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Nikola Hercigonja's *Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica* as a 'Hit TV Programme'. The Hows and Whys of the Work's Success in the Former Yugoslavia

In this article I present a case study of Nikola Hercigonja's final major work, the 'scenic passion' Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica (Servant Jernej and his Right, 1976–1980), aiming to draw attention to the importance of TV broadcasts of operas and other music-theatre works in the former Yugoslavia in broadening the reception of these works in all parts of the country. Hercigonja's Hlapec Jernej was considered a huge success following its premiere at the Belgrade Music Festival in 1984, and its colossal production was mounted by several institutions including the radio and television stations of both Serbia and Slovenia (both being part of the Yugoslav Radio and Television network at the time). Before discussing the performance and broadcast history of this work, I sketch out the cultural and political circumstances of Yugoslavia at the time as well as the 'stylistic' characteristics of Hlapec Jernej, especially with regard to the composer's adherence to the postulates of '(socialist) realism'. My goal is to discover why this work – which was rather anachronistic at the time of its premiere – was so well received by critics and audiences alike, and to examine the role that Yugoslav TV stations played in its promotion and success.

Introduction

The two decades from 1970 to 1990 are considered the 'golden era' of artistic programmes produced and broadcast by Yugoslav Radio and Television (JRT) and regional TV stations in the former Socialist Federal Republic (SFR) of Yugoslavia¹ including the Serbian 'branch' of JRT, called Radio and Television Belgrade (RTB) at the time. In this article, I draw attention to the importance of TV broadcasts of Serbian operatic works for their reception with general audiences in Yugoslavia by presenting a case study of Nikola Hercigonja's 'scenic passion'² *Hlapec*

This article is dedicated to the loving memory of Branka Radović (1949–2023).

- 1 The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) emerged in 1945 on the territory of the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia after World War II and the rise to power of the Yugoslav Communist Party. On 29 November 1945, the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was proclaimed, and Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980), president of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia and leader of the partisan uprising during WWII, became the first, lifelong president of Yugoslavia. The country was renamed the SFRY with the adoption of its second constitution, which came into effect on 7 April 1963. The SFRY formally lasted until 1992, but its dissolution had already begun the previous year when two of its former republics, Slovenia and Croatia, declared their independence on 25 June 1991.
- 2 Branka Radović highlights Nikola Hercigonja's affinity to mixing preexisting genres of music-theatre works (such as oratorio, opera, passion, cantata, etc.) or even inventing new ones such as the 'music-stage vision', and she connects the composer's approach to a broader 'polystylistic' tendency present in the 20th century, but without precisely defining its temporal or geographical outlines. See Radović 1995, pp. 293–304, here p. 293. In the pres-

Jernej in njegova pravica (*Servant Jernej and his Right*, 1976–1980). I have chosen this work for a case study mainly because it was a huge success with audiences and critics, not only on its first performance within the framework of the 16th Belgrade Music Festival (BEMUS) in 1984. The TV broadcasts of this performance also received praise from critics in other Yugoslav republics. The premiere itself represented a huge co-production effort involving the radio and television stations of Belgrade in Serbia and Ljubljana in Slovenia along with other partners.³ I shall analyse the cultural and political circumstances in Yugoslavia at the time of the premiere as well as the stylistic characteristics of Hercigonja's large-scale work in order to draw conclusions as to why *Hlapec Jernej* was so well received by critics and audiences alike, and what role the Yugoslav TV stations played in its promotion and success. Due to the limited availability of primary sources for my analysis,⁴ I have also used several reliable secondary sources for my research, including valuable contributions by Hercigonja's former students and close collaborators such as Branka Radović, Snežana Nikolajević and Marija Bergamo.

Nikola Hercigonja (1911–2000) was a Yugoslav composer, music pedagogue and publicist who was born in Vinkovci (today in Croatia). He completed his general and music education in Zagreb between the world wars. Already as a teenager he developed a keen interest in opera, having had the opportunity to sing in the children's choir of the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb from the age of thirteen. Later, during his university studies, he developed an active interest in Marxism and communism, following in the footsteps of his elder brother Marko. Young Nikola was particularly inspired by the personality of the musicologist Pavao Markovac (1903–1941), notably by his activity in Zagreb with amateur choirs of the workers' unions and other organisations (an activity that Hercigonja also pursued after completing his studies). Hercigonja shared Markovac's admiration of Richard Wagner and especially of Modest Mussorgsky.⁵ Markovac probably also influenced Hercigonja's lifelong interest in music and literary folk art. He argued in favour of "getting to know common folk, their life and their culture at the source, studying the music of folk speech, understanding that an artist is *only* [original underlined] an interpreter of what his people feel and

ent article, all these examples of Hercigonja's 'multiple genres', as Radović also calls them, are given in single quotation marks.

- 3 The first performance took place at the 16th Belgrade Music Festival (BEMUS), on 17 October 1984 at the Sava Centre in Belgrade. The work was performed by the Choir, Children's Choir and Symphony Orchestra of Radio and Television Belgrade (RTB) with the conductor Mladen Jagušt and the following soloists: Nikola Mitić, baritone (Jernej); Jože Kores, tenor; Slobodan Stanković, baritone; and Irena Prosen, narrator. The production was directed by Dejan Miladinović, with sets by Aleksandar Zlatović. Details of the co-production will be discussed later in this essay.
- 4 Up to the moment of completing this essay, I have not been granted the right to access the Programme Archive of Television Belgrade / Radio and Television of Serbia (RTS), and excerpts of the original broadcast are apparently preserved. My colleagues who are employed as programme editors at RTS have also been denied access to these tapes, which are mostly not digitised. Jugokonzert, the producer of the Belgrade Music Festival and one of the co-producers of Hercigonja's *Hlapec Jernej*, was shut down by the City of Belgrade in 2014 and its remaining archive, while preserved at the Belgrade Festivals Center (CEBEF), is incomplete. The Sava Centre was sold by the City of Belgrade to the private company Delta Holding in 2020 and most of its extant programme archive was destroyed thereafter. I learnt from the former employees of the Sava Centre that parts of the archive might be preserved at the Historical Archives of Belgrade, though their searchable online catalogue does not give any results for multiple keyword entries. The only primary sources that I have been able to consult are the audio recording of excerpts of *Hlapec Jernej* from the phono-archive of Radio Belgrade, thanks to my colleague Sanja Kunjadić, to whom I am very grateful, the manuscript score of the work, and original reviews from the first performance in Belgrade in 1984 that were published in various daily newspapers and are kept at the National Library of Serbia in Belgrade.
- 5 Markovac completed his PhD degree in Vienna in 1926 with a dissertation entitled *Die Harmonik in den Werken Modest P. Mussorgski's (1839–1881)*, which was published in Croatian in 1988. Cf. Anonymous 2013.

