbian folk heritage – ethnic instruments, recordings of folk tunes etc. – and real life stories, presented through the exploration of new technologies and electronics. Using music, sound, gestures and visuals, Paranosić exposes her identity as a fluid and non-static, influenced by her heritage and her current surroundings, an identity that is a mixture of different music styles (folk, pop, hip-hop, classical...). This paper explores these intersections focusing on the ways in which the composer positions herself as an (exotic) eastern European woman living in New York, as a composer of classical music, influenced by popular music genres etc.

Context: Female Composers In/From Serbia/Yugoslavia

During the 1990s, with the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the civil wars and the economic crises, many young intellectuals and artists emigrated from Serbia to the countries of the Western Europe and North America. Thus, since the 2000s, the musical world of Serbia was shaped and considerably influenced by young composers who built their careers abroad. Many among those who left were female composers, who began their studies of composition in Serbia during the eighties, or the beginning of the nineties. Since that time, the number of female composers has risen drastically in Serbia, as opposed to their number in Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Reasons for this shift can be found in the fact that, on the one hand, official political and cultural discourses in socialist Yugoslavia promoted gender equality and, on the other, because – due to growing economic and political crisis in Serbia during the nineties – the artistic field ‘lost’ its social influence and importance, which ‘enabled’ women to ‘enter’ the field once reserved mostly for men. Namely, in accordance to basic ideas of the communist revolution, the fight for gender equality became an important issue in the post-war Yugoslavia. The official stance of the communist authorities, which was in accordance to the ideas of Marx and Engels, was that

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the causes of the unequal position of women do not lie in their oppression by men, and that women do not constitute a uniform stratum; rather, their status is inextricably linked to the existence of class society based on the exploitation of man by man on the basis of private ownership. Hence the only way to achieve the emancipation of women [...] is by pursuing [...] the road to revolutionary struggle [in order] to topple the class system. (Pejić 2009: 23).

Thus, when it came to fight for equal rights, there existed two discursive currents in Yugoslavia: one, mostly comprised out of male politicians, that adopted the mentioned attitude and the other, formed around a number of female organizations (like the Antifascist Women's Front) that insisted upon the fact that this is a separate question that can't be solved 'simply' through the annihilation of class society. Thus, women in Yugoslavia had many rights 'on paper' that involved the right to vote, right to equal pay and education, ability to choose their own profession, right to abortion etc., yet this 'official equality' was strongly countered by the patriarchal society that, in the everyday life, still placed her in the private domain. When it came to classical music, it was still considered to be a 'male profession' due to the fact that the act of creation of art was – as it still is – considered to be reserved for men. As one female musician noted, "much has been said about the insufficiency of female creativity in the field of music. Psychologists, women-haters and reactionaries claimed that, due their natural inferiority, women were denied the creative power as well [...]" (Đurić Klajn 2000: 170). Yet, even though male composers had almost all the power in the world of music in Yugoslavia, the number of women who studied composition was constantly growing, since women were encouraged to choose whatever profession they wanted, so more and more chose to be composers. During this time, the state did pay much attention to the cultural politics, which is the reason why composition was considered to be a prestigious profession, reserved for the "talented individuals" who were extraordinary representatives of their people. In other words, a composer was a respected member of the society, which is one of the reasons why women weren't easily 'allowed' to enter this field.¹

After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Serbia (and what was left of the former Yugoslavia) fell into deep crisis that encompassed all areas of life. One of the consequences of sanctions and wars that marked this period was a strong re-traditionalization of the women's role in society that, basically, denied her any ability other than that of a wife and mother. This situation also brought about a gradual loss of power and importance that classical composers had in the SFRY and the constant underestimation of the arts, which, in turn resulted in this field losing its prestige in the society. As it often happens, more and more women 'entered' this field of human work that was growing less and less important to those who had power in the state (first in Yugoslavia and later, Serbia). This phenomenon of the 'feminization of a profession' is notable in many areas when "the social status of a profession begins to deteriorate, men leave, and the number of women begins to grow and the profession continues to lose its social status and [...] economic power" (Popović and Duhaček 2009: 694). When it comes to contemporary Serbia, the number of female and male composers is in balance and female composers make an important part of this country's world of music. Another important aspect is the fact that many composers born mostly during the sixties and the seventies – Aleksandra Vrebalov, Katarina Miljković, Nataša Bogojević, Marko Nikodijević, Djuro Živković, Svetlana Maksimović and others – emigrated during the nineties, but

1- According to one statistics from 1970, the Yugoslav Composer's Society has a total of 448 male and 37 female members (Milošević 1970: 153).

their works are often performed in Serbia as well, forming an important part of the repertoire of 'Serbian' contemporary music. In the aforementioned context, Milica Paranosić, a composer born in Belgrade, began her career. The following text will focus on her first performance titled *Confessions* (2007)² and the intersections of different identity formations that she presents while confessing her life to the audience. The accent will also be placed on the ways in which different musical traditions work as signifiers for different identity formations and the ways in which – through their intersection – Paranosić presents herself, forming her identity on the stage, for others.

Women, Identity, Electronic Music

For understanding of this piece, ideas of Donna Haraway, or, to be more precise, her thoughts on the impact technology has on our identities, proved useful once more. Namely using the metaphor of a cyborg, she points to the fact that there is no such thing as 'human essence' and that the binary opposition such as nature/culture is not valid anymore, due to the fact that most of the western world is living 'in accordance with technology'. For her, a cyborg is a promise of a being living in a post-gender, post-racial etc. world. As she says, "the cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity" (Haraway 1991: 151) and "identities seem contradictory, partial and strategic" (Haraway 1991: 155), they are fractured and opened. In this sense, we can talk about the intersection of different identities, meaning that such aspects of every person like gender, religion, ethnicity, political views, sexual orientation etc. always interact and can't be separated. Or, as Kimberle Crenshaw claimed, we "need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw 1991: 1245). Proposing the idea that the separation of gender, racial, ethnical, religious, sexual... identity is only conceptual, Crenshaw insists upon the fact that each of these categories is, in fact, intersected by all others and that each subject is 'located' in the middle of the mix. Another important issue in understanding *Confessions* by Milica Paranosić is the idea that, as Rita Dhamoon claims, "identity is difference", it is "not the base of a subject but an effect of being produced as a subject through meanings of difference" (Dhamoon 2009: 11). In the opinion of this author, difference is always connected to power, and it "exists in the relationships between people at the level of representation and in the ways they experience subjectivity and subjection" (Dhamoon 2009: 12). Thus, she believes it's necessary to understand "how meanings of difference are produced, organized, and regulated through power" (Dhamoon 2009: 2), which, in turn, leads her to "speak not for Others but to the construction and effects of Othering" (Dhamoon 2009: 16). So, in this paper I would focus on the ways in which Milica Paranosić is othering herself, examine what would this 'other' be, what are the meanings she produces while doing so, what are some of the effects of this process and what is the role of technology in the (self) construction of her identity. Also, I'll point to certain strategies which she uses to negotiate and question her 'otherness' as a Serbian composer living in New York, strategies that enable her to present her identity as open and forever in flux.

Confessions

Milica Paranosić was born in Belgrade in 1968. After working briefly on the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, she moved to New York where, since 1995, she has been on the music faculty of

2- Music composed, record produced and/or arranged by Milica Paranosic; visuals: Carmen Kordas, Radivoje Andric, Andrea Staka/Igor Martinovic, Martha Colburn and Paradizajn; director: Kirsten Kelly.

the Juilliard School. She co-founded and produced *Beyond the Machine*, Juilliard's Festival of Electronic Music. She has taught and created curricula in varied settings such as Belgrade Music University, San Diego State University, Franklin Marshall College, Brotherhood Sister Sol, and 92nd Street Y, and she also maintains an active private teaching studio, working with professional musicians and beginners (Paranosić 2015). She is probably best known as a performance artist and her works include performances such as *I Am Bird*, *The Tiger's Wife*, *Uspavanka (Lullaby)*, *Ladies First*, *Al Airi Lepo Sviri*, *VioLens*, *Traveling Songs*, etc. In these works, she explores different possibilities offered by technology, combination of music, gesture, electronics, as well as body and/or performance art traditions. In this paper, I direct my attention to her performance that was envisioned as composer's 'personal blog'. As her website states, „*Confessions* shares Milica's life and art, exposing her most intimate moments. *Confession* is the artist, vulnerable and bare ...”.³ In light of the statement that this piece exposes her most intimate moments, I would like to examine what are the identities presented by the composer through this piece, bearing in mind the fact that *Confessions* presents Paranosić as she appears in one precise point in time and that her identities are mediated, and thus influenced and constructed by, different technologies and also her wish to be liked and understood by the audience. *Confessions* is a multimedia collage of many different elements: personal stories, memories, photographs, videos, stories about her home country and home town, folk/traditional, popular music, Paranosić's own compositions etc. Being a woman who moved to the USA from Serbia, she seemingly intended to present to the audiences the place she came from as well as the person she became in the new context, especially given the fact that this was her first performance piece. One important musical aspect of this piece is traditional Serbian and Balkan music – as well as other 'ethno' elements – which play a significant role in determining the place where the composer/performer comes from. For this reason, I will direct my attention precisely to this, 'folk element' of *Confessions*, intending to shed light on the way in which a non-native New Yorker negotiates her different (musical) identities. This is, of course, just one segment of the highly complex performance that exists parallel with stories from her childhood, tales about the history of Serbia and Yugoslavia, political commentaries, cabaret-like jokes, football fans songs etc.

Confessions is organized in nine segments, each one connected to a song: 1. *Regrets*, ends with a traditional tune, *Kaleš, bre, Anđo* (Vocals, laptop, keyboard, melodica); 2. *Drugs*, ending with a traditional tune *Zasp'o mi je dragi (My Dear, He Fell Asleep, with laptop, vocals and gusle)*; 3. *Sex and Sexuality*, with a football fan's song about the club "Partizan"; 4. *Insecurities and Seduction*, with *U Milice Duge Trepavice (Milica Has Long Lashes)* a very popular lyrical folk song; 5. *Wars and Conflicts* followed by *Crne oči (Black Eyes)* (vocals, percussion, keyboard) and *300 crunches* (vocals, drumming); 6. *Solitude and freedom*, with *Oj svijetla majska zoro* (vocals, movement), national anthem of Montenegro; 7. *Stealing and Lying*, followed by a traditional song *Milica Jedna U Majke (Mother Has Only One Daughter, Milica)*, vocals, laptop, melodica, movement); 8. *Believing and not Believing* with *Coupled up world* (vocals, laptop, dance, keyboard, kaolimba, lights, puppets, movement), *Miracles* (Heartbeat with Blood Drops, sound and vocals collage) and *Don't make me push*; 9. *Regrets – Letting Go*. Each part explores one segment of Paranosić's life, whether it is about Yugoslavia, her favorite football club, conflicts in Kosovo, final end of Yugoslavia (with the

3- <http://www.broctopus.com/milica/confessions.html>.

Montenegrin independence from 2006), or more personal stories like losing a boyfriend to drugs, wanting and not having children, brake-ups, sex, growing up as a girl with brothers etc.

Most music and sounds used in this performance piece are modified through electronic means, use of effects etc. As already mentioned, folk music signifies her home land, her roots and origins, something that is far, dressed in the shroud of melancholy and nostalgia. Music is followed by a video presentation of images from her youth or old movies of Yugoslavia, Belgrade etc, painting a nostalgic picture of the county the composer came from. The song that she begins with, while talking about her childhood – *Kaleš bre, Anđo* – is slow, based on harmonic or chromatic scales and electronically modified to create an image of Serbia as an exotic country in which nature rules over culture. It is also important to note that she uses songs from different parts of the Balkans among which some are strongly influenced by Turkish traditions. Thus, Paranosić presents one version of the image of the Balkans that has been established more than once in occasions in which countries from this part of Europe are presenting themselves to Western audiences (like the Eurovision contest, for example), making a *pastiche* of different elements that constitute the culture of people living on this peninsula. Important aspect of this ‘ethnic experience’ is created through recordings of original folk tunes that are not tempered and are a part of the so called older village tradition – like the song *Zasp'o mi je dragi* – that are sampled together to make a specific kind of noise, possibly foreign to the ‘western ear’. Within this image, she places herself, as someone different from the ‘typical American’, yet also different from her former countrymen. She combines different musics that form her background, that mean something to her personally – since the performance is called *Confessions* – but in doing so, she is also effectively ‘othering’ herself, insisting on the fact that she comes from ‘The Hilly Balkans’ and that she is quite different than the Americans (New Yorkers). Other than through music, the idea of presenting ‘Her country’, as she says through ‘ethnic’ elements is also visible in the use of traditional instruments, gestures, dance movements etc.

This ‘traditional imagery’ that Paranosić produces through her performance, is coupled by a somewhat different image of the composer herself. Namely, we see her surrounded by technology, as well ‘ethnic props’, a woman dressed in a black dress, with short hair, big earrings, etc. Her body is an integral part of *Confessions*, as she demonstrates particularly when her bare back becomes the canvas onto which symbols painted in bright red are projected. Her body is, thus, controlling the technology she uses, but it is also modified by it. It is also important to note that Paranosić could be understood as a performance artist who continues to change the idea that men are ‘native’ to technology and that women, being ‘connected to their bodies’ and thus to nature, are a ‘foreign element’ in the artificial world of electronics. Her appearance also gives out the idea of a ‘female warrior’, blurring the clear difference between male and female gender. She is tall, her movements are often aggressive and her voice deep and commanding.⁴ For example, when she is playing *gusle*, she is reciting an epic poem about Kosovo, which was, and still is a man’s ‘job’. Namely, this instrument is native to Dinarides parts of Southeast Europe, being very popular in Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, south Serbia, Albania, Montenegro etc. They are not connected to any specific religion – both Christian Orthodox as well as Muslims play them, for example – and are considered to be a symbol of heroism and are usually used as accompaniment

4- Images of the performance are available here: <http://www.broctopus.com/milica/confessions.html>.

for epic poems that describe bravery and strength of (local) heroes. Thus, they can be viewed as a symbol of a patriarchal society in which – to put it roughly – men go to war and women stay at home. In other words, it is not typical for women to play *gusle*, even though there have been some notable exceptions throughout history. As Iva Nenić notes, “although the folk musician ideal was equated solely with the male gender, notable female instrumental musicians, although perceived as something unusual, were no longer easy to ignore” (Nenić 2013: 88). In other words, it can be argued that in her performance, Paranosć is using the traditional imagery of her home country to paint an image that her audience will respond to, yet she is also questioning that very tradition, through a unique gender performance.

She is also acting within the tradition of performance and body art, presenting herself as a New Yorker, an independent woman, surrounded by latest technologies (and is not afraid to use it). Other than Serbian folk tunes, *Confessions* also incorporate genres like punk, hip hop, pop as well as opera, classical music etc, which connect her more strongly to the western world. Music, images and stories also speak about her growing up in the capital of Yugoslavia during the eighties, in urban surroundings, her years as a teenager, first love, getting to know her body and her sexuality, disappointments and so on. In one segment of her performance, she says:

When you're born a girl and your father wanted six boys, you end up being confused about your sex and your sexuality. I wanted to be boy until I was a woman. My brother was older, stronger, more handsome and way more popular. I was shy and fat and clumsy and I cried all the time. I wanted to be boy. I tried to play football just to be more like him. Except I sucked at it. I wanted to be a boy! It took me a lifetime to become good at being a woman. It would take a few more to become good at football. But hey – I can still enjoy it. I don't want to be a boy anymore. But I don't mind being around them (Paranosć 2007).⁵

In a similar, strong and uncompromising way, she reflects on her youth and her mother, sharing the experience of having a ‘strange name’ that most of her new friends and colleagues can't pronounce:

Your name is Milica. Not Milika. Not Malayka. Not Milicia. Not: can I just call you Mila, coz' no one can pronounce your name anyway. Your name is Milica. Don't let anyone call you different unless I approve. Coz, when you're born a girl and your mother wanted a girl whose name would be Milica – Take the name. Love the name. Make them lean the name – you've learned the language. But Don't do drugs. Don't do boys that do drugs. Do the nice ones. The ones that treat you right. Like a princess. Well, I did them too. But I am no princess. (emphasis A.S.) (Paranosć 2007).

Thus, the composer and the performer is presented in the middle of different influences: urban and rural, old and new, communist and post-communist, Eastern and Western; she presents a girl who wanted to be a boy, but then learned to love the fact that she is a woman.

Conclusion

Thus, through *Confessions* Milica Paranosć presents a fluid, segmented, sometimes even contradictory intersections of identities – ethnic and gender being only two of them. With this piece, she produces herself as ‘the other’. Or, as the composer Joseph Martin Waters stated: “Milica Paranosć is a strong, feminine Serbian composer, whose work references 21st century USA from a world-weary, Eastern European, post-communist, been-there-seen-that perspective” (Broctopus

5- Quotes are taken from the script for the performance, provided by the author.

2013). It is also important to note that the Eastern European, post-communist perspective can also be viewed as a good 'selling point', something new and different from what is familiar to the American audiences. As, for example, Eric Sommers, a viewer and a professor at the state university of New York noted, the sound of *Confessions* is "made accessible through the ethnic and folk timbres and melodies" (Broctopus 2013). Thus, the folk tunes are at the same time making her 'sound' like the other, and are at the same time helping her move closer to the audience, precisely due to the fact that she labeled herself as the other.

Thus, it can be concluded that one of the most important ideas behind Paranosić 'confessing' her life to the audience, is that she 'produces' herself as the other, an immigrant, but that she plays with expectations and stereotypes none the less, making herself into a Serb (Ex-Yugoslav?) who has none the less been integrated in her new surroundings. Thanks to the domination of technology in this performance, her different 'guises' – Serbian, Yugoslav, Eastern European, as well as a strong, feminine, technically minded woman – are presented as inseparable, open to interpretation and fragmented. She is at the same time a Serb and an American, a folk song and an opera lover, funny and nostalgic, aggressive and venerable etc. By talking to the audiences through different identities, that is, by putting herself in these different 'identity boxes' that she simultaneously deconstructs, she ensures that she is recognized by the audience as an artist and that her work is understood by those who watch, but she also raises questions concerning who she *actually* is.

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