

UDK 781.61 Stibilj

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LoughboroughPROCESS AS MUSICAL FORM IN THE MUSIC OF
MILAN STIBILJ

As a composer in Slovenia, Milan Stibilj (b. 1929) is something of a special case. His training has been unorthodox in some respects; he studied psychology to an advanced level before concentrating on music. Although he wrote some of his earlier works in Ljubljana after studying with Karol Pahor and established himself as a composer while still living in Slovenia, Stibilj has spent long periods abroad. His earliest advanced musical studies were with the Croatian composer, Milko Kelemen, in Zagreb in 1963-64. As a result of these studies (Kelemen had himself studied with Messiaen and Fortner), Stibilj wanted to become acquainted with the latest Central and Western European music at first hand. The most important was his study in Berlin in 1967-68 as a guest of the Berliner Künstlerprogramm. Stibilj reported on new music festivals in Kassel¹ and Berlin.² The tone of these articles indicated his strong enthusiasm for what was taking place there. Further studies included work at the Utrecht University Electronic Studio (1966-67, 1968, 1972 and 1975), although only one acknowledged composition has emerged from these studies. After holding a composition teaching post in 1973-74 at the Université de Montréal in Canada, he returned to Ljubljana. Here he has remained, standing somewhat apart from the mainstream of Slovenian music.

Stibilj's contact with psychology may have had some effect on his musical thinking, but it would no doubt have been of a general nature. There is little after his student works³ that is traditional in approach, yet there is a certain conservatism in his progress. Stibilj has generally avoided the rhythmically free coordination between parts that is found in the music of Darijan Božič and others. There is no free textural working in the manner of some Polish composers, and his notation, with a few rare exceptions, is precise. There are no "half-composed" pieces in which the performer acts as an intermediary for the composer, improvising according to general instructions, as in some works of Vinko Globokar.

1 Milan Stibilj: "Kasselski muzički dani 1965", *Zvuk* 67 (1966), pp. 244-48.

2 Milan Stibilj: "Berlinske svečane nedelje 1967", *Zvuk* 82 (1968), pp. 115-20; id.: "Berlinske svečane nedelje 1969", *Zvuk* 101 (1970), pp. 46-51; id.: "Berlinske svečane nedelje 1970", *Zvuk* 109-110 (1970), pp. 462-64.

3 See ch. 14 of Niall O'Loughlin: *Slovenian Composition since the First World War* (Dissertation, University of Leicester, 1978). The published works are *Štiri anekdote* for piano and *Tri skladbe* for violin and piano.

In almost all of Stibilj's music, there is a concentration on *process*. Indeed it is no exaggeration to say that these processes, and the formal plans determined by them, have been Stibilj's main concerns as a composer.

His attention to formal manipulation and process can be found in embryonic form in *Koncertantna glasba* ("Concertante Music") for horn and orchestra of 1959. Significantly, unlike his earlier works, it is played without a break. On the one hand, Stibilj presents two substantial sections in contrasting tempos (Andante and Allegro), with a final coda alternating the two speeds. On the other hand he makes an attempt to unify the melodic material of the two sections. While in *Koncertantna glasba* Stibilj was breaking with his past, this is even more apparent in the orchestral work *Slavček in vrtnica* ("The Nightingale and the Rose"), subtitled "symphony", which was composed in 1961. In it the composer aimed at formal variety by clear-cut and frequent changes of tempo, and at formal unity by means of thematic links. Although the piece is ostensibly based on Oscar Wilde's short tale, *The Nightingale and the Rose*, the musical structure is entirely convincing without making any reference to it.

The simple tempo relationships of *Koncertantna glasba* are considerably elaborated in *Slavček in vrtnica*. A fast speed of $\text{♩} = 144-160$ is immediately contrasted with another approximately half as fast ($\text{♩} = 72-60$). The melodic content of the fast music is very important: the opening bars (Ex. 1a) contain one important thematic germ ("x"), which also appears in Ex. 1b. The phrase "y" in the latter example also features in much of the thematic development (see Ex. 1c). Both these shapes emerge at prominent and sometimes unexpected points in the score. Yet all this is welded into a coherent and continuous structure which also incorporates a slower tempo ($\text{♩} = 84-100$). It is this mastery of the problems of using different tempos in single-movement works that characterises two important works that followed, *Skladja* and *Verz*.

Skladja ("Congruences") for piano and orchestra of 1963 is a concerto in all but name. Its scheme or process is very simple: the orchestra plays long-held and slow moving chords, while the piano plays florid virtuoso passages. The tempos of the two types of material are clearly distinguished: $\text{♩} = 60$ for the chords and $\text{♩} = 152$ (also increased to $\text{♩} = 184$) for the piano figurations. As the work progresses, the two tempos, which were originally separate, interact with each other. The florid piano writing is infiltrated by the occasional held note and then by chords. Considered in another way *Skladja* is a set of free variations on the opening string chords (Ex. 2), but each statement of this progression is separated from the next by a passage of florid piano writing. During the course of the work the chord progression is broken up and sometimes reduced to single long notes. This is the point of "congruence" of the title: both chords and flourishes are transformed into long notes.

Stibilj's horizons were expanded at this time by the award of a scholarship from the Prešern Fund to study at the Academy of Music in Zagreb with Milko Kelemen. The first fruits of this study were three contrasting works: the small-scale *Impresije* ("Impressions") for flute and strings, the striking but terse edifice of *Verz* for orchestra and the dramatic and sometimes wild setting for speaker and percussion, *Épervier de ta faiblesse, Domine*.

Verz for orchestra, in common with *Skladja*, uses a conflict between long-held chords and fast-moving fragments. Stibilj chose a variety of tempos for his slow chordal opening section ($\text{♩} = 48, 52, 60, 72$), but the basic tempo of the contrasting wind fragments is faster ($\text{♩} = 92$). The work itself is notable for its use of multi-rhythm

textures in the sections using the faster tempo. The superimposition of many different subdivisions of the crotchet beat is similar to that found in passages from Stockhausen's *Gruppen* of 1957.⁴ The process of interaction between the opening string chords and the complex wind textures is clearly a development of that used in *Skladja*, but the multiple subdivisions of the crotchet beat are new.

The form of *Impresije* can be loosely construed as exposition, development and recapitulation, though one must not take these labels too literally. The first entry of the flute, an unaccompanied melodic line (Ex. 3a) has the appearance of twelve-note writing, although no strict application of the technique is used. Instead the process employed by Stibilj is his own type of note-and-rhythm serialism, given in tabulated form in Ex. 3. He started with a six-note row consisting of the following intervals: falling major sixth, and ascending minor second, augmented fourth, perfect fifth and diminished fifth. This basic form, starting on the note B, is transposed to three other pitches (C, D and A) and also used in inverted form at three pitches (B, B flat and A flat), making a total of seven forms. The first, second and sixth notes of each row are classed as "obligatory", the other three as "optional". Further, the actual sequence of the notes of each six-note set is subject to some reordering. The only way that Stibilj restricts himself is in the change from one set to another, which has to be by means of common "obligatory" notes (see the "minims" in the top part of Ex. 3). The *rhythmic* structures that Stibilj applies to the melodic forms derived from his six-note sets are three in number (see A, B and C in Ex. 3) and may be used in forward or reversed forms. He also allowed himself to choose segments of each of the rhythmic structures, as well as the possibility of subdividing any notes, or linking some of them together to form long notes. The total result of this system is that Stibilj was able to work with a simple note-row and easily understood rhythmic patterns.

While much of Stibilj's music is instrumental and operates with purely musical processes, there are a number of vocal works, but these also tend to follow the same processes. *Épervier de ta faiblesse, Domine* of 1964, set to the poetry of the Belgian, Henri Michaux, employs less complex and sustained superimposition of rhythms than *Verz*. The composer has described the form of the work as follows: "The piece is composed as a set of 17 variations of rhythmic structure. The first 8 variations are based on the original, the last 8 on its retrograde form. The central one, the ninth, presents the combination of both forms".⁵ One might expect that a regularly recurring pattern would be discernible. This is not in fact possible, because, as the composer says, "throughout the composition the fixed elements of the rhythmic structure frequently disappear and are substituted with free rhythmic components".⁶ Just as in *Impresije* an apparently strict plan has been modified to the extent that it is not possible to recognise it as such. The conclusion must be that the process is an ideal only, and that a strict formal scheme must not be allowed to hinder the composer's desire to respond to the text.

The new process that is included in *Mondo* for chamber ensemble is a limited form of very carefully controlled improvisation. At the same time Stibilj consolidated the rhythmic techniques tried out in *Verz* and *Épervier*. *Mondo*, like almost all the composer's works since *Slavček in vrtnica*, is written in one continuous movement,

4 Karlheinz Stockhausen: *Gruppen für drei Orchester* (London and Vienna, 1963) pp. 1 and 38.

5 Note supplied by the composer, July 1977.

6 Note supplied by the composer, July 1977.

but does not feature contrasting tempos, the initial tempo ($\text{♩} = 84\text{-}104$) being maintained throughout the work's nine minutes. The speed of the pulse is consistent, despite frequent changes in bar lengths and the type of note that has one beat, even in the passages which involve improvisation. These passages are given, four for each performer, in a separate part of the score. The players choose one of the four at each of four places in the score. Each of the "improvisations" is part fully composed and part only a suggestion for further rhythmic elaboration. Despite the fact that the performer can choose which example to use and can also introduce rhythmic irregularities, the total duration of each "improvisation" is fixed at exactly fifteen bars of 2/4 at the basic pulse. This shows the composer's strict control of the process of improvisation.

In the course of the main part of *Mondo* there are many passages in which so few notes sound simultaneously that Stibilj specifically notes these synchronisations. What happens in the passages that use separate "improvisations" is still more complex, with virtually no synchronisations at all, despite the fact that they all fit into a 2/4 metre. This type of rhythmic complexity is difficult to perform, but it is possible. It is also possible for a keyboard player to perform parts of widely differing rhythmic natures. For a single-line melody instrument, however, this is impossible. Yet Stibilj, virtually alone of contemporary composers, has made a determined effort to simulate this impossible task in a number of works from 1965 onwards: *Assimilation* for violin, *Contemplation* for oboe and strings, *Condensation* for trombone, percussion and two pianos and *Zoom* for clarinet and bongos. An investigation of these works reveals a number of other processes already discovered working in parallel.

The violin writing of *Assimilation* bears a great deal of similarity to that of *Mondo*, with its frequent double-stoppings and rhythmic variety. However, the appearance of multiple rhythms on what is virtually a single melodic line is novel (Ex. 4a and 4b). One can see that this superimposition of different rhythms on to a single melodic line is more an intellectual abstraction than a rhythmic reality. A clear presentation of Stibilj's attitude to performance is given in the notes to the second published edition.⁷ Taking the passage quoted in Ex. 4b, he suggests that the seven component parts (Ex. 4c) are practised separately with one basic beat, which is given in the stems above each segment. When they are subsequently fitted together, the composer says "it will no longer be possible to count out any rhythm: the player's feeling for the duration relationships will have taken over". The spatial notation of the new edition suited the composer better than the notation in equal bar-lengths of 4/8 time which was used in the original Bärenreiter edition of 1966.

The processes of *Assimilation* are taken one stage further in *Contemplation* for oboe and strings of 1966. The plan of the piece is straightforward. The strings begin with dense multi-rhythm textures (Ex. 5), which are gradually simplified as the piece progresses. The oboe part follows the opposite course: it is silent for the first thirteen bars, entering unobtrusively on a quiet long-held note against loud and complex string textures. By bar 30 the oboe has used only three pitches, but gradually the part becomes more complex, using more pitches and increasingly greater subdivisions of the basic crotchet beat. Stibilj introduced his superimposed rhythms

⁷ Milan Stibilj: *Assimilation* (Ljubljana, n.d. ca 1973). The first edition was published by Bärenreiter, Kassel in 1966.

into the oboe part, tentatively about two-thirds of the way through the work, and later more profusely (Ex. 6). The parts achieve such a confusing complexity that the composer marked the positions of the crotchet beats with vertical arrows (see Ex. 6). Although there are wide fluctuations, the general dynamic levels change in the oboe part from quiet to very loud to correspond with the increase in rhythmic complexity, while in the string parts the opposite applies (loud to quiet) to match the gradual change from complexity to simplicity.

The third of this group of works is *Condensation*. The title "condensation" is a translation of the Slovene "zgoščanje", which might be better translated as "compression". This word is said to relate to the principles of composition involved. A note at the beginning of the published score states that "the composition is constructed on the principles of simple harmonic motion". In fact, this is an incorrect translation of the Slovene, which should now read "... on the principles of longitudinal waves that are transformed into time-values".⁸ What this means in practice is not at all obvious, although there are some wave-shapes in the pitches and a certain visual "compression" in the notated accelerandos. A scale of durations from one to twenty-eight semiquavers over two broad wave-shapes is used. Within each duration, however, there is such subdivision, variety and additional complexity that this macrostructure is not easily discernible. Nevertheless, the music does reach a section of great complexity (the "cadenza" for two pianos), in which there is a break in the wave-forms. Alongside this large-scale process Stibilj composed a solo trombone line written in a manner similar to those of *Assimilation* and *Contemplation*, with numerous small fragments and flourishes, and some use of superimposed rhythms.

A smaller piece, the fourth of this group, *Zoom* for clarinet and bongos of 1970, employs similar melodic and rhythmic techniques in its short time-span. The complexity of the melodic lines rivals those of *Assimilation*, with many florid passages, very frequent large leaps, superimposed rhythms, as well as microtones, multiple sounds and audible breathing.

The process of conflict that was such a feature of *Contemplation* also formed the basis of two large works from the years 1967-68, *Apokatastasis-Slovenian Requiem* for tenor, chorus and orchestra and *Ekthesis* for orchestra. The *Slovenian Requiem* is a major work which gathers together a number of strands from earlier techniques. In it Stibilj set two texts, one in Slovene by the poet Edvard Kocbek (for the tenor), and another for the chorus of two parts of the Latin *Moralia* by the Slovene composer Gallus. The two texts are skilfully interleaved with a number of ironic interchanges and contradictions between the tenor and the chorus. The main musical conflict is between the generally simple and smooth delivery of the chorus and the unpredictable and sometimes violent style of the orchestral parts.

Ekthesis of 1968 also displays a simple process involving conflict. Much of the music is static, with the use of quiet, sustained chords built up from the composer's favoured intervals, seconds, fourths and sevenths. Occasionally there are outbursts from the brass which trigger off loud, florid rushing passages from the four clarinets, divided into the multiple rhythms that played such an important part in *Verz* and *Contemplation*. The discordance and conflict of these passages is intensified by the

⁸ Personal letter from the composer 23 July 1977.

tuning of the clarinets. Stibilj asks that the second and third clarinets be tuned 1/4 tone flat. This disruptive element is used in a similar fashion, though obviously not style, to that found in works of Carl Nielsen, notably the Fifth Symphony (side drum), Flute Concerto (bass trombone) and Clarinet Concerto (side drum).

At various times from 1966 Stibilj has visited and worked in the Studio voor Elektronische Muziek van de Rijksuniversiteit te Utrecht ("Electronic Music Studios of the University of Utrecht"). The only published work to emerge from this work is *Mavrica* ("The Rainbow"). The basic sound-material of this work consists of six different sounds of drops of water falling into water, eleven different sounds of small pieces of metal falling into water, and a "noise-like structure" drawn with a magnetic pencil onto the tape to produce another nineteen sounds, the first twelve with the addition of square-wave sounds and the next four with the addition of sine-wave sounds. The processes involved are quite straightforward. All the sounds are subjected to considerable transposition according to an elaborately planned scheme and the electronic sounds are extensively filtered. It must be said that, despite the transpositions, the water-produced sounds are almost always heard as such, with the listener inevitably making the programmatic association with the title. However, repeated hearings do reveal the subtlety of the treatment of the materials, especially in the spacing of the drops at the beginning and the variables of pitch, volume and reverberation which follow.⁹

Stibilj's music of the 1970s remained on an intimate level with no large orchestral works. The chordal writing that appeared extensively in *Skladja*, *Contemplation* and *Condensation* was developed in these works, but it was often contrasted with notable use of fast, unmeasured flourishes. Again they are in single movements and in none of them is there any return to the controlled improvisation of *Mondo*.

Séance for violin, cello and piano uses mainly harmonic material, especially chords built up from superimposed sevenths and ninths, but has a complex rhythmic articulation. One technique featured in both *Zoom* and *Condensation*, the accelerando to the dynamic climax of a phrase followed by a ritardando dying away in volume, is much in evidence. The process involved sometimes takes place in all the parts simultaneously, but also appears in one instrument independently of the others. The formal structure as determined by *tempo* is broadly ternary, with the pulse of the outer sections fluctuating around ♩ = 60 and a much faster central section (♩ = 108-166), which is dominated by the piano's demisemiquaver-triplets. The process of *transformation* of chordal passages into little flourishes is clear in *Kathai* for recorder and spinet. In *Indian Summer* of 1974, Stibilj returns to barred notation using a basic pulse varying around ♩ = 76, with numerous superimposed rhythms of the type found earlier. The processes of conflict that were a feature of some earlier works are then followed in *Xystus* of 1975 for wind quintet, percussion and strings. Instrumental functions are clearly distinguished: the strings mostly play chords, the percussion rapidly repeated notes and the wind long, legato melodic lines. It is the conflict between, and the blending of, these elements that constitutes the main interest of the work.

⁹ See the composer's own detailed analysis in "Mavrica za štirikanalni magnetofonski trak", *Slovenska glasba v preteklosti in sedanjosti* (ed. Kuret) (Ljubljana, 1992) pp. 193-203.

Central to the ideas of Stibilj's process working is the orchestral piece *Rozeta* of 1982. It is strongly harmonic and incorporates a number of differing tempos within a single movement, like the earlier works *Verz* and *Skladja*. In *Rozeta* the use of long-held notes sometimes disguises the audible effect of the notated tempos. Much more obvious in this work is the use of loud, usually staccato, chords that punctuate quieter and more sustained chords.

A complete contrast with this process of harmonic confrontation and juxtaposition can be found in *Elegija umirajočemu drevesu* ("Elegy to a Dying Tree") of 1987, which is melodically conceived throughout. In the outer sections of this broadly ternary piece the melodic thread is heavily disguised by changing and overlapping instrumentation, although sometimes it is harmonically supported. The tempo contrast between sections seems to operate much less rigidly than in *Rozeta* with its stark conflicts of harmonic material. The central section (pp. 18-38 in the published score),¹⁰ while still maintaining a slow-moving but somewhat erratic melodic line in the wind instruments, employs fast-moving scattered pianissimo notes in the strings as a textural background or accompaniment. In this case the composer is giving the piece its form, i.e. ternary, mainly by means of textures.

The "melodic thread" process of *Elegija* is again used in a remarkable piece for piano from 1988 called *Shota*. The title, used for an Albanian round dance, gives little away to those unfamiliar with the original. Its process is described by the composer as being based on an ornamented unison of folksong tradition, utilising the complex rhythmic patterns of folk dance music.¹¹ Florid decoration around a similar melodic framework to that found in *Elegija* is used, with ornamentation around longer notes increasing to a final climax.

It is not yet possible to make a definitive evaluation of Stibilj's music. Provisionally, however, one can say that where the process used is part of the immediately audible communication with the listener, as for example in *Skladja*, *Elegija umirajočemu drevesu*, *Shota*, *Mavrica* or *Contemplation*, the impact can be strong, and can provide one with the framework to investigate the details of how this happens. On the other hand, where the macrostructure is less easy to discern without the help of the detailed working of the microstructure, as in *Condensation*, or because the details had been deliberately confused, as in *Épervier*, the process is less clear and consequently so is the form. In the operation of the microstructure there is the added complication of Stibilj's use of complex melodic lines in *Assimilation*, *Condensation*, *Zoom* and other works, which pose enormous difficulties for the *performer*, some of which have been discussed above. With the resolution suggested by the composer (see Ex. 4b and 4c), it is not all clear whether the *listener* can then really hear what the composer has actually done. This perhaps shows the limitation of using these processes as a means of determining the form of each work.

10 Published by the composer (Ljubljana, 1993).

11 On the notes accompanying the recording by Bojan Gorišek on Helidon (Musica Slovenica) 6.711497.

Musical Examples

Ex. 1 Slavček in vrtnica

a) 

b) 

c) 

Ex. 2 Skladnja



Ex. 3 Impresije (composer's work sheet)

A sequence of five staves of handwritten musical notation, connected by a dashed line. The staves are labeled as follows:

- Staff 1: A(H)
- Staff 2: B(H)
- Staff 3: B(AS)
- Staff 4: A(D)

	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
A	o	o	o	o	o	o
B	o	o	o	o	o	o
C	o	o	o	o	o	o

A sequence of four staves of handwritten musical notation. The top staff has four 'X' marks above it. Arrows point from the top staff to the bottom staff, which is labeled with A5H, B6H, B5RS, and A4D.

A sequence of two staves of handwritten musical notation. The top staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The bottom staff has a bass clef and a key signature of one flat.

3 ⑥ ⑤ ④ ③ ② ①

② ④ ⑤ ⑥

R ⑥ ⑤ ④ ③

C (1+2+3 ④ ①)

Ex. 4 Assimilation

a)

Musical notation for exercise a) in treble clef. It features a complex melodic line with various articulations and dynamics. The notation includes slurs, accents, and dynamic markings such as *p* and *cresc.*. There are also some numerical markings like '3' and '4' under certain notes.

b)

Musical notation for exercise b) in treble clef. It shows a melodic line with slurs and accents. The notation includes a *pizz.* marking at the end. There are also some numerical markings like '3' and '4' under certain notes.

c)

Musical notation for exercise c) in treble clef. It consists of a main melodic line at the top and seven numbered variations (1-7) below it. Each variation is connected to the main line by a vertical dotted line. The variations show different ways to play the same melodic fragment. The notation includes slurs, accents, and dynamic markings such as *pizz.*. There are also some numerical markings like '3' and '4' under certain notes.

Ex. 5 Contemplation

a) Bärenreiter score p.1, b.1-3

Handwritten musical score for Ex. 5 Contemplation, part a. The score is written on five staves. The top staff is for Vn I, the second for Vn II, the third for Va., the fourth for Cb., and the fifth for Cb. pizz. The time signature is 2/4. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (ff, fff), articulation (pizz., arco), and fingering (5, 3). The Vn I staff has a circled first measure. The Vn II staff has a circled first measure and a circled second measure. The Va. staff has a circled first measure. The Cb. staff has a circled first measure. The Cb. pizz. staff has a circled first measure. The score is divided into three measures by vertical bar lines.

b) Bärenreiter score p.29, b.2-7

Handwritten musical score for Ex. 5 Contemplation, part b. The score is written on three staves. The time signature is 2/4. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (cresc., ff), articulation (pizz.), and fingering (5, 3). The first staff has a circled first measure. The second staff has a circled first measure and a circled second measure. The third staff has a circled first measure. The score is divided into three measures by vertical bar lines.