think ...".⁶ Sentiments such as these must have stimulated Hercigonja's interest in melograph-ic work and inspired his first attempts at using folk songs as material for compositions during the interwar years. Hercigonja also admired the work of another leftist musicologist and composer, this time from Belgrade: Vojislav Vučković (1910–1942), who shared Markovac's tragic fate of being killed for his convictions, and whose writings⁷ likely further contributed to Hercigonja's admiration for Mussorgsky's 'realism'.⁸ Before joining the partisan uprising in World War II (WWII) in 1942, when he took an active role with the *Kazalište narodnog oslobođenja* (The Theatre of People's Liberation), Hercigonja completed his first large-scale work – the opera *Vječni žid u Zagrebu* (*The Eternal Jew in Zagreb*, 1940–1942), based on August Šenoa's eponymous 'feuilleton' (satirical novel).⁹

During Hercigonja's formative years in Zagreb, it is important to note that the "Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes" (1918–1929), renamed in 1929 the "Kingdom of Yugoslavia" (1929–1941),¹⁰ was a fragile political edifice. Among Serbian musicologists, Srđan Atanasovski has discussed the 'production' of Yugoslav territory and identity in several published articles.¹¹ It is important to highlight the conflicting ideological stances of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, which promoted the concept of 'integral Yugoslavism' (1929–1939) that attempted to obscure national, linguistic and religious differences between its citizens by enforcing a new, Yugoslav 'national' identity, and of the subsequent communist federation of national republics that reinforced the interwar anti-unitary views of the Communist Party, promising individual national recognition of all constitutive ethnicities (i.e. not only of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, but also of Montenegrins, Macedonians and Bosnian Muslims).¹² Thanks to the Communist Party's active role during WWII and its subsequent rise to power following the liberation in 1945,¹³ its evolved understanding of 'Yugoslavism' was carried over into the post-war period. According to Atanasovski, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia wished to lead its citizens in their newly formed socialist country by way of "new generative and unifying myths". These were the "partisan warfare against the Axis occupation led by the Communist Party [...] portrayed as an unmediated act of the 'people', and further interpreted as the source of legitimacy of the new social order, as the 'people' concurrently opted for socialism" and the "cult of labour, inextricably linked with the narrative of economic progress, industrial development and better life". Atanasovski concludes that "[u]p to early 1960s the party leadership could have indeed believed that these myths, subsumed under the slogan of 'brotherhood and unity' will eventually surpass 'tribal' national myths and build the supranational identity of Yugoslav people".¹⁴ These circumstances are important for understanding Hercigonja's life and work in Yugoslavia after WWII, especially concerning his active participation in the work of the Communist party of Yugoslavia

6 "[U]poznavanjem naroda, njegovog života i njegove kulture na izvoru, proučavanjem muzike narodnog govora, spoznajom da je umetnik *samo* (podvukao P. M.) tumač onoga što oseća i misli njegov narod ..." (Quoted after Hercigonja 1972c, p. 91). All translations by the present author unless otherwise stated.

7 A selection of Vučković's essays was published posthumously (Vučković 1955a).

8 Vučković notably wrote that "[m]usical realism, in a narrower sense, appears with Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky, the author of 'Boris Godunov.'" ("Muzički realizam u užem smislu datira od pojave Modesta Petroviča Musorgskog, autora 'Borisa Godunova'"). See Vučković 1955b, p. 130. Hercigonja, for his part, wrote at length about his admiration for Vučković; see Hercigonja 1972e.

9 This work was analysed by Branka Radović; see Radović 2000, pp. 26–36.

10 Also referred to as the "First Yugoslavia".

11 See, for example, Atanasovski 2011a; Atanasovski 2011b; Atanasovski 2015.

12 These conflicting ideologies are discussed in detail in Djilas 1991, notably on pp. 49–102.

13 Having spent WWII in exile in Great Britain, the last king of Yugoslavia Petar II Karađorđević was officially de-throned on 29 November 1945, when the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was proclaimed.

14 Atanasovski 2015, pp. 63f.

and his lifelong commitment to the idea of 'Yugoslavism' in the communist sense – as the 'brotherhood and unity' ('bratstvo i jedinstvo') of distinctive national identities – even after the disintegration of the country.¹⁵

Following the liberation, Hercigonja assumed the position of Chief of the Cultural/Artistic Department of the Ministry of Education in Zagreb in the newly formed Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (FPRY). Soon after, however, he was appointed to the newly formed Committee for Culture and Arts of the FPRY Government in Belgrade, to which city he relocated in 1946, remaining there until the end of his life. According to Branka Radović, Hercigonja at first had difficulty adapting to life in his new environment, but after a year or so began to fit in better.¹⁶ In 1947 he was appointed head of the music department of Avala Film in Belgrade, and in 1950 he was appointed an assistant professor of music history at the Music Academy (nowadays the Faculty of Music) in Belgrade, where he had already begun to teach part-time in 1947 and where he stayed until 1975. In the early 1950s, Hercigonja also began working as a music critic and publicist. His activity as a composer reached new heights: besides being well-known as a composer of numerous popular mass songs, he resumed his work on large-scale vocal works with instrumental accompaniment that had been his main field of interest since his youth. His first major work to enjoy considerable success at the time of its performance was the cantata and subsequent 'opera-oratorio' *Gorski vijenac* (*The Mountain Wreath*), composed after the eponymous epos by Petar II Petrović Njegoš.¹⁷ Hercigonja's other monumental works include the 'music-stage vision' *Planetarijom* (1958–1960) after Miroslav Krleža's work *Balade Petrice Kerempuha* (*The Ballads of Petrica Kerempuh*), the 'opera-ballet' *Stav'te pamet na komediju* (*Put Now Your Wits Into the Comedy*, 1962–1964) after Marin Držić's *Dundo Maroje* (*Uncle Maroje*) and various other literary sources, the 'scenic oratorio' *Jama* (*The Pit*), subtitled *Passio Hominis Nostri* (1968–1971), after Ivan Goran Kovačić's eponymous epos, and finally the 'scenic passion' *Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica*, after Ivan Cankar's eponymous novel.¹⁸

Hercigonja's music is largely based on various Croatian and other folk idioms of the former Yugoslavia (from Montenegro, Herzegovina, et cetera). Later in his career, he combined these idioms with the prolific use of 'Scriabin's mode',¹⁹ together with certain elements of more con-

15 We learn from Hercigonja's former student, the musicologist Branka Radović – herself a committed champion of Hercigonja's work throughout her career – that at the end of his life he insisted that after his death he should always be referred to in the following manner: "He was a Yugoslav, atheist and communist." (Cf. Radović 2011, p. 18).

16 Ibid., p. 9. See also Radović 2000, p. 49.

17 The cantata was commissioned from Hercigonja to mark the centenary of death of Petar II Petrović Njegoš (1813–1851), the Orthodox Bishop, statesman and poet. Hercigonja's cantata was premiered in Njegoš's birth town of Cetinje (today in Montenegro) during the central celebration, in early September 1951. According to Predrag Malbaša, this celebration was the first public "manifestation of his [Njegoš's] persona and work organised by the new communist Yugoslav government." (Malbaša 2013, p. [54]). He recomposed it as an opera-oratorio between 1952 and 1957. This version was premiered on 19 October 1957 at the National Theatre in Belgrade, directed by Radomir Plaović (who was also the librettist), cf. Bošković 2017, p. 162.

