

## THE SPECIFICS OF ROMAN BERGER'S COMPOSITIONAL LANGUAGE

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Abstract: The presented paper is focused on the compositional language of the paramount Slovak composer, theorist, musicologist and publicist Roman Berger. His work occupies an essential and unique place in the field of Slovak music culture. The composer has created his own and original musical language that is specific to each of his compositions. The paper is a summary of the composer's lifelong work and an explanation and characteristic of his specific compositional language.

Keywords: Roman Berger, slovak contemporary music, compositional language

### 1 Introduction

Roman Berger (1930 - 2021) was an exceptional figure in Slovak music. He worked as a composer, theorist, musicologist and publicist who tried to create a system of music theory adequate to current scientific thinking and which would be as general as possible. In many respects, his work can at the very least be described as specific, original and fundamentally meaningful. Berger's work does not impress in the range or width of the scope, but in its depth and the effort to concentrate. He was not only a composer, but also an exceptionally thoughtful philosopher and writing poet - this feature became an integral part of every composition. He created his own, inimitable compositional language, which is characteristic and recognizable within each of his compositions.

### 2 Life, work and compositional language

Roman Berger was born in a humanist-based family of Polish Evangelical pastor Jozef Berger, who was interned in concentration camps during World War II due to his patriotic mindset. After graduating from high school, his son decided to study music at the University of Music in Katowice. His interest in composition originated in his theory lessons with Ján Gawlas. Here he also met two other professors - Boleslaw Woytowicz and Boleslaw Szabelski - who were the protagonists of the organic connection of respect for tradition and the sensitive way of its integration into the development of contemporary music, as well as music as a spiritual profession. In 1952, the whole family was forcibly moved to Bratislava, which forever left Berger with feelings of resistance and protest against the manifested power, the expressions of dogmatism and unculture. In 1952 he became a student of piano at the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava. His teachers were Frico Kafenda and Štefan Németh-Šamorínsky, whose spiritual world was the polar opposite of the political and ideological realities of the time. In 1956 he began teaching piano at the Bratislava Conservatory. However, he maintained his relationship with composition and was intensely interested in contemporary work at the time. In the late 1950s, he intended to enroll in composition studies in Katowice, but this effort was thwarted by representatives of domestic institutions at the time. Unlike his companions, he began studying composition as a mature man at the age of 30. He became the first student of Dezider Kardoš.<sup>1</sup>

Roman Berger began composing in the mid-fifties of the 20th century. Studying piano at the Academy of Performing Arts became the primary starting point for choosing an instrument - his first works were piano compositions - e.g. *Fantasia quasi una sonata* (1955) or miniatures *Five Very Short Pieces* (1959), *Five Studies* (1959 - 1960), *Inventions* (1959 - 1961) and *Little Suite* (1960). Already in the first of them he tried to address the musical substance of compositional trends of the 20th century in

the integration of tonal harmony with atonal elements.<sup>2</sup> The instruction and brevity of parts of these cycles is reminiscent of Béla Bartók's *Microcosmos*. Here, Berger works with the details of the motivic phrase, exposes the elements of modal organization, shapes the simplicity of the relationship of the two lines, the variability of the metric pulse and the simplicity of the chord shapes. The progress from simplicity to the gradual evolution of the initial elements in the *Sonata 1960* (1960) and the *Piano Suite* (1961). In the background of the *Sonata* composition process, we find Messiaen's modal system in a relaxed twelve-tone space, adapted to a dynamically perceived form. The composer's intention was "to create a homogeneous stream of music in which the traditional thematic contrast in the exhibition is bridged and the balance of evolutionary and repetitive procedures in sonata form is resolved."<sup>3</sup> Berger composed the *Piano suite* as a composition student at the Academy of Performing Arts. It consists of *Prelude*, *Scherzo* and *Toccata*. The musical process of the work is characterized by the constant movement of the ostinato, which is interrupted by the opposition of melodic fragments in the horizontal line. The baseline of the compositional process is chronometric regulation, which can be seen in the shifts of accents and polyrhythmic structures, as well as the layering of a wide range of shapes, interspersed with several rhythmic models.<sup>4</sup> The influence of Paul Hindemith's work can be seen in the flute, clarinet and bassoon performance in *Trio for Winds*. It is characterized by the discipline of developing thematic cores, moderation of expression and polyphonic binding of equal voices. On the contrary, Bartók's composition *Music for strings, percussion and celesta* is reminiscent of Berger's orchestral *Suite in the Old Style* for strings, percussion and keyboards (1963). Except for the second part, it is characterized by seriousness and a meditative touch. The interval cores are made up of two small seconds and small thirds, apart from the interval of the increased quarter.<sup>5</sup>

