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SLAVKO OSTERC - AN EXPRESSIONIST?

The question posed here is in loosely encyclopaedic terms a comparatively straightforward one; in such a non-committal form as it is it requires neither hypothetic formulations let alone empirical 'evidence' the strength of which is in the so-called sciences of art, and all the more in musical science, in any case open to question. For here we are concerned with a typical stylistic problem, the 'resolving' of which usually involves the application of one or another kind of label, commonly arrived at on the basis of individual generalized impressions about the opus of a particular composer. This is so because the positivistically-oriented musicology - which generally regards music, owing to its non-conceptual idiom, as language not to be compared in its expression with other arts - tends to evade it, seeing in this a kind of attack on its identity. In other words: stylistic categorization in musical art appears to be an issue too unclear to permit an adequate solution and, in line with this orientation, it would clearly deprive music of its status of integrity and force it to become classified by criteria representing non-musical import. Such an attitude may well be due to a fear of narrow-mindedness, a feeling ignoring the fact that such a treatment isolates music as a document of time and place of origin, that it uproots it from the overall human context conditioning it, that it makes comparisons no longer possible and that it thus in a number of ways truncates it. If musicological literature and encyclopaedic works reflect to an extent such tendencies, this is not yet to say that these and such questions do not merit scholarly interest or that they even should not exist.<sup>1</sup> For it seems that just the opposite is true, only that owing to the existing difficulties these questions are hard to solve and indeed elude the principal currents of musicological endeavours. Which is understandable, for here an attempt is made to identify the comparatively not closely related associations between the specific, musical and the universal, generally artistic.

Definitions about what is expressionism in music abound in encyclopaedic works, both Yugoslav and foreign ones, also in the

1 Mendel, A., *Evidence and Explanation*, in: *IMS Report of the Eighth Congress - New York 1961, Kassel & Basel 1961*, 16.

most recent literature.<sup>2</sup> Hence it would not really serve a purpose 'to enrich' the existing designations which more or less approximate a full-scale definition by another, our own, attempt - for this would represent but a quantitative contribution to the existing no small number of incomplete formulations. But analytic treatment of this concept is not so often to be found in the literature,<sup>3</sup> therefore all the more notable is Willi Hofmann's contribution "Stilbestimmung des musikalischen Expressionismus" under the entry "Expressionismus" in the today already classical handbook *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*;<sup>4</sup> this contribution has been substantially further developed, extended and systematized by Ivan Klemenčič in his study "Expressionism kot glasbeni slog" (Expressionism as Musical Style),<sup>5</sup> which can now be used as a touchstone for evaluating a composer or rather his output in terms of a given style, in our case for confronting expressionism with the work of the key Slovene modernist in the inter-war period - Slavko Osterc, which may from its own angle help to elucidate the musical expressionism in Slovenia, which was following a course of its own both as regards broader European developments and the development of other artistic branches.

At the outset it must be said that in Osterc's publicistic writing we cannot find solid clues to his own conception of style in general and of expressionism in particular. Having been writing without sufficient discipline and hastily, he had not presented his views clearly: thus, his formulations of individual historical periods or of the styles of individual composers are stylistically loose - but even here he is not consistent: he finds that the style of a particular composer is "pure", even if it is "a mixture of the classical and of the romantic",<sup>6</sup> that another composer "tends to mix lighter style with more serious one",<sup>7</sup> in a third place he equates style with compositional technique,<sup>8</sup> then again he does not know "where lies the border between style and bothering",<sup>9</sup> and so on and so forth. As regards the term expressionism, he comparatively seldom uses it in his writings. Very explicitly, he makes use of it when for instance he reviews Kogoj's "Črne maske" (Black Masks) and says that "the work bears a stamp of late Romanticism and expressionism, the latter of which for the present I regard as the last phase of Romanticism. In a similar style", he continues, "write today almost exclusively Germans - Strauss, Schreker, Schoenberg, Berg".<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, and this stands out as particularly interesting, in his article "Glavne struje sodobne glasbe in njih eksistenčna upravičenost" (Main Trends in Contemporary Music and Their Existential Justification), he does not use this term at all and applies

2 *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, London 1980, 6, 332.

3 Cf. Stuckenschmidt, H.H., *Was ist musikalischer Expressionismus*, in: *Melos I/1969*, 1-5.

4 *III, Kassel & Basel 1954*, 1958-73.

5 Cf. *Muzikološki zbornik (Musicological Annual) XVII/2*, 1981, 29.

6 Cf. Bedina, K., *Slavko Osterc - publicist in kritik (Slavko Osterc - Publicist and Critic)*, Diploma work, 23, kept in Department of Musicology, Philosophical Faculty, Ljubljana.

7 *Gledališki list - Opera (Theatre Bulletin - Opera)*, Ljubljana 1928/29, 13, 102.

8 *Jugoslovan I/1930*, No 14.

to all kinds of current pursuits the expression "modernism", in which connection he designates as father "of the great musical revolution lasting already over 10 years" Igor Stravinsky and not possibly Schoenberg and his school which had by this time - this was in 1928 - long ago in Europe passed into its late stage.<sup>11</sup> Which is to say that he wrote also this article, of which one would expect tolerance if not already objectivity, with a clear bias, in his own taste and against the German trend, which is in part understandable. In this way he merely by-passed the issue of expressionism, which was at least in its beginnings a product of the expressly "German mind" but at this time in the Slovene music already strongly present. He acted as a convinced and faithful supporter of the Prague-led Slavic orientation in the ISCM, which was seeking to tone down the leading role of Germans.<sup>12</sup> But this does not mean that despite his views, clearly progressive in the European context, he could avoid expressionism which "was in the general development as well as in its essence undoubtedly suited also to other cultural environments, less to the rational Romanic ones and especially French one, closer to the post-war sur-realism, and more to the emotional Slavic ones and thus also Slovene one. In Slovenia", as Ivan Klemencič states, "the decisive moment was played not only by the tradition of living in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, with partly similar intellectual and social problems and a partial cultural gravitation to Vienna, but also by certain internal dispositions and receptivity due to contacts with northern neighbours, despite all big differences and specifics".<sup>13</sup>

In this light it now appears - on the basis of Osterc's opus from the time of his Prague studies, i.e. from 1927 (earlier works are owing to their romantic orientation or technical inadequacies not of any interest here) - useful our purpose gradually to follow up expressionist musical criteria as developed in the above mentioned study by Ivan Klemencič. Without a detailed treatment of individual compositions, their number is too high and all of them are not exactly relevant, there will appear similarities and of course differences leading to a more concrete elucidation of the many-faceted stylistic image of this uniquely significant Slovene musical creator in this century.

In Prague, which was in those years one of the centres of the European avantgardism, Osterc had in fact from such musical pedagogues and composers like Karl Boleslav Jiráček and Alois Hába assimilated the tendency to update the Slovene musical creativity and to constantly draw parallels between production at home and abroad. Hence his idea that he advocated on coming home: "We want to create and to recognize cultural values which will find recognition not only within a narrower circle, not only among Slovenes, not only among Yugoslavs... - but all over the world. And also, that we will find recognition not only within a narrower circle, not only among Slovenes, not only among Yugoslavs... - but all over the world. And also, that we will not need to blush at the performance or at a review of one

9 *Jutro XVI/1935, No 139.*

10 *Jugoslovan I/1930, No 10.*

11 *Nova muzika (New Music) I/1928, No 1, 2-3.*

12 Cf. Osterc's correspondence preserved in the Manuscript Department of the National and University Library in Ljubljana.

of our works - in front of anybody, including ourselves!"<sup>14</sup> His views developed abroad and now brought to his home-country were bound to be met with resistance. He was found fault with for lack of invention and emotion, for cool constructivism, originality at all costs, cynical negation of established rules and even a destructive revolutionary style. These and similar reproaches made Osterc even more convinced in the value of his views. Moreover, because of insisting on his points, Osterc tended in his publicistic writing towards exaggeration and sometimes carried his arguments to effective sophistic absurdities. But not in his music! In other words, despite his advocacy of compositions that were "ultra-modern", his oral and written statements in favour of atonality and athenatics and indeed of everything exhibiting a new orientation, he himself was not in his compositional work invariably realizing such views - hence consistent atonality, consistent athenatics, decline of any repetitive or periodic writing, and the like. In his compositional work he just did not happen to be so consistent, and so we find what is old placed by the side of what is new - something that is after all a proof of creative power and organic growth. Therefore we can also not find in his works a theoretically ideal, model specimen of any particular style. But now to turn back to the question of expressionism and to the individual aspects and criteria of the style in question!

The expressionist composer is taken to be marked by an idealistic and metaphysical inclination or, in broader terms, by an anti-positivistic and anti-materialistic inclination - conditioned by his expressly non-rational and thus intuitive attitude towards the world, an attitude representing the sole dependable guide in all essential and no less in all hidden existential issues. From this angle he considers everything that is eminently human or divine, objective or mystic. This is also for Osterc a concern in his works, but only rarely does he abandon the positions of rationalism, for they have never disappointed him. Self-assertingly, polemically, he places intellect first,<sup>15</sup> but at the same time he leaves its full predominance open.<sup>16</sup> Such an oscillation in this key issue already makes Osterc in places leave expressionist stands and he becomes in his attitude towards the society, especially in choral works, not infrequently strongly socio-critical and antibourgeois; only in some places his latent expressionism is aroused to an almost aggressive tension, just as in other places, except when fun is being made and when the composer's "espressivo" deliberately touches on sentimentality, his musical idiom exceptionally acquires qualities at least not for him theoretically acceptable: a romantic tinge and even a romantic verve. But these are merely extreme positions. Generally he is closer to a more objective presentation as reached by expressionism in its dodecaphonic phase, closer to typical than subjective, ontological than psychological time, the former being usually in other ways "blurred".

13 *Muzikološki zbornik (Musicological Annual) XVII/2, 1981, 29, and subsequent studies whose analysis of the stylistic characteristics of expressionism are used in the present inquiry.*

14 Pokorn, D., Slavko Osterc, Ljubljana, 1965, 13.

15 *Zvuk II/1932, 104.*

16 *Čustvo in razum v glasbi (Emotion and Reason in Music), Žena in dom, VI/1935, 3, 35.*

Although, accordingly, Osterc did not espouse the subjectivist expressionist positions, his music is similarly intellectualized or generally intellectually oriented and therefore deprecating anything that would be naturalistic, impressionistic, let alone hedonistic. And from here, similarly as with pure expressionist music, there is but one step to abstraction, to absoluteness which emerged through the disintegration of tonal music and the formation of atonality. It seems that it was the atonal state of sound material which made possible, and subsequently supported, Osterc's excursions into the expressionist waters, while on the other hand it was deterring him from anything that would be "narrative", "picturesque", or in the nature of "programme music" - or in his own words: "Music shall be a work of art in its own right, and not in conjunction with other arts or in support of them, arts with which it cannot compete in presenting absolute events and facts".<sup>17</sup>

The mutual consequences of the subjectivization, less characteristic of Osterc, and of the intellectualization, typical of him, are reduction and deformation. The reduction of the essential reflects the artist's endeavours "under the appearance, the surface of things and phenomena to discover whatever is essential, deeper, inner, and to separate whatever is material, unessential and disturbing - both in the wish to come as closely as possible to the idea of truth and to present it as faithfully as possible". In his expressionist reduction Osterc was rarely consistent; we could say that owing to the compositional purity there are successful exceptions rather than a creative principle which in his hasty manner of writing would have been invariably followed by the composer. However, in Osterc we notice more clearly the outer manifestation of reduction, i.e. deformation, which is at all events a characteristic of the mostly progressively oriented art of the 20th century, also of such objective trends as neoclassicism and its derivatives, which the composer found closer to his taste and which in their results similarly reflected the increased tension in man and his disharmony with the objective reality.

This is to say that in Osterc deformation is only by way of exception expressionist, as for instance in the First Movement of the Second String Quartet (1934), where all the expressive elements - from melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic toagogics, dynamics, tempo and ways of attacking sound - are from the traditional point of view "distorted". If in this and in a few other cases one can speak of the expressionist feelings, which become in the Second Movement, representing a disintegrated fugue form, motorically objectivized, Osterc's psychological deformation very often leads him to a somewhat different but equally characteristic frontier of expressionism, the frontier of the grotesque, grimace, and sarcasm often realized in sound.

Among the fundamental determinants of expressionism - subjectivism, intellectualization, and irrationalism (which is practically alien to Osterc), and their already mentioned conceptual derivatives - there is a fourth aspect: the relation between beauty and truth, a facet of intimate presentation of the romantic and neo-romantic beauty, out of which he had evolved, and juxtaposed the idealized spiritual or intellectual

17 *Gledališki list - Opera (Theatre Bulletin - Opera) 1927/28, 17, 205.*

beauty and the inner, intimate reality, not admitting of romantic, or rather tonal, sublimation. And yet: also as regards this point - like Schoenberg, who in his later years turns back to tonality, or Berg, who is clearly not "pure" in expressionist terms - Osterc as well in his last works negates his own negation, which used to be for him as a self-taught musician the departure for compositional style.

It is from the thus established attitude of the artist towards the world and towards his "artistic organ" that the musical content proceeds,<sup>18</sup> content such as it is and as it is being shaped by Osterc. Although less tangible than in the literary art and in the fine art, this content is comparatively evident wherever it comes up in association with text covering the whole range of existential problems of European man in the period between the two Wars. However it may be expressionistically heightened and deformed, this - because of the composer's mainly positively oriented, objectivized and by a touch of irony tinged rationalism - is but one and indeed a smaller facet of his compositional content. Also of his instrumental one. On this account Osterc's music for the most part remains outside the pessimistically heightened expressionist sensibility. New if it does not already move on in a neutral, albeit a little deformed, world of the play of sound and of playfulness, his music finds as more suitable to its purpose the overall more positive moods, even if with parodic, sarcastic or grotesque overtones - which of course moves it away from the high expressionism and brings it close to the dodecaphonically "cooled" expressionism more closely associated with other contemporary, and above all more objective, stylistic trends.

All these reductions, deformations, the heightening of expression - in a word: the moves away from the 19th century, thus at the time of immediate interest here, were essentially influencing the compositional means; the most far-reaching influence was precisely within the expressionist orientation, which most consistently carried out the emancipation of the dissonance as an equivalent of the tension in contemporary life and of the acute crisis of ego. Also in the case of Osterc, but not always in a steady and consistent manner. As if the composer had been defiantly certain what he was against but not enough resolute on what he was for. This is why in his music one does not find the high, dissonantly heightened expressionism with outcries and outbursts just as one does not find pure dodecaphony - but therefore countless variations inside "abstract" atonality and also inside the still existing "concrete", expounded tonality, variations extending as far as bi-tonality and poli-tonality. Hence the inconsistencies of the vertical solutions, which, because of the distinct linear thinking, are in any case of secondary importance. Which again does not turn him away from occasional, surprising tonal cadenzas, which represent defiance if not already mocking at second power. This all means that he was not always capable of working out consistent systemic solutions which would rank him into a selected style.

What can be said about the harmony can be said also about the melodics, which beside the expressionist, "seismographically" discontinued refinement, has a comparatively wide diapason of possibilities between the diatonic and the chromatic, even if in

the latter Osterc is less on his ground since he regarded chromatics as "something typically romantic".<sup>19</sup> Also rhythm, which is in non-rational expressionism, not found in Osterc, at unexpected places disconnected and in terms of psychological time markedly non-uniform, is characteristic of our author. Besides expressionist *ostinatos*, which Osterc holds in special esteem, it seems that on the whole he finds more congenial the inherited rhythm of the objective world, which in terms of the ontological time receives vital emphasis through syncopes, motorics, folkloristic flashes, grotesque dances and funeral marches.

Which means that Osterc in all the three essential compositional means moves away from the high expressionism 'par excellence'. This can be said also of the form. While he cultivates solid athenatic aphorisms, he - because of his bent for rationality and for poliphonic principles, known already in atonal expressionism - nevertheless gives priority to imitative and variative as well as to inherited, no matter how deformed, traditional cyclic forms. This is after all understandable, for he was creating his mature works at a time when the excessive expressionism had already died down. Therefore he is also in the attitude to sound, although modern, anything but *avant-gardist*.

Along with expressionism there were in the interwar-period in co-existence naturally also other styles, thus in particular neoromanticism and neoclassicism with their modifications - neobaroque and *Neue Sachlichkeit*. These have also to be taken briefly into consideration when defining the style of Slavko Osterc; this can be best done on the basis of at least some, partly new and partly already used, polarity profiles. The first such distinction is that between pure and expressive music.<sup>20</sup> If the stylistic trends mentioned took into account one as well as the other, it is certain that expressiveness is to be related more to neoromanticism, from which Osterc started, than to expressionism, which in its heightened form, as we have seen, Osterc did not find to his taste, for he was above all nevertheless a devotee of pure music, which is so characteristic of neoclassicism, or in a somewhat accentuated form typical of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, from which there are but a few steps to the expressiveness of the late expressionism. Osterc appears to have been moving inside the triangle of the last three stylistic variants. Also if we employ for our purpose the relation between subjective and objective creativity, we get a similar result. The already used polarity contrast between beauty and truth yields additional nuances, because in neoclassicism, which of course is oriented to the objective world, there still is the possibility to take into account the beautifulness of the outer world, something that is with Osterc rare but certainly not unknown. Further on, the relation between emotion and reason, where Osterc again espouses the more moderate expressionist stands, which are with their rationally controlled components closer to the neoclassicistic clarity and the neobaroque linear thinking and with their intellectual bent related to *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

If at the end we should reiterate the question given in the

*Music*, Zagreb, 1978, 65.

<sup>19</sup> *Gledališki list - Opera (Theatre Bulletin - Opera) 1928/29*, 16, 119.

<sup>20</sup> *Supičić, I., ib.*, 117.

title, we could neither decide for a clear yes not for a clear no. Osterc the composer simply did not happen to be consistent in his attitude towards himself and towards the world: he was developing but again returning to earlier stands, he was searching and also wavering - but always among styles which were at the given time of topical interest, just as was expressionism - a style that Osterc clearly could not have evaded.

#### SUMMARY\*

Sodobna muzikologija se v glavnem izogiba razreševanju stilnih problemov, ker se nekako boji, da bi se glasbena govorica, ki je glede na svojo nepojmovno izpovednost zares neprimerljiva z drugimi umetnostmi, vkalupila na podlagi kriterijev, v katerih vidi neglasbeni import. Kakor je tako gledanje deloma razumljivo, v bistvu jemlje glasbi kot dokumentu časa in prostora, možnost vzporeditve in jo mnogostransko oktroira.

Sestavek se opira na razmeroma razdelano, čeprav izjemno razpravljano o pojmu ekspresionizma, kakor ga je razvil Willi Hofmann v leksikonu *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* in ki ga je bistveno dopolnil, razširil in sistematiziral Ivan Klemenčič v svoji razpravi *Ekspresionizem kot glasbeni slog* (Muzikološki zbornik XVII/2/1981). Izhajajoč iz Osterčevih pojmovanj stila in Klemenčičevih ekspresionističnih glasbenih meril skuša sestavek izluščiti ekspresionistične elemente v mnogoplastni stilni podobi tega enkratno pomembnega slovenskega glasbenega ustvarjalca 20. stoletja. Pri tem so ob upoštevanju skladateljevega opusa uporabljene take polaritetne karakteristične dvojice kot materializem-idealizem, pozitivizem-antipozitivizem, racionalnost-intuitivnost, objektivnost-subjektivnost, ontološki čas-psihološki čas, naturalističnost-poduhovljenost, lepota-resnica ter vrsta kompozicijsko-tehničnih izpeljank, kot so redukcija, deformacija, itd., ki in kakor odsevajo v uporabi določenih kompozicijskih sredstev.

Potem ko so navedeni kriteriji uporabljeni tudi pri razsvetljevanju ostalih sočasnih stilnih gibanj, vodi sinteza do spoznanja, da Slavko Osterc v svojem odnosu do sebe in sveta ni bil dosleden, da se je razvijal in vračal, iskal in nihal, in da se je stilno gibal v trikotniku oziroma četverkotniku aktualnih stilov, med neoklasicizmom oziroma neobarokom, novo stvarnostjo in ekspresionizmom, ki se mu nikakor ni mogel izogniti.

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