18 All these works are analysed in detail in Radović 2000, pp. 51–255.

19 In the literature about Hercigonja, as well as other Yugoslav composers of his time, 'Scriabin's mode' (which also corresponds to Messiaen's second mode of limited transposition) is often referred to as the 'Istrian mode', as a similar scale can be found in folk music of the Istrian peninsula in Croatia. Branka Radović, e.g., defines Hercigonja's late harmonic language as 'panistrianism' in order to highlight his prolific use of this scale and to argue for his supposedly national music idiom (Radović 2000, pp. 249–254). In Hercigonja's particular case, his reference to Istria is undoubtedly motivated by his admiration for the Croatian composer Ivan Matetić-Ronjgov (1880–1960), who first defined the 'Istrian mode' and whom Hercigonja acknowledged as one of his main influences, writing cordially about him and his love of Istrian folk music in Hercigonja 1972d. However, as pointed out by Ivana Medić, the 'Istrian mode' is a non-tempered scale, which is why it cannot be equated with 'Scri-

temporary music techniques such as the employment of a chromatic total and quasi-aleatoric sound effects. Coupled with Hercigonja's almost exclusive interest in basing his works on revolutionary, socially engaged literature, his style is often described as 'socialist realism'²⁰ or simply 'realism', and he remained faithful to his aesthetic choices throughout his life.²¹ Obviously, his oeuvre became rather anachronistic in the second half of the twentieth century when we consider that different generations of Yugoslav composers were already venturing into avant-garde techniques (serialism, aleatory, tone clusters, micropolyphony, electronic music) from the 1960s onwards. Furthermore, minimalism and experimental music gained prominence in Yugoslavia during the late 1970s, especially in Serbia, at almost the same time that Serbian composers began writing postmodern works. Nevertheless, older generations of composers, including Hercigonja (who was 89 at the time of his death in 2000) remained faithful to so-called 'moderate/moderated modernism'²² throughout their careers, albeit with certain individual differences. Three aspects of Nikola Hercigonja seem especially important to me in any endeavour to assessing his place properly within the Yugoslav and Serbian music scene of his time: 1) the definition of 'realism' in music and the influence of Boris Asafyev's theory of intonations; 2) definitions of the 'stylistic' formations of socialist realism, socialist aestheticism and socialist modernism and the differences between them, as discussed in Serbian musicology and wider art theory; and 3) music folklore as an 'overarching' paradigm which connects very different poetic stances in the interwar and post-WWII period. I shall discuss these three aspects briefly here before proceeding to discuss Hercigonja's works as presented in the form of TV broadcasts in the former Yugoslavia.

Realism in music, and the influence of Boris Asafyev's 'theory of intonations'

Marija Bergamo considers the idea of 'music realism' as a core aspect of Hercigonja's approach to music composition: "it is at the same time his goal and his starting point for deciding how to reach this goal."²³ She rightly asserts that realism represents an ideological category for Hercigonja, much more than a stylistic category or compositional method. Hercigonja's adherence to Marxism led him to consider music (and indeed art in general) as something that had an important social function and that should be directly linked to reality.²⁴ According to Bergamo, Hercigonja found it unacceptable to view music as an "autonomous ('constructed') aesthetic fact. [...] The] functionality [of music] was considered a prerequisite for its relevance."²⁵ In such an ideological framework, Hercigonja's interest in artistic 'truth' revolved around the notion of 'music realism', which he defined as

abin's mode', see Medić 2004, pp. 67–73. The tempered scale used by Hercigonja can thus rightfully be referred to as 'Scriabin's' or 'Messiaen's (second) mode'.

20 Such is the case in Radović 2000, as well as in the entirety of Veselinović-Hofman/Milin 2011.

21 Radović 2011, p. 19.

22 The notion of 'moderate/moderated modernism' is discussed in Medić 2007. The author defines it as a "politically neutral, socially acceptable, non-avant-garde, non-challenging form of modernism, whose most obvious feature was the artists' desire to make peace between modern and traditional and between regional and international." (Ibid., p. 280).

23 "[Ideja muzičkog realizma] je istovremeno i svojevrsna ciljna točka i polazište za konkretne odluke o realizaciji cilja." (Bergamo 2011, pp. 62f.).

24 Ibid., pp. 67 and 63f.

25 "Muzika kao autonomna ('konstruisana') estetska činjenica za njega je neprihvatljiva [...]. Funkcionalnost je dakle uvjet njezine relevantnosti." (Ibid., p. 65).

a method of clearer and more convincing musical expression using music and literary devices; [...] there is always room for limited or artistically generalised, purposeful sound illustration; for together with all other means of expression, it must serve the one goal: the clearest representation of the truth of life.²⁶

Bergamo also sums up the ‘tools’ which Hercigonja used to ‘transplant’ his aesthetic programme into music:

[D]ramatic tension, clash of opposites = ‘symphonism’; faith [...] in folklore as a fertile base from which art music can ‘sprout’; intonation of words as an impulse for music intonations along the lines of recitative as a pledge of authenticity, ‘truth’, truthfulness; a correct understanding of the moral message ‘assisted’ by the unambiguous ‘content’ expressed in words (hence the priority given to opera, song, cantata) [...].²⁷

Within such a poetic framework, Hercigonja’s oeuvre is almost exclusively focused on human beings and their suffering and sacrifice in search of a better society. This is evident in most of his music-theatre works, culminating in *Hlapec Jernej*. One can almost assume that Hercigonja was striving to immortalise his musical, poetic and political heroes Modest Mussorgsky, Pavao Markovac and Vojislav Vučković in his works – just as he did in his abovementioned writings about them. Indeed, Marija Bergamo claims that Hercigonja founded his understanding of realism on Markovac’s and Vučković’s analyses of Mussorgsky’s works (as already discussed above), which he himself then deepened and extended through his work as a composer and pedagogue.²⁸ In Hercigonja’s *Writings on Music*, one finds an article entitled “Realista Modest Petrovič Musorgski” (The Realist Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky), in which he also portrays the Russian composer as a ‘little man’²⁹ opposed to the vicious bureaucracy of Tsarist Russia: “Mussorgsky’s life journey carries the markings of that tragic grandeur of a hero who stays true to his principles till the end, a hero who, running out of strength, wounded and powerless, does not move his sight from the goal towards which he is going.”³⁰ This apologetic portrayal of Mussorgsky is reminiscent of Hercigonja’s tragic hero Jernej, who – as I shall discuss later – persisted in his battle against an unjust system until his very end. In his TV portrait, filmed in 1996, Hercigonja confessed his lifelong admiration for the great Russian composer:

Mussorgsky won me over immediately, but I became obsessed with him when I was fifteen and heard *Khovanshchina* for the first time. I was crazy for that *Khovanshchina* and I attended each performance and stood in the student area [of the theatre] about 30 times. [...] For me, Mussorgsky remains to this day what he was then as well – if I say a role model, then someone will think that I have copied him. And perhaps I did. Anyway, to me Mussorgsky remains totally pure. [...]

26 “[Realizam je] metod jasnijeg i uverljivijeg muzičkog izlaganja muzičkim i poetskim sredstvima; [...] tu uvek ima mesta i ograničenoj, celishodnoj zvučnoj ilustraciji, ili umetnički uopštenoj; jer ona treba da, uza sva ostala sredstva, posluži jednom cilju: što jasnijem prikazivanju istine o životu.” (Hercigonja 1972f, p. 215).