In the period's fascination with new sound possibilities, electronics, serialism, sonorism, stochastic music or graphics, it was time to look for connections between what was considered traditional and the "shock" of unusuality, typical for the time. Berger attempted a sort of combination of these contradictions in *Transformations* (1965), his graduate composition at the Academy of Performing Arts. The baseline of the work was a twelve-tone series with the intention of achieving the greatest possible diversity. There is also a notable relationship with the sonorism of the Polish composition school.<sup>6</sup> In the middle of the basic series arrangement (2-6-1-3-1-6-1-3-2-6-1 - numbers indicate the size of the interval according to the number of halftones) is the tritonus. Similarly to the previous ones, in this composition, the basic building blocks and pillars of melodic-chord thinking are the intervals of small and large seconds, as well as small thirds. "Berger's characteristic position is meditative as a derivative of the seriousness and concentration of search and finding, as well as explosiveness, excitement, interpreted as if by sighs and screams ... The work does not emanate author's pride...or enthusiasm for experimenter, but rather a certain humility."<sup>7</sup> This work was awarded the Ján Levoslav Bella Award and the Czechoslovak Critics' Award in the year of its premiere (1966). "... Berger's composition surpassed the level of a synthetic documentary of the author's mature compositional poetics and achieved the value of a

<sup>1</sup> CHALUPKA, E. 2011. *Slovenská hudobná avantgarda*. Bratislava : Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2011. s. 192 - 195.

<sup>2</sup> JAKUBISOVÁ, L. 2016. *Roman Berger – skladateľ*. In: Slovenská hudba, roč. 17, 2016, č. 2. s. 113.

<sup>3</sup> CHALUPKA, E. 2018. *Generačné a štýlové konfrontácie. Sprievodca slovenskou hudbou 20. storočia II*. Bratislava : Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2018. s. 247.

<sup>4</sup> JAKUBISOVÁ, L. 2016. *Roman Berger – skladateľ*. In: Slovenská hudba, roč. 17, 2016, č. 2. s. 115.

<sup>5</sup> CHALUPKA, E. 2018. *Generačné a štýlové konfrontácie. Sprievodca slovenskou hudbou 20. storočia II*. Bratislava : Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2018. s. 247.

<sup>6</sup> HRČKOVÁ, Naďa. 2006. *Dejiny hudby VI. Hudba 20. storočia (2)*. Bratislava : Ikar, 2006. s. 388.

<sup>7</sup> CHALUPKA, E. 2018. *Generačné a štýlové konfrontácie. Sprievodca slovenskou hudbou 20. storočia II*. Bratislava : Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2018. s. 251 - 252.

symbolic statement, a testimony for his whole generation about its creative motivations, ambitions and results, a testimony that had the power to transcend origins and send impulses to the present."<sup>8</sup>

During the normalization period, Berger was expelled from the Slovak Composers' Union due to his unshakable opinion and moral attitudes and also stripped of a teaching position at the Conservatory. He began to create in his own internal exile. During this period, he gradually composed a cycle of compositions for string instruments called *Convergence I.* (1969) for violin, *Convergence II.* (1970) for viola and *Convergence III.* (1975) for cello. He believed the concept of musical form required refining and could be inspired by practices from the exact sciences, such as logic, mathematics or systems theory. Looking for connections between composing and contemplating about it, he presented a way to use these techniques in the presented compositions. Violin and cello are characterized by a synthesis of mathematical structures and diatonic, elements of Bach melodies are implied in violas with the creation of structures of contemporary musical language. The meaning and starting points of the author's intention are obvious - to overcome contradictions and find connections. This idea poses a serious question about the mission of art and the authenticity of artistic creation - "it is understood on a transcendental level as a possible way to get rid of a state of chaos, randomness, indiscipline or distraction, carried out with the help of firm principles and a sense of order."<sup>9</sup>

Ten years after the creation of the *Piano Suite*, the *Sonata No. 3 "da camera" in memoriam Frico Kafenda* (1971) was created. The basis of the four-part work is formed by short melodic-rhythmic models, which are arranged in various meters. Here, too, the intervals characteristic of Berger - tritonus, small thirds and small seconds - appear. The composer's affection for the expressionism of the Second Viennese School is referred to by symbolic quotations - a fragment of the waltz *The Blue Danube* by J. Strauss, tone sequence B-A-C-H and behind it the cryptogram K-A-F-E-N-D-A as a symbol of respect for the teacher's memory. Influenced by the tragic death of musicologist Miroslav Filip, he created a Memento after the Death of Miroslav Filip (1973-1974). "... The musical material in this composition oscillates between extremes - especially in terms of complexity. Perhaps in these oscillations and the unpredictability of the form process, there are points of contact with the non-musical sphere that evoked this music."<sup>10</sup>

In 1972, Berger began composing the electroacoustic composition *Epitaph for Nicolaus Copernicus*. The introduction of this type of music was banned in the period of normalization, it was first introduced in Slovakia only in 1977. Berger also applied his principles of harmony to hum and microintervals. *The Epitaph* was planned as a "melodrama" with a recitation of excerpts from Copernicus' *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*. At the international competition in Bourges, he placed fifth out of a hundred songs, which was a significant morale boost for the author.

After meeting the poetic narration of the texts of the Polish poet Tadeusz Różewicz, Berger wrote the four-part chamber work *De profundis* (1975 - 1980) for bass, piano and cello. The almost hour-long composition is characterized by great drama, consisting of a synthesis of all the compositional techniques used by the composer - diatonic, off-interval series, fragments of the twelve-tone series, repeated fifth techniques and his usual symbols. The intensity of the statement is increased by the electronic transformation of sound, singing and piano. The author demands an extremely wide range of means of expression

from the singer - from spoken word to expressive singing to shouting.<sup>11</sup>

In 1987, a musical meditation was created in honor of the late friend - *Adagio for Ján Branný*. The sharp contrasts present in previous works disappear; the author uses only muted musical means. At the beginning of the song, Berger again utilizes the popular interval of a small third, which then develops into a pure fifth. The composition recalls the meditative character of "minimal music" by the frequent return of the main motivic sections and the use of repetitions. It is also characterized by detailed work with elementary structures. In *Adagio No. 2 "Repentance"* (1989), Berger revises his composing practice, searches for elementary sources of music, and rethinks the limits of his possibilities. The tonal functional relations of the harmonic cadence, culminating in fragments of Bach's chant "*Wer nun den lieben Gott lässt walten*" (Who relies on God), are further reduced to a double voice in a series of small thirds. The center of gravity of the parallel procedures of the scaled-down septachords is the tritonus. In addition to chromatic procedures, it also uses a full-tone scale and clusters. In the final Epilogue, the meditative character returns in diatonic procedures and complete dynamic silence.<sup>12</sup>

A reflection of Berger's spiritual world is also *Wiegenlied* (1991), in which he meditates on the tragic fate of a young teacher, Ella Maldaque, one of the first victims of the Nazi regime. In the dead mother's "lullaby", two contrasting positions change - soothing and anxious. The dramatic atmosphere of the concentration camp is replaced by the poetic chorus "Willows softly sway you". *Wiegenlied* probably best describes the whole spiritual world of Roman Berger and the Poetics of his music as dramas. *Requiem da camera* (1998) is not a form of liturgy. Berger composed it on the basis that we may call it art if the artifact is aimed at the expression of the last truth about man. The composition consists of four consecutive sections of attack. In the third part, the B-A-C-H motif and a fragment from the Lutosław 4th Symphony appear, which will also be heard in the final part. The sonorism of the musical expression is confirmed by a wide range of musical means - clusters in the bass position of the piano, tremolos, glissandos, clusters in fortissimo and sudden dynamic contrasts. The context of the author's spiritual thinking here is to "penetrate to the essence of being through music."<sup>13</sup>

One of Berger's most specific compositions is the monumental composition *Korczak in memoriam for mezzo-soprano, flute, organ, timpani and string quartet* (2000). It was commissioned by the *Krakow 2000 Festival - Velvet Curtain*. The author dedicated it to the Polish doctor, writer and pedagogue Janusz Korczak (1878 or 1879 - 1942), who decided to accompany the children from his orphanage during transport to the concentration camp, even though it meant his certain death. This story substantially fascinated Berger. He, too, relentlessly fights against all the evil he observes and feels, even at the cost of causing him harm. He always remains faithful to the Good, the Truth and his principles.

In the case of a performance at the church, Berger requests that the first part (*Polemos* - "Kinderszenen") be played by a quartet in front of the audience (in front of the altar), after the beginning of the second part (*Dies irae*) the lights are turned off and the players go to the choir. The flute is to be hidden behind the altar or sound from a distance, the timpani placed behind the audience. The whole work is presented by the organ. By repeated fifth procedures and a rapid change in dynamics, the composer achieves a great gradation effect at the beginning of the composition, with noticeable gusts between the lyricism of "slow" fifths on one hand and their opposition of "fast" and restless fifths on the other. The drama is stepped up by the

<sup>8</sup> CHALUPKA, E. 2018. *Generačné a štýlové konfrontácie. Sprievodca slovenskou hudbou 20. storočia II*. Bratislava : Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2018. s. 253

<sup>9</sup> CHALUPKA, E. 2011. *Slovenská hudobná avantgarda*. Bratislava : Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave, 2011. s. 207.

<sup>10</sup> JAKUBISOVÁ, L. 2016. *Roman Berger – skladateľ*. In: Slovenská hudba, roč. 17, 2016, č. 2. s. 116.

<sup>11</sup> HRČKOVÁ, N. 2006. *Dejiny hudby VI. Hudba 20. storočia (2)*. Bratislava : Ikar, 2006. s. 389.

<sup>12</sup> JAKUBISOVÁ, L. 2016. *Roman Berger – skladateľ*. In: Slovenská hudba, roč. 17, 2016, č. 2. s. 145 – 146.

<sup>13</sup> JAKUBISOVÁ, L. 2016. *Roman Berger – skladateľ*. In: Slovenská hudba, roč. 17, 2016, č. 2. s. 145 – 148.

accompanied timpani. Berger uses the same material (distributed quarters and fifths) to alternate poetic and dramatic passages, which perhaps symbolize the beauty and tragedy of Korczak's life. (At this point, it is possible to reflect on the fact that beauty and tragedy may come from the same matter ...) The moment the last soothing pure fifth in pianissimo sounds on the organ, the string quartet sounds in the tranquillo for the first time. The second (accompanied by timpani) and third organ input are a short reminiscence of the beginning of the song. The second part of *Dies irae* comes attacca by the gentle melody of the flute (sounds like a memory from a distance), which is literally shaken by the sharp blows of a timpani accompanied by the organ in fortissimo. After a tumultuous and expressive solo, the organ sound shows its second - poetic face, which is lost in the imitation of a flute melody. Another organ input in the accompaniment of the quartet (which is already located near the organ) quotes the melody *Dies irae*, which is further varied in different ways. The third part (again attacca) *Choralvorspiel - Marcia funebre* begins with long "mourning" fifths, resounding in strings. The last organ entry begins in an aggressive forte, which is replaced by the chant *O glowo, twa korona* (O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden), delivered by the mezzo-soprano in pianissimo. The last tones of the organ resound in the fading dynamics and atmosphere that presents the final tranquillo. The whole composition ends with a mezzo-soprano solo in pianopianissimo with the words: *O glowo poraniona, krwiva hańba pokryta, o glowo ...*

In writing this work, Berger was galvanized by the tragedy of Janusz Korczak's story, the hiding of war misfortunes behind a wall of silence, and the thoughts of John Paul II that after tragedies in the first half of the 20th century, one can sing as long as one's singing is an expression of protest, lamentation or hope. According to his own words, he initiated the music of the first two parts several times, the chant itself is not finalized. He could not create music that would be the ideal of wholeness and evolution if it came from something that was killed, broken or shattered. In the end, the unfinished chant is only broken by the silence - *Silentium*. Hope can no longer be triggered by old illusions. The postulate of Truth suggests that not only the category of ethos, but also sin, should be integrated into aesthetics.

Berger uses the organ as an equal partner to the other instrumental components. It does not state or have special sound color requirements. He prescribes dynamics in standard markings. Sections with listed crescendo and decrescendo are relatively short, and it is appropriate to perceive them as terracelike due to the speed of dynamic changes. In solos, the organ carries dramatic tension, but due to the overall sound concept of the work, it must never sound in full tutti (except for a small instrument). Silent registers (covers and flutes) are sufficient when playing with the ensemble. Dramatic passages in strings can be a great inspiration for the expressiveness within the interpretation of *Exodus*. The performer will also find stimuli for the interpretive performance in the silent tranquillos of the quartet, which are reminiscent of all *Misterios* and *Andante* of the second, as well as *Moderato* of the third part of the *Exodus*. These related sites have led me to use an accessible range of string registers. The sound of the strings can be guided at the final *Veloce ma Tranquillo e eguale, legatissimo* of the third part, while its complete conclusion is to some extent related to the solo sections of the flute. (This one interprets its solo from a distance, hidden from the view of the audience.)

### 3 Conclusion

If we want to summarize the specifics of Roman Berger's compositional language, it is important to perceive the fact that this composer takes music very seriously and that it represents a significant dimension of life, an integral part of it, not an autonomous entity. The basic theme is always the truthfulness, the authenticity of Creation. It is conditioned by authentic humanity, which is manifested in man's relationship to eternity (Sacrum). Music becomes one of the manifestations of the creative forces of the Universe, and man's role is to cultivate this

eternal energy, because otherwise it degenerates into ideologically or commercially (i.e., egocentrically) determined reproduction. Berger emphasizes the term "authentic creation" in opposition to "re-producing" creation, which only touches the surface of the psyche and is tied to ready-made forms, positions of expression and means. "Authentic work" is characterized by a deep immersion in the psyche, it is urgent and revealing. It focuses on the search for the "expressiveness" of the sound-musical substance, which presupposes "direct contact" with sound, the "abolition of the Cartesian dichotomy, 'subject versus object'. The sound (tone) 'material' here changes to the 'element' with which the composer enters into a dialogue sui generis".<sup>14</sup> Authentic creation has the ability to deeply impact the recipient and Berger's contains two types of "messages" - S.O.S. and the Eureka!

Roman Berger's work cannot be seen as a set of thorough mastery of many compositional techniques in synthesis with a vivid expression. The composer cared primarily about the message and the emotional impact of the work. For him, music was an expression of dramatic existence and creation by an emotional shock that seizes rational structures. The composer's spiritual and emotional world is evidenced by the passion and emotional strain of his music. Its inspiration is an extraordinary contribution not only to the Slovak but also to the world music culture. In composing, the composer sought the meaning of artistic music and activity, while trying to find answers to the essential questions of life. The values that he defended in his journalistic activity and musicalized through personal testimony are still natural to us - in our inner essence - only they - according to the composer's words - need to be rediscovered.

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### Primary Paper Section: A

### Secondary Paper Section: AL, AM

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