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# Expressive Sonority and Formal Control: Lojze Lebič into the 21st Century

## Izrazna zvočnost in oblikovna kontrola: Lojze Lebič ob vstopu v 21. stoletje

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### IZVLEČEK

Raziskava novejših del slovenskega skladatelja Lojzeta Lebiča odkriva nenehno skladateljevo prizadevanje, da z instrumenti in glasovi ustvari izrazno spomina vredne zvoke. To pa je vedno povezano s premišljenim običajnim načrtom.

### ABSTRACT

An investigation of recent works by the Slovene composer Lojze Lebič shows continuing attention to drawing memorable sounds from instruments and voices in a very expressive way. This is always allied to a careful formal planing.

For over half a century the music of Lojze Lebič has appeared on the concert platforms of Slovenia and beyond. From the very beginning it has impressed its audiences with its sense of adventure, but also by its sheer musicality. Its ideas are always vivid and well imagined, with an expressive quality that is ever present. At the same time these powerful moments are put in context by a strong sense of formal control, not necessarily a traditional one, that shows a clear discipline in musical planning. This duality of heart and mind has never been a problem, but rather it has been the springboard of the composer's vivid imagination. As Lebič approached the 21st century, his music has been typically strong in its emotional content, its expressive sonority and its intellectual grasp of structure. Much of his music has been composed for chamber groups and for orchestra of which a number of his recent works in the latter category include a solo instrument or singer.

Two major orchestral works from around the turn of the century marked Lebič's continued inspiration from words:<sup>1</sup> the purely orchestral *Glasba za orkester*, in two parts, *Cantico I* from 1997 and *Cantico II* from 2001, and *Miti in apokrif* ('Myths and Apocrypha') for baritone and orchestra of 1999. The words that sparked the inspiration of *Glasba za orkester*, but used as the composer says as a faraway creative symbol, are the 13th-century *Cantico della creatura* ('The Canticle of the Creatures') by St Francis of Assisi and *Hymne de l'Univers* ('Hymn of the Universe') by the 20th century French writer and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin. It is the words of the earlier *Cantico* of St Francis which determine the structure and plan of the two parts of *Glasba* which are clearly considered to be a single work, although the two parts may be played separately. The seven sections represent, respectively, the three of *Cantico I* (the Sun, the Moon and Stars, and Wind and Air) and the four of *Cantico II* (Water, Fire, Earth and Death). Seven lines of the poem of St Francis are the basis of the inspiration for the character of the music and at the same time determine the form of the two parts of *Glasba*. Lines 1, 2 and 3 are the foundation of *Cantico I*, and lines 4, 5, 6 and 7 the inspiration for *Cantico II*.

The relevant lines by St Francis are:

1. Specialmente messer lo fratre sole ('first my lord brother Sun')
2. Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora luna e le stelle ('Praised be you, my lord, through sister Moon and Stars')
3. Laudato si', mi' Signore, per fratre vento et per aere ('Praised be you, my lord, through brother wind and air')
4. Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora acqua ('Praised be you, my lord, through sister Water')
5. Laudato si', mi' Signore, per fratre focu ('Praised be you, my lord, through brother Fire')
6. Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora nostra matre terra ('Praised be you, my lord, through our sister Mother Earth')
7. Laudato si', mi' Signore, per sora nostra morte corporale ('Praised be you, my lord, through our corporal sister Death')

1 See my paper: Niall O'Loughlin, "Music and Words in the Works of Lojze Lebič", Primož Kuret, ed., *Stoletja glasbe na Slovenskem – Centuries of Music in Slovenia* (Ljubljana: Festival Ljubljana, 2006), 365–380.

The music of *Cantico I* is laid out in a tripartite structure, with sections getting progressively shorter. The first section ('my lord brother Sun') is extended (9 minutes), varies enormously and is subdivided into three sub-sections; after a broad sweep from the whole orchestra, the music gradually emerges from long-held notes with occasional bursts of fierce drumming. The second section ('sister Moon and Stars') is shorter (4½ minutes), quiet and generally slow, conveying a sense of mystery and awe. The third ('brother wind and air') is shorter still (3 minutes), strongly rhythmic, exciting and loud. It is typical of Lebič's bacchanal music with extended passages of insistent regular rhythms, leading to a forceful climax. The formal plan of *Cantico I* leads from mystery through suppressed dynamics to a dance-like fury to end in a frenzy of sound, with a clearly inevitable progression.

The music of *Cantico II* works from a different perspective. It is laid out in four sections, but with less distinction than in *Cantico I* between those that represent the key words from the chosen text by St Francis: water, fire, earth, death. Although the score makes clear where the four sections connect with the key words, the connection with these words is loosely defined. To ensure continuity, the composer includes three transitions, connecting fire and earth, and earth and death, and the third during the course of the fourth part leading up to the climax of this section. A chronological account of the work shows how the individual sections fit together to define the form. Section 1 ('Water'), although very short, consists of the introduction and four sub-sections, all using the same compositional technique. It opens with loud timpani and orchestral tutti before instruments enter one by one with long notes to build up complex chords. Some short melodic phrases are introduced in the fourth part of this first section, before the loud timpani and tutti from the opening return to close the section. Section 2 ('Fire') is deliberately mysterious with strings playing tremolo, *sul ponticello* or at the tip of the bow, and timpani rolls moving glissando up or down a semitone, with regular 'interruptions' from the percussion. After a short, coordinated strongly rhythmic passage, the music halts abruptly for the first transition ('Doppio movimento') which builds on melodic phrases to merge into the powerful 'chorale' (Andante) of Section 3 that leads to the work's most imposing climax. The narrow range chorale melody is interrupted by the full orchestra, first by five chords, then by four and then by three, all played fortissimo (*fff*). It may seem to be an unexpected moment, but one that arises totally from the musical logic of the piece. After this, the fourth and final extended section (representing St Francis's 'corporal sister death') is a benediction using the melodic style of the chorale of Section 3, pianissimo, in Lebič's most sensitive orchestration. In the final pages of the score the words of each of the sections (of both *Cantico I* and *Cantico II*) are spoken and instrumentally articulated as a reminder of the original inspiration for this amazingly fertile composition. From the sustained note-clusters at the beginning and the repressed mystery of the second section to the climax in the third through to the almost religious atmosphere of the final section, the progress of the work is carefully and almost effortlessly balanced.

Thus *Glasba za orkester* is not programme music as such, but rather music whose original inspiration derives from words, but whose distant significance is lost as the music defines its own character and its natural progress. Because the actual words no longer

hold their original significance and have yielded to musical autonomy, even if they have remained as a symbol, this music has a logic of its own and its own 'narrative.' There are further features especially in connection with numbers that will not be explored here. One notes that the seven sections (or units) make an intriguing summative order:

'1, 3, 4, 7 that defines the entire composition and structure of the building blocks. In the background are historically known symbols: 3 (Trinity), 4 (Empedoclean world of four elements: fire water, air, earth); their sum is the symbol of cosmic perfection (7 planets, tones, Arts ...)'<sup>2</sup>

Lebič's most recent major work to set words for a solo singer and orchestra is *Miti in apokrifi* ('Myths and Apocrypha') of 1999 for bass-baritone and orchestra, with words by the Slovene poet, Venko Taufer,<sup>3</sup> which are very expressive but cryptic in their meaning, displaying the use of extensive repetition and considerable word play. The work is cast in four movements or sections but it is performed without a break; it is not unreasonable to consider it symphonic in character. The first section, written as an accompanied recitative, uses the phrase, 'Še več vemo pa na povemo' ('We know much more, but we won't tell'), over and over again. First it appears as the title and then prefaces six mysterious secrets of the human soul. Lebič groups the statements in pairs with an instrumental prelude and interludes between the pairs as follows:

Prelude - 1 and 2 - interlude - 3 and 4 - interlude - 5 and 6

The repeated phrase usually starts in a low register rising fitfully and often chromatically. The prelude sets the tone of mystery with sustained low C sharps, with explosive bursts and both regular and irregular rhythms. The first sung phrase rises from this C sharp and with the first two mysteries is presented in recitative fashion, in order to ensure the clarity of the words. With this terse and elliptical poetry, every effort has to be made to ensure complete audibility, while the interlude takes some features from the prelude to enable continuity. The second pair is also presented as recitative, *parlando*, with freely repeated string patterns, moving into a modern 'arioso' before returning to the recitative. The third pair returns to the recitative setting, punctuated by chords and synchronised flourishes. The insistent repetition forms a unifying factor in the music, in something of the manner of a traditional rondo.

The fascinating word-play of the second movement between the opposites of 'blizu' ('near') and 'daleč' ('far'), and between the sun and the moon (showing some connection with *Cantico D*) are played out very teasingly by Taufer. Here again Lebič uses recitative punctuated by flourishes and chords. He picks out the rhythm of the words to infiltrate the orchestral texture, for example, the rhythm of the words 'dolgo tiho blizu' are played percussively by the flute even before the singer enters. When the sun and moon appear, so does the rhythmic definition. If one considers this work a symphony, this would be the slow movement.

2 Lojze Lebič, Notes to CD recording entitled *Lojze Lebič* on MDC CD 009 (Celje: Mohorjeva založba, 2003).

3 The first two movements take poems from *Vodenjaki* (published Ljubljana, 1986) and the third and fourth from *Pesmarica rabljenih besed* (published Ljubljana, 1975).

The movement that follows, 'Godec pred peklom' ('A Fiddler before Hell') is in essence a scherzo, with its subsidiary section, 'Mrtvaški kost' ('The Dead Bone'). The rhythmic presentation of the words is as close to regular as anything in the whole work. As in the previous movement, the rhythm of the words, in this case 'poje dušada igra,' is played by the percussion. 'The Dead Bone' ('Mrtvaški kost') inspires a wide range of percussive patterns, sometimes rhythmically regular and sometimes broken up into short phrases. The final section of this movement is a brief bacchanal without voice that disintegrates into wailing glissandos and quarter-tone inflections.

This leads into the fourth movement 'Gospod Baroda' ('Mr Baroda') described as 'the music of parting from dead brothers.' Its slow tempo embraces long-held notes and a slowly-moving melody. The words are set freely, descending slowly and fitfully with a modest use of melisma. Lebič rearranged the order of the words of the words of the original poem, omitting the words 'ptica' ('bird') and 'voda' ('water'). The epilogue (without voice) uses sustained overlapping notes in the upper strings with a slow-moving melody in the clarinets, cellos and basses. The flutes freely play a selection of nine different bird-like sounds above these textures in a magical benediction on the distant words.

The overall structure of *Miti in apokrifi* balances many moments of vivid and memorable character with an overall plan that draws all these sections together. One can recall Lebič's cantata *Požgana trava* of 1965 which did many of the same things, but now we have a subtlety of control and manipulation of motifs which is much stronger than in the earlier work.

Of the other major recent works by Lebič two cantatas also stand out for continuing the development of the composer's inspiration from words: *Božične zgodbe* ('Christmas Fables') of 2000 and *Zgodbe* ('Fables') of 2006. They are loosely connected but not directly related, although *Zgodbe* has been influenced by the extended multi-media work *Fauvel '86*. *Božične zgodbe* is a work that celebrates Christmas with a mixture of medieval musical materials and modern techniques. Lebič uses various Christmas carols in his extensive Prologue and Epilogue to frame the work, in the former *Resonet in laudibus* and, in the latter *Oj dete je rojeno nam* ('Oh, the child has been born to us') as well as the Gregorian chant *Rorate coeli desuper*. A spoken narration is used to maintain continuity. The three middle movements are well balanced, with the second and fourth faster and more excited. The former entitled *Krilata noč* ('Winged Night') setting Brane Senegačnik's fantasia on a Christmas theme is a vivid and exciting setting of the words. The fourth movement setting *Koledniki* ('The Carollers') by Anice Černe and *V sveti noči* ('By Holy Night') by Gregor Strniša is much more restrained with a blend of very straightforward music in the regular rhythm of *Koledniki* and a textural working of Strniša's atmospheric words. The middle movement is in some ways the heart of the work, setting *Pod nočjo* ('At Dusk') by Miran Jarc and *Petričkove poslednje sanje* ('Little Peter's Last Dreams'). The opening is gentle while the solo singers' contributions, mostly unaccompanied, contain beautifully inflected vocal lines.

If *Božične zgodbe* places the old and new in startling juxtaposition, *Zgodbe* makes a really powerful feature of this technique, something that the composer explored to such impressive effect in *Fauvel '86*. Lebič takes two of the titles from the original *Le Roman*

*de Fauvel: flatterie* (flattery) and *avarice* (greed), but adds *Le doute* ('doubt'), *L'amour* ('Love') and *Et les songes sont* ('And there are dreams'). Throughout the work there are sections of simple medieval-type chanting and songs, but this is constantly contrasted with a wide range of vocal techniques, for example, ostinato patterning, shouting, and speaking. The two solo singers contribute much of the narrative with words mostly clearly distinguishable. The orchestral contribution is almost completely subservient to that of the singers, although there are a number of interludes, particularly one at the beginning of the fourth movement with regular rhythmic phrases, that lead into a choral chant which expands into a joyous expression of love. The whole work is a tour-de-force of these features which are made to merge almost effortlessly one with another. Formally the work is similar to *Božične zgodbe* in that it has five movements with the second and fourth being somewhat shorter than the others, but in all other respects it is much more ambitious in its aims, as a powerful expression of the medieval term *varieté*.

Among the large number of his earlier instrumental and orchestral works, Lebič had never written a concerto as such, and in general he has not particularly favoured the use of solo instruments with orchestra. Only two of his earlier works fit into this category: *Sentence* of 1967 for two pianos and orchestra and the *Simfonija z orglami* of 1993, with a solo part for organ. Both of these pieces have difficult solo parts, but they are never virtuosic in character. However, in the recent music there are three compositions which feature a solo instrument with orchestra in a much more explicit way: *Musica concertata* for horn (of 2004), *Diaphonia* for piano (of 2009) and *Glasba* for cello (of 2011).<sup>4</sup>

*Musica concertata* is in many ways like a traditional concerto, with prominence given to the solo instrument, both in the unaccompanied opening solo and the sections with the orchestra. The formal plan is straightforward but untraditional: its single-movement structure consists of two slow sections followed by a longer faster one, with a short cadenza and coda. This description is misleading as the two slower sections merge into one, to be followed by a faster section of similar length. The remaining third, consisting of a cadenza and coda, balances the whole perfectly. There is a strong character in the opening horn calls with a hint of sounds produced by the natural horn. Contrasting with this is a vividly dense textural passage from the orchestra with the horn continuing with its melodic passages. The faster section is rhythmically strong, exhibiting both regular and irregular rhythms familiar in some of the composer's earlier music. The final sections present a cadenza recalling the opening horn calls and a fast conclusion to the work. At all stages the horn is brought into sharp contrast with the orchestra with short flourishes, and even some unorthodox techniques not normally favoured by the composer. What is especially impressive is the way all this potentially diffuse music is drawn into Lebič's clear structure.

*Diaphonia* for piano is more complex, being cast in two separate movements, although these are played without a break, making it in effect a single-movement work. The slower first section is roughly ternary in plan with a cadenza inserted before the reprise, while the faster second movement is also tripartite (but not ternary) with a cadenza placed just before the third section. This plan is completely consistent with

<sup>4</sup> The last of these was originally entitled Concerto for violoncello and orchestra.

the composer's aim to make a convincing structure without falling into the easy solution of plain symmetry. The introduction is immediately gripping with a strong call to attention with intensely expressed, grinding chords and loud piano roudades before moving into the slow section proper. Fragmentary phrases are part of a dialogue while the central section features strings in slow-moving melodic shapes. While most of the work features generally modest demands from the soloist in the dialogues with the orchestra, the cadenza introduces virtuosity, something which is taken over to the faster second part. The strong rhythmic drive in this part recalls the almost Bacchic dances found in some earlier works by the composer, notably *Miti in apokrifi* and *Korant*. It is work that balances the raw emotion of the sound with the careful formal control of the disparate elements in the music.

*Glasba* for cello has its origins in the piece that Lebič wrote in 1976, *Atelje III* for cello and electronic tape. The orchestral part has been developed from the electronic sounds, but is not a literal transcription. The solo cello part is very demanding, with the composer originally calling the piece a concerto, but later using the much more unassuming title *Glasba* ('Music'). The work is cast in similar fashion to *Diaphonia*, being divided into two halves of approximately equal length. The opening *Lento con estro* is mostly fragmentary in texture with atmospheric sounds, for example trills, harmonics and some held notes. The composer draws more extended melodic shapes from these long notes, accompanied by gentle harmonies from the orchestral strings. The music is 'distant' in its character. Lebič moves without a break into the second half, *Allegro risoluto*, again starting with fragmentary motifs from the cello, mostly unaccompanied, skating up and down the strings in short phrases. A vivid pizzicato passage leads to the main entry of the orchestra. Its increasing presence is emphasised by numerous ostinatos against the very high sustained cello notes. The dialogue between the soloist and the orchestra is brilliantly maintained with a totally unpredictable but completely logical sequence of sounds. Overall it is a work that maintains a good balance between vivid content and convincing structure, but it demands total concentration from the listener because the ideas, phrases, and gestures are tantalisingly brief.

In some of his earlier music Lebič has shown a fondness for the string orchestra and a consummate skill in drawing out unique and distinctive sounds from it. Two recent works that are typical of this trend are *Archiphonia - Preludij za godala* of 2005 and *Za godala - Per Archi* from 2009. *Archiphonia* does have some sectional features with a strong and powerfully argued long opening slow section, in which the composer's grasp of a wide range of string techniques is very extensive, followed by two much shorter sections (fast, then slow). The plan does not correspond with any traditional form, but is in every way convincing. The very opening of *Archiphonia* uses loud dense string textures that immediately engage the listener, but Lebič follows these with scattered sounds, bass rumblings and textures built on fast-moving ostinatos. What comes as a surprise is the section involving melodic phrases set in a virtual tonal context, at times suggesting the music of Bartók. For the shorter second part the music is fast moving, with the strongly rhythmic passages for which the composer is well known, including vivid stamping passages distantly reminiscent of parts of Stravinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*. The short third part acts as a coda with slow moving overlapping phrases and chordal

punctuation. Overall the balance of the three sections is unorthodox but clear.

*Za godala* ('For Strings') is modestly titled but expertly executed. The work is again cast as a single movement, broadly in four parts,<sup>5</sup> and it thrives on an elaborate interconnection of motifs. As in *Archiphonia* the opening is slow with suppressed dynamics, a mysterious alternation between held string notes or chords and an interesting motivic exposition. A faster second section (*Subito animato, energico*) elaborates a number of very distinctive motifs, especially a rising two-note figure, until it is suddenly cut short. The third section that follows is quiet and slow although unpredictable. Ricochets and groups of repeated notes lead suddenly to tonal melodic phrases and quiet chords. Solo players develop the motivic activity. A sudden rapid tremolo intervenes, anticipating the final section but the slow section returns briefly. A vivid collection of fast, short string figures make up the substance of the fourth section, at first repeated notes and pizzicato, then sliding notes and glissando. Loud chords variously articulated are suddenly cut off, leaving a very quiet D major chord to end the work. For a composition of just over twelve minutes' duration, *Za godala* uses a wide range of string techniques in a natural and inspired way, set in a formal context of great simplicity which at the same time is supremely effective.

Of chamber works one can mention the humorous and adventurous *Duettino* of 2009 for clarinet and guitar, written for fellow composer and clarinettist Uroš Rojko, and the ensemble work *Barvni krog* ('Colour Circle') written for MD7, the specialist group directed by the composer Pavel Mihelčič. The *Duettino* is a tour-de-force of avant-garde instrumental techniques that from start to finish shock or at the very least surprise in their imagination. The use, at the opening, of the detached clarinet mouthpiece to produce a wide variety of sounds, although unusual, is made to sound completely natural. Lebič again varies his tempo to build up the tension, first by using scattered sounds in a slow tempo, and then by introducing melodic phrases mostly accompanied by guitar chords (sometimes spread). The melodic feature is extended with the guitarist playing the triangle, then engaging in a dialogue with the clarinettist, sometimes with vocal sounds. The form, like parts of *Za godala*, is planned in short sections rather than longer parts which maintain a single tempo, but it is very effective in conveying the almost 'breathless' character of the piece. Lebič's *Barvni krog* of 2008 is a ten-minute work scored for flute, clarinet, trombone, percussion, piano, violin and cello and is tripartite in form as described by the composer: 'the single-movement work is linked [in] three separate sections, so that the calm outer sections encircle a dramatic and faster middle part.'<sup>6</sup> As in *Archiphonia*, the three sections are not of equal length: for example, the opening slow section is allowed to develop naturally without any need to rush the argument of the music before the faster central section emerges.

In all these works the composer has aimed to achieve an effective balance between attractive and imaginative sounds, and a structure or form in which to place these sounds. It is clear that Lebič does not rely on any one particular form, but uses an ima-

5 The statement by Klemen Hvala in the notes with the recording *20 Years – 20 Let: Komorni godalni orkester Slovenske filharmonija*, KGOSF CD 014 (Ljubljana: Slovenske filharmonija, n.d. [2014]) refers to three parts, but the fragmentary introductory music is clearly separate from the faster motivic activity in the passage that follows, thus dividing the first part into two.

6 Lojze Lebič in notes to CD entitled *MD7 Barvni log – Colour Circle DSS 200974* (Ljubljana: Edicije DSS – Društvo slovenskih skladateljev, 2009).



ginative variety of plans to achieve his ends. What is impressive is that the composer's skilful handling of instrumental technique is always used to produce memorable sonic events which mark out the important points in his formal structures, and, especially in the single-movement pieces, these distinctive sounds are placed in a narrative progression that creates a strong unity. It is this feature which has marked out Lebič as one of Slovenia's leading composers.

## POVZETEK

Glasba Lojzeta Lebiča nagovarja poslušalce s svojim smislom za pustolovščino kakor tudi s svojo očitno muzikalnostjo. Njene ideje so vedno polne življenja in izraza z močnim občutkom za oblikovno kontrolo. Te in take značilnosti kažejo zlasti večja orkestralna dela, ki so nastala ob koncu tisočletja in poslej, *Glasba za orkester* ter *Miti in apokrifji* kakor tudi koncertom podobne skladbe

za rog (*Musica concertata*), klavir (*Diaphonia*) in čelo (*Glasba*). Isto velja za komorna dela in tista za manjši orkester. Slednja so vedno živa in nepozabna ter odsevajo izkušeno obravnavo instrumentalne tehnike in močno, a ne togo, kontrolo nad obliko. Lebičeva dela za vokal so enako prepričljiva, tako zlasti *Zgodbe* in *Božične zgodbe*, ki izkazujejo uravnovečeno mešanico starih in novih tehnik.