27 “[D]ramska napetost, sukob suprotnosti = ‘simfonizam’; povjerenje [...] u folklor kao podlogu za ‘klijanje’ umjetničke muzike; intonacija riječi kao impuls za muzičko-intonativni materijal recitativnoga tipa, koji je za-log autentičnosti, ‘istine’, istinitosti; ‘pomoć’ nedvosmislenog ‘sadržaja’ iskazanog riječima pri pravilnom shvaćanju idejne poruke (stoga prioritet opere, solo-pjesme, kantate) [...]” (Bergamo 2011, p. 68).

28 Ibid., p. 67.

29 The notion of the ‘little man’, which was a common topic in Russian realist literature, is discussed in Sultanova/Akhmadzhonov 2023, p. 52.

30 “[Ž]ivotni put Musorgskog nosi obeležje one tragične veličine heroja koji do poslednjeg daha ostaje veran svojim principima, heroja koji na kraju snaga, izranjajavljen i nemoćan, ne spušta pogled sa cilja kome je pošao.” (Hercigonja 1972b, p. 59).

In Mussorgsky's work I sensed what was important in music – that it grew from the soil. Not from concrete, nor from air. Up to today, he is the personality who still mesmerises me. Even more so, as I am older. For I am convinced that music must have its foundation in the soil.³¹

Bergamo is the only musicologist who has observed the important influence of the Russian/Soviet music theorist Boris Asafyev (1884–1949) on Hercigonja's oeuvre, especially with his theory of intonations, which was widely promoted by Soviet historiography, especially after Asafyev's death. In recent years, many authors have analysed the ongoing influence of Asafyev's theories and their development, their instrumentalisation and even distortion during the twentieth century in the writings of Russian and international scholars, comparing them to modern-day semiotic theories of authors such as Eero Tarasti or Kofi Agawu.³² For instance, Asafyev's ideas about the importance of the melodic nature of music, discussed in his seminal work *Musical Form as a Process*,³³ clearly resonated with Hercigonja, in whose musical language a folk-like melody (including quotations of music folklore) is used as a primary expressive tool. Polina Golubkova observes that in this respect Asafyev followed Glinka's and The Mighty Handful's example,³⁴ and Daniel Elphick, in discussing Asafyev's posthumous legacy, notes that an aspect of his theory which, among other things, was appropriated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, was "his emphasis on the melodic 'song quality' ('pesennost') of Russian and Soviet music as rooted in folk tradition, which could be held aloft as the antithesis of formalism."³⁵ Asafyev's definitions of and distinction between 'speech intonations' and 'purely musical intonations' are important for an understanding of Hercigonja's manner of using verbal texts in his mature works for voices with instruments:

The intonation of speech is the interpretation of sounds not musically fixed, not stabilised in *musical* spaces nor in the invariable relations of sounds which have become tones. Musical intonation is the interpretation of sounds already placed in a system of sound relations precisely fixed by the memory – a system of tones and tonalities.³⁶

Marija Bergamo claims that the correlation between speech and music in Hercigonja's oeuvre is to be understood as "the discovery of musical elements in language."³⁷ Following on Asafyev's

31 "Musorgski me je osvojio odmah, ali me je opseo od moje petnaeste godine kada sam prvi put čuo *Hovanščinu*. Ja sam bio lud za tom *Hovanščinom* i išao sam na svaku predstavu i prestajao u dačkom parteru na oko 30 predstava. [...] Musorgski je za mene do danas ostao ono što je i tada bio – ako kažem uzor, onda će neko misliti da sam ga kopirao. A možda i jesam. Dakle, Musorgski mi je ostao potpuno čist. [...] A Musorgski [...] je stvaralac kod koga sam osetio ono što je bitno u muzici, da je izrasla iz zemlje. Ne iz betona, ili iz vazduha. Tako mi je ostao do danas ličnost koja me naprosto očarava. Što sam stariji, sve više. Jer, ja sam ubeđen da muzika mora da se oslanja na zemlju." (Nikola Hercigonja's 'TV portrait' entitled *Sećanja* [Recollections] was produced for Belgrade Television in February 1996. This TV special is preserved in the Archive of Belgrade Television, tape A-02 230, cf. Nikolajević 2011, p. 177. Since I have not been able to obtain this recording, I have quoted Hercigonja's words from *ibid.*).

32 For instance, Elphick 2021, Khannanov 2018 and Golubkova 2023.

33 I here use the English translation of Asafyev's book by James Robert Tull. Asafyev explicitly states that "melody has been, and remains, the principal manifestation of music and its most clearly expressive element. That is why there persistently arises, from the mass audience, a uniform demand from composers for melody! [...] Melody is the soul of music because it is a sensitive reflection of the principal quality of human, 'vocal speech', of utterance in tone, in vocal continuity. Therefore, melody is, in principle, continuous." (Asafyev 1976, p. 935 [footnote 1]).

34 Golubkova 2023, p. 6.

35 Elphick 2021, p. 64.

36 Asafyev 1976, p. 543.

37 "Korelacija govornog i muzičkog [...] shvaćena je kod Hercigonje prije svega kao otkrivanje muzičkih elemenata u jeziku." (Bergamo 2011, p. 70).

idea about the common origin of speech and music in human consciousness, Hercigonja was interested in the ‘melody of speech’ as a relevant factor in shaping music structures.³⁸ These ideas are of great importance for understanding Hercigonja’s insistence on using a writer’s original language in his music-theatre works (for instance, the Slovene language in *Hlapec Jernej*, or the local dialect of Dubrovnik in *Stav’te pamet na komediju*). However, his primary concern was with *musical* intonation, which means that his music operates within the well-established system of sound relations within extended tonality. Furthermore, Asafyev’s insistence on the importance of the *interval* as a dynamic relationship of tones,³⁹ which is aptly highlighted by Tull,⁴⁰ and his discussion of musically significant intervals in various music styles – including the augmented fourth and diminished fifth among the Mighty Handful⁴¹ – can readily be related to Hercigonja’s prolific use of the ‘Istrian’ (i.e., ‘Scriabin’) mode, which is symmetrical at the tritone.

Another interesting point of convergence between Asafyev and Hercigonja can be found in the former’s concept of an ‘intonational vocabulary’, which Asafyev defines as a “‘reserve’ of musical intonations, intoned by every man [...], which are expressive for him, and which ‘speak to him’; it is a reserve of living, concrete sound formations, even including characteristic intervals, which always ‘lie in the hearing.’”⁴² In *Hlapec Jernej*, one finds a prolific use of music quotations and quasi-quotations of diverse origin (folk songs, Gregorian plainchant, church chorales, the *dies irae* sequence, march-like rhythms, etc.) which are used as musical representations of various characters. They are recognisable for belonging to certain musical contexts, even though Hercigonja adapts them harmonically to fit the supposedly ‘Istrian’ mode. It can be said that these ‘intonational spheres’ assume a role comparable to Wagnerian leitmotifs but are imbued with narrative potential, making them highly reminiscent of the strategies of ‘polystylism’ employed by a number of Soviet composers of Hercigonja’s time.⁴³ Since the spheres of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in *Hlapec Jernej* are musically distinct and clearly perceptible on account of their differences, it is also easy to connect them to Asafyev’s abovementioned concept of ‘symphonism’ and its ‘dialectic battle’.

Finally, in this brief analysis of Asafyev’s possible influence on Hercigonja, it must be noted that the main purpose of the former’s theory of intonations was to express and communicate the *meaning* of any piece of music, to facilitate “taking musical ideas beyond the limits of formal analysis and forcing musicians to think about the connections between musical sounds and social and stylistic contexts.”⁴⁴ At the very beginning of his book, Asafyev states that musical form is a “socially determined phenomenon [which] is perceived, first of all, as a form (i.e., a condition, a method, and a means) for revealing music socially in the process of its intoning.”⁴⁵ This ‘anti-formalistic’ stance is precisely why Asafyev’s theory was so readily appropriated by the communist music authorities after his death, or, as Daniel Elphick observes:

38 Ibid.

39 “[E]ven the simplest musical intonation presupposes the presence of two features, a sound manifestation, and the relation of this sound manifestation to the following one. [...] Consequently, any musical presentation of sound, in order to become an intonation, cannot remain isolated; [...] for only then does musical *motion* occur with all its characteristics.” (Asafyev 1976, pp. 543f.).

40 “The interval, in fact, is the basic unit in Asaf’ev’s concept of intonation, by virtue of its quality of relationship. [...] an isolated musical tone is meaningless until its relationship to some other tone is established.” (Tull 1976, p. 155).

41 See Golubkova 2023, p. 50.

42 Asafyev 1976, p. 936.

43 A thorough analysis of polystylism and its development, typical manifestations, and transformations in Soviet music, can be found in Medić 2017.

44 Golubkova 2023, p. 59.

45 Asafyev 1976, p. 184.

In its final (and most influential) iteration, Asafyev deployed the term [intonatsiya] to encompass a complex set of historical and national emotive meanings, to be communicated through music. This provided a conveniently Marxist way of viewing musical history: that musical meaning was the product of intonatsiya that held social significance [...].⁴⁶

Elphick states that intonations are “musical symbols, broadly speaking, the combination of which creates a meaningful piece of music.”⁴⁷ This is exactly how Hercigonja uses his musical material, i.e., various ‘intonational spheres’ as musical symbols. It is therefore no surprise that Jernej’s vocal part is based on the ‘melody of speech’ and imbued with folkloric inflexions,⁴⁸ while all representatives of the oppressive and unjust authorities express themselves in an unmelodic, artificial (quasi-robotic) and highly grotesque manner. The similarity of Hercigonja’s ‘realism’ to polystylism seems apparent if one considers his skilled and effective utilisation of the symbolic and narrative potential of various ‘intonations’. When we bear in mind that Asafyev’s legacy still had an impact during Hercigonja’s lifetime, it is not surprising that one finds its remnants in the work of a Marxist Yugoslav composer as late as in 1980.

‘Socialist realism’, ‘socialist aestheticism’ and ‘socialist modernism’

Hercigonja’s understanding of musical realism is reflective of his rather utopian belief in socialism as a fairer society than anything that history had hitherto seen: a society that is achieved by means of a revolutionary battle of the ‘common people’ (which was also a class battle). Hercigonja thought that music was reflective of class and that it was capable of “disseminating certain ideas of certain social forces”.⁴⁹ His poetic stance is therefore resistant to truly modernist tendencies which favour the autonomy of art (*l’art pour l’art*). In this respect, Hercigonja remained closer to the postulates of ‘socialist realism’⁵⁰ throughout his creative life, regardless of the evolution of his language of musical expression, than to the concepts of ‘socialist aestheticism’ and ‘socialist modernism’, which are used in Serbian art theory and sometimes in musicology to describe Yugoslav art *after* socialist realism when it moved in the direction of greater autonomy of expressive artistic means while still adhering (at least nominally) to the communist/

46 Elphick 2021, p. 62. The author observes that the appropriation – and misuse – of Asafyev’s ideas after his death “led to a wider pseudo-scientific justification for proving the supposed ideological worth of any given piece.” (Ibid., p. 65).

47 Ibid., p. 62.

48 Marija Bergamo quotes Hercigonja’s admiration for Mussorgsky and Janáček, in whose works “general factors of their music language – folk melody and its emotional content, intonation of words of folk language, the motivic unit of the musical tissue – are all melted together, all connected as a constructional unit, as a ‘cell’ of a living organism – music” (“osnovni faktori njihovog muzičkog jezika – narodna melodija i njen emocionalni sadržaj, intonacija reči narodnog jezika, motivska jedinica muzičkog tkiva – sve je to stopljeno u jedno, sve je to povezano kao sastavni deo, kao ‘čelija’ živog organizma – muzike”). Cf. Hercigonja 1972a, p. 8, also Bergamo 2011, p. 70. However, Bergamo argues that Hercigonja evidently revised this early conviction later in life (the above article had originally been published in *Književne novine* 22 on 30 May 1950), since in the majority of his music-theatre works the accent is placed on a recitational melodic line in which the intonation of speech is placed up-front (cf. Bergamo 2011, p. 70). Nevertheless, her observation is not supported by the musical fabric of *Hlapec Jernej* in which folk (and folk-like) melodies, although adapted to fit Hercigonja’s harmonic language, still occupy a very important place in the musical portrayal of the work’s main protagonist. I would therefore argue that while Hercigonja’s music language did mature and change over time, it stayed true to the composer’s lifelong ideals and goals.

49 “Hercigonja je muzici pripisivao ‘klasni karakter’ i smatrao je sposobnom da ‘rasprostranjuje određene ideje određenih društvenih snaga.’” (Bergamo 2011, p. 69).

50 Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman (2017, pp. 17f.) presents the most comprehensive definition of socialist realism in Yugoslav/Serbian art music.

socialist political ideals described earlier.⁵¹ It is important to observe that Hercigonja's revolutionary past and his firm belief in the functionality of music (and art in general) presented strong obstacles to adopting these more current stylistic trends. However, in this regard one must also consider his unquestionably traditionalist tastes in music, which were shaped in the interwar period and dominated by his lifelong love of music folklore.

Hercigonja's relationship to music folklore

As previously discussed, the folk music of the Yugoslav peoples was a constant focus of interest for Hercigonja. Bergamo notes that he was inspired by Vojislav Vučković, who saw folklore as a fertile soil from which all 'healthy' realist art would grow.⁵² His relationship to Vučković seems crucial, even though Hercigonja admired many composers who created their art on the basis of folklore (including several Serbian and Yugoslav composers such as Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, Petar Konjović, Josip Štolcer Slavenski and others). During his studies in Prague, Vučković adopted Alois Haba's quarter-tone compositional system and athematicism, believing that progressive social ideas should be accompanied by progressive (i.e., modernist) means of artistic expression. However, upon his return to Belgrade in 1934, Vučković quickly realised that the young Serbian music culture was not ready for such avant-garde music. Therefore, guided by the ideas of 'social art', he began his 'shift' towards a simplified, folklore-inspired musical language in ca 1938/39, thus before World War II, in works such as the symphonic poem *Ozareni put* (*Voie illuminée*, 1939/40) or *Zaveštanje Modesta Musorgskog* (*Testament de Modeste Moussorgsky*) for string orchestra (1940), based on motives from *Boris Godunov*.⁵³ With this in mind, Stefan Cvetković has observed that:

Aspects of continuity between Serbian music of the interwar and postwar period, which to some extent blur or blunt the sharp line of demarcation between the two dominant paradigms in Serbian music of the mid-twentieth century [the modernist and the realist], can be found both in the poetic field (in the transfer and shift in function of the folk idiom in different stylistic directions, and in the continuity of social themes of the late 1930s and war-related themes of the early 1940s) and the aesthetic field (in the simplification of the musical language that transcends stylistic trends).⁵⁴

In other words, the 'paradigm shift' after WWII was much more sudden in the change of the governing model and economic system (from monarchy and bourgeois economy to state social-

51 I presented a detailed analysis of the concepts of socialist aestheticism and socialist modernism, in comparison with the more frequently used notions of socialist realism, moderated modernism, neoclassicism and avant-garde, in Janković-Beguš 2017. For further information, see Denegri 2003.

52 Bergamo 2011, p. 69.

53 In her foreword to Vojislav Vučković's collection of essays, Stana Đurić-Klajn (1955, p. 7) observes: "Vučković used the example of Mussorgsky in his attempt to 'define the notion of musical realism, to determine its specific domain, to fix its ideologic and stylistic manifestations', while unconcerned with realistic elements in works of other representatives of this direction." ("Vučković je na primeru Musorgskoga pokušao da 'definiše pojam muzičkog realizma, odredi njegov specifični domen, fiksira njegove idejne i stilske manifestacije', ne ulazeći u to kakvi su realistički elementi kod drugih autora realističkog pravca."). Hercigonja (1972e, p. 122) quotes this observation.

54 "Aspekte kontinuiteta koji u izvesnoj meri zamagljuju ili omekšavaju čvrstu liniju razgraničenja među paradigmatima modernizma i realizma u srpskoj muzici sredine dvadesetog veka, moguće je dakle pronaći kako u domenima poetičkog (transfer i prezačenje funkcije folklornog idioma između dva stilska usmerenja, kao i kontinuitet socijalne tematike od kasnih tridesetih godina ili ratne tematike iz ranih četrdesetih godina), tako i estetičkog (simplifikacija muzičkog jezika označena kao neoklasična tendencija, čija protežnost prevazilazi stilska usmerenja ovog perioda)." (Cvetković 2011, p. 130).

ism) than in the field of artistic expression in music. These facts, according to Cvetković, do not relativise the undeniable, strong political repression that artists had to endure in the period immediately after WWII until Yugoslavia's break with the Soviet Union in 1948.⁵⁵ These observations nevertheless allow for a better understanding of Nikola Hercigonja's poetics and its contextualisation within Yugoslavia and Europe. I conclude that Hercigonja's 'socialist realism' was fully coherent with his political-cultural work and that it was a consciously chosen artistic path, rather than a symptom of creative weakness.

Hercigonja's oeuvre and Serbian television

According to Snežana Nikolajević, there were three types of opera and ballet broadcasts on Radio and Television Belgrade (RTB),⁵⁶ almost from its inception:⁵⁷

1. Broadcasts of staged productions, including live broadcasts (from theatre to TV);
2. TV adaptations of preexisting works (adapted for TV);
3. Works newly composed for TV (made for TV).⁵⁸

While the first type of broadcast was not very common, the second and third types included some 30 operas and ballets by the most prominent Serbian and Yugoslav composers of the twentieth century that were broadcast during a peak period that encompassed two decades, roughly from 1970 to 1991.⁵⁹

One of these 'adapted for TV/made for TV' works was Nikola Hercigonja's 'madrigal comedy' or 'opera-ballet' *Stav'te pamet na komediju*, produced for RTB in 1974.⁶⁰ This work, composed a decade earlier in 1962–1964, was never given in the theatre. Its TV production was directed by Slavoljub Stefanović-Ravasi and choreographed by Vera Kostić, who made full use of the authentic scenery of Kotor Old Town where the recording took place.

Snežana Nikolajević has observed that at the time when the mass medium of television emerged in the former Yugoslavia, composers of different generations were able to respond to it, either by composing music that would be suitable for presentation on TV, or by taking the opposite approach by letting the television react to their work. Slobodan Habić, the longstanding music editor of Belgrade Television, played an important role in finding works which would be suitable, from his point of view, for these types of transformations. He "encouraged many

55 Ibid., p. 127.

56 When Yugoslavia dissolved, the Serbian segment of the former Yugoslav broadcasting company was renamed the Radio and Television of Serbia (RTS) on 1 January 1992.

57 The experimental programme of Television Belgrade launched on 23 August 1958.

58 Nikolajević 1995, p. 320.

59 The Serbian music-theatre works broadcast by RTB from 1970 to 1991 were: Stanojlo Rajičić, *Simonida* (opera, 1970); Petar Konjović, *Seljaci* (opera, 1972); Petar Konjović, *Knez od Zete* (opera, 1973); Nikola Hercigonja, *Stav'te pamet na komediju* (ballet-opera, 1974); Stanojlo Rajičić, *Seme zla* (TV opera, 1977); Petar Konjović, *Koštana* (opera, 1978); Ljubomir Bošnjaković, *Robinja* (opera, 1978); Stanojlo Rajičić, *Dnevnik jednog ludaka* (TV opera, 1981); Mihovil Logar, *Paštrovski vitez* (musical play, 1983); Stanojlo Rajičić, *Bele noći* (opera, 1985). Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 321f. However, it must be mentioned that Nikolajević lists Hercigonja's work among the ballets, not the operas, even though she claims that the work goes "beyond the framework of pure ballet" (*ibid.*, p. 318).

60 According to Nikolajević, *Stav'te pamet na komediju* was recorded in Kotor in the summer of 1974 (the preparations had begun earlier, in Belgrade in 1974, cf. Nikolajević 2011, pp. 173f. On the other hand, the IMDb entry on this work lists the production year as 1973 (IMDb 1990–2024), and the information about the work on the webpage of the Radio and Television of Serbia states that the TV film was premiered on 4 October 1973 (RTS 2020). At the moment of writing, I have not been able to determine with certainty which information is correct.

composers to embark on an *adventure* with the television”⁶¹ – including Nikola Hercigonja, who was reluctant at first towards Habić’s offer to adapt *Stav’te pamet na komediju* for TV presentation. However, once Hercigonja was on board, he took the challenge seriously and worked eagerly with the TV crew on the adaptation, which necessitated certain abridgements and rearranging of the original score. Nikolajević highlights the very important roles that the choreographer Vera Kostić and especially the director Stefanović-Ravasi played in transforming Hercigonja’s work into a TV format: “In his directorial approach, Slavoljub Stefanović-Ravasi highlighted the syncretic qualities of this work and built characters and their relationships, interweaving elements of music, dance, acting and pantomime with every one of them.”⁶² The finished ‘TV musical’ was a success with audiences and had a number of repeats, and Hercigonja was undoubtedly happy to see his work come to life on TV, if not on stage, for it had a special place in his heart as it bore a dedication to the memory of his mother and her birthplace, the city of Dubrovnik.⁶³

However, the work which is the focus of my research, Hercigonja’s *Hlapec Jernej*, belongs to the first group of broadcasts mentioned by Snežana Nikolajević – namely, broadcasts of staged productions, with the exception that its performance took place not in a theatre, but at the monumental Blue Hall of the Sava Centre in Belgrade, undoubtedly due to the much larger stage and seating capacity of this venue compared to any theatre in the city.⁶⁴

Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica was Nikola Hercigonja’s final major work, representing a synthesis of his entire music-theatre oeuvre. It is based on the eponymous novel of 1907 by the Slovenian writer Ivan Cankar (1876–1918), which also served as an inspiration for several other music-theatre works that were composed several decades earlier.⁶⁵ For his version, Hercigonja dramatised the novel and shortened it while introducing several changes, the most important of them being the division of the narration between the narrator (a spoken role) and the Choir of Evangelists (14 singers, A – T – B), which has a very active role throughout the work and emphasises the elements adopted from the genre of the passion. Hercigonja’s decision to use the original Slovenian language, despite Cankar’s work having been translated into Serbo-Croatian,⁶⁶ was probably on account of his firm belief in the use of ‘intonations’ (in the Asafyevian sense, as discussed earlier) as a means of achieving musical realism. Jernej is the victim of an unjust class system, his *moral* rights are denied, and his search for justice in an unjust world of dominant and subordinate classes is doomed to failure. This is also how Hercigonja depicts

61 “[Slobodan Habić je] podsticao mnoge kompozitore na *avanturu* sa televizijom.” (Nikolajević 2011, p. 173).

62 “U svom rediteljskom nastojanju Slavoljub Stefanović-Ravasi je potencirao sinkretičnost ovog dela i izgradio likove i odnose među njima, preplicući elemente muzike, plesa, glume i pantomime kod svakog i u svakom od njih.” (Ibid., pp. 174f.).

63 Hercigonja mentioned this in his ‘TV portrait’ *Sećanja*, cf. *ibid.*, p. 175.

64 This congress, cultural and business centre in Belgrade opened on 15 May 1977 and had a capacity of ca 3,800 seats.

65 According to Marija Mitrović’s recent research, four other composers had used Cankar’s *Jernej* as the basis for music-theatre works before Nikola Hercigonja: 1) The Czech composer Alfréd Mahovský (1907–1932) in his opera *Knecht Jernej*, composed in 1932; the composer also prepared the libretto, based on the German translation of the novel. It was premiered in Brno and subsequently also presented in Ljubljana (also in 1932); 2) the Slovene composer Matija Bravničar (1897–1977) in his opera-oratorio composed in 1936 and premiered in 1941 in Ljubljana, with other performances after WWII; 3) the Croatian composer Antun Dobronić (1878–1955) in a scenic oratorio composed in 1946; no data exists about any performances; 4) the Croatian composer Krešimir Fribec (1908–1996) in his opera-oratorio composed between 1941–1951 and broadcast by Radio Zagreb in 1952 (no data exists about any stage performances). Cf. Mitrović 2020, pp. 9–17.

66 Since Hercigonja himself did not speak Slovene, he enlisted the help of his former student Neda Bebler, herself of Slovene origin, to help him with the correct pronunciation of the text. Personal communication with the present writer by Neda Bebler.

his protagonist, highlighting his tragedy. Concerning the second part of the title, the composer himself explained how he saw the meaning of the work as a whole: "The most important element of the plot was seeking justice. It seemed to me to be a topical, completely topical [issue] [...]. Seeking justice and fighting injustice, the unfair judges."⁶⁷

Hercigonja described the genre of this work as *scenska pasija* (a 'scenic passion'), since the work is situated at the intersection of opera and passion: it has a libretto, clearly distinguished roles and genre scenes in the spirit of Russian opera, all of which clearly point to the operatic genre, while the use of a narrator and the 'Choir of Evangelists', plus the division of the work into 'numbers' and the use of quasi-liturgical melodies (accompanied by the organ), as well as the absence of female characters, can all be traced back to the genre of the passion.

Snežana Nikolajević quotes Hercigonja as follows about this final, magnum opus, and why it meant so much to him:

[I]t was the longest working process, it took me the longest to solve the problems of music, but even more so of the text, the plot and especially the main idea. [...] What more can I say: I never dreamt that things would happen that eventually did happen. [...] And even Cankar himself [...] who was, *nota bene*, imprisoned because he gave a lecture entitled *Slovenes and Yugoslavs*, in which he explained that the Slovenes should live united in the same country with other South Slavic peoples.⁶⁸

In my opinion, this testimony, made in 1996, must be understood in the light of the breakdown of the SFRY, which had begun several years prior. It almost seems as if Hercigonja had felt, more than a decade before the actual dissolution of the SFRY, that (Maršal) Josip Broz Tito's declining health (and his death in 1980) would lead to the decline of Yugoslav 'brotherhood and unity' (whether real or imagined), and aimed to reinforce it in his final monumental work. An interesting circumstance must also be noted: 1984, the year of *Hlapec Jernej's* premiere, was also the year when the Winter Olympic Games were organised for the first and only time in Yugoslavia, namely in Sarajevo (today the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina). This ensured that the spirit of togetherness was at least temporarily reinforced, four years after the death of Tito, the 'father of the Yugoslav nation'. Nevertheless, according to Branka Radović, Hercigonja was actually governed by personal reasons and feelings of dissatisfaction when he decided, in his mature years, to return to Cankar's novel – a work that he had loved since his youth:

So, how did I remember 'Jernej'? I was embittered by certain – in my opinion – unjust bureaucratic procedures which impacted me personally. I reached for 'Jernej' and immediately felt that the work far surpassed my personal [dissatisfaction], that it contained something greater and more general – the riot against social injustice. In 'Jernej', Cankar condemns social injustice, which

67 "Posebno je u samom sižeu bilo ono traženje pravde. To mi se činilo nečim savremenim, potpuno savremenim [...]. Traženje pravde i sukobljavanje sa nepravdom, sa nepravednim sudijama." (Nikolajević 2011, pp. 177 f.).

68 "Prvo, na njemu sam najduže radio, nekako sam se najduže unosio u tu problematiku muzičku, a i u tekst, siže i ideju posebno. [...] Šta ćeš više: nisam ni sanjao da će se dogoditi ovakve stvari kakve su se dogodile. [...] A eto, opet i sam Cankar [...] koji je, *nota bene*, bio zatvoren zato što je držao jedno predavanje *Slovinci i Jugosloveni*, gde je objašnjavao da Slovenci treba da budu u jednoj zajednici sa ostalim jugoslovenskim narodima." (Ibid.). Ivan Cankar gave his lecture *Slovenes and Yugoslavs* on 12 April 1913, at the City Hall (Mestni dom) in Ljubljana, organised by the General Workers' Union Uzajamnost for the department of Kranjska. In this lecture, Cankar unambiguously supported the union of the Yugoslav peoples, including the Slovenes. In consequence, he was sentenced to seven days in prison, and he served his sentence between 12 and 19 September 1913. Cf. Trifunović 2019, pp. 147 and 150f.

is omnipresent even today, from the most insignificant interpersonal relationships to global ones. And this battle for justice, as old as human society itself, is almost synonymous with the battle for freedom ...⁶⁹

Today it is impossible to guess to what Hercigonja was referring, though the fact that he retired from his work at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade in 1975 might be a factor. Again, Radović offers a ‘sneak peek’ into the composer’s personal life by writing the following lines: “since his retirement, he has lived withdrawn from all daily and musical events, largely disappointed in people whom he had loved and adored.”⁷⁰ Considering these circumstances and Hercigonja’s withdrawal from professional and public life, it is little wonder that the performance of the *Hlapec Jernej* on the grand stage of the Sava Centre came as a surprise to him: “I never hoped that any of my music-theatre works, from *Žid* to *Jernej*, would ever be performed. This performance was nothing short of a miracle to me. [...] With *Jernej*, I thought: I will write it, I must.”⁷¹ Three years after the success of the premiere in Belgrade, a new production was prepared at the Mari-bor Opera in Slovenia (with its first night on 29 November 1987), where *Hlapec Jernej* was presented as an operatic work. It was subsequently presented in Ljubljana as well.⁷² For the moment, it seemed as though Hercigonja was being successful in his attempt to unite the peoples of Yugoslavia who were inevitably drifting apart.

The Belgrade premiere was one of the largest endeavours ever undertaken by Radio and Television Belgrade, which was one of many co-producers of the work, together with Radio and Television Ljubljana (Slovenia), Sava Centre, Belgrade Music Festival – BEMUS, the ‘Self-organised interest community for culture’ (SIZ) in Belgrade, and the Union of Composers of Serbia (UKS).⁷³ Dejan Despić, a composer and music theorist, wrote in his chronicle of the Belgrade Music Festival that the first performance of Hercigonja’s ‘oratorio’ was a very complex production accompanied by many difficulties, even resistance from some quarters. “However, it proved to be not only one of the most successful creations by this author, but also a valuable addition to Yugoslav music, a piece the critics praised and the public received with enthusiasm.”⁷⁴

69 “Dakle, kako sam došao na pomisao na ‘Jerneja’? Bio sam ogorčen zbog nekih – po mom mišljenju – nepravdanih postupaka birokratije, kojima sam bio i lično tangiran. Posegnuo sam za ‘Jernejem’ i odmah osetio da tema daleko prevazilazi ono moje lično, da sadržava nešto mnogo više i opštije – pobunu protiv društvene nepravde. Cankar u ‘Jerneju’ osuđuje društvenu nepravdu koje i danas ima posvuda, od, na oko, najneznatnijih u svakodnevnom odnosu prema ljudima – do onih u svetskim razmerama. A borba za pravdu, stara kao samo ljudsko društvo, to je gotovo sinonim borbe za slobodu ...” (Hercigonja 1984, quoted after Radović 2000, p. 214).

70 “[O]d kada je u pezijji, povučen od svih dnevnih i muzičkih zbivanja, uglavnom razočaran u ljude koje je voleo do obožavanja.” (Ibid., p. 254).

71 “Ni za jedno muzičko-scensko delo koje sam pisao, od *Žida* do *Jerneja*, ja se nisam nadao izvođenju. To izvođenje je za mene bilo – čudo! [...] A čak je i kod *Jerneja* bilo to da sam mislio: pisaću, moram napisati.” (Quoted after Nikolajević 2011, p. 178).

72 Nikola Mitić (1938–2019), at the time one of the most distinguished Serbian baritones, performed the title role in all these productions.

73 Cf. Simić Mitrović 1988, p. 142. Darinka Simić Mitrović, who at the time was the music editor of Radio Belgrade, was the main coordinator for the five co-producers, and she testified to the fact that this large endeavour was in fact realised with fairly limited financial resources: “The hardest part was to reach an agreement, and after that everything was much easier. We invested a lot of work and very little money in cash. This is really an example of how great work can be done with limited funds. [...] If we manage to find the means to cover travel expenses, this work will be shown to the citizens of Ljubljana and Zagreb.” (“Najteže je bilo dogovoriti se, a ostalo je išlo lakše. Uložen je velik rad i vrlo malo novca u gotovom. Ovo je zaista primer kako veliki posao može da se obavi sa malo sredstava. [...] Nađu li se sredstva za putne troškove, ovo delo videće i Ljubljančani i Zagrepčani.”) Quoted after Tomić 1984, p. 9. Unfortunately, these plans to present the Belgrade production in other cities of Yugoslavia did not come to fruition, probably due to a lack of money.

74 Despić 2001, pp. 70f. It must be noted that the Belgrade Music Festival – BEMUS has had a long tradition of

The premiere performance received rave reviews from critics from all parts of the SFRY, who praised the “impressiveness of Hercigonja’s work”, its “masterly synthesis of various elements”, and its “powerful music-scenic drama”.⁷⁵ As the following selection of reviews shows, the majority of critics who wrote about this premiere apparently did not think badly of Hercigonja’s largely ‘retrograde’ musical language and stylistic choices.

For obvious reasons, the volume of reviews was largest in Serbia:

‘Servant Jernej’ is one of Hercigonja’s best works. It possesses an epic width of narration, and at the same time a distanced stance from the drama of class relationships which gives birth to existential questions of human dignity, morality, valuing an individual at any time and in any form of society. The universally humanistic aspect of Cankar’s text is set to music which [...] has avoided realistic interpretations, remaining decent, quite appealing, with folkloristic nuances, using unusual sound combinations of the orchestral instruments and voices. This music differs from [Hercigonja’s previous work] ‘Jama’ because it portrays the tragedy of an individual without sentimentality, but also without sharp sounds and tension, finding in musical narration various possibilities to express the deeply moving issues of a man’s struggle to survive in an unjust world.⁷⁶

If there is anything from this year’s Bemus that deserves to be called ‘an event’, it is last night’s premiere of the scenic passion ‘Servant Jernej and his Right’ by Nikola Hercigonja. There have been few such events at the Sava Centre big hall, and some 1,000 people greeted the performers and the composer with long applause and ovations.⁷⁷

The space available does not permit us to engage in a deeper analysis and praise of Hercigonja’s impressive work, which undoubtedly represents a valuable enrichment of Yugoslav music. This concert was a triumph for Hercigonja as a composer as well as for the entire ensemble [...].⁷⁸

The work was also received enthusiastically in other parts of Yugoslavia:

- Croatia

[T]his is the kind of work that one should see and hear and that we can be proud of, because it is the product of true inspiration – starting from the imagination of Nikola Hercigonja, to each and every small movement on the stage.⁷⁹

preparing large-scale festival productions of works by contemporary Yugoslav composers, including commissioning new works. See Despić 2001, Janković-Beguš 2015, Medić/Janković-Beguš 2016.

75 Cf. Radović 2011, p. 217.

76 “‘Sluga Jernej’ je jedno od najboljih dela Hercigonje. Posедуje epsku širinu kazivanja i istovremeno distanciran odnos prema dramatici klasnih odnosa iz kojih su proistekla i egzistencijalna pitanja ljudskog dostojanstva, morala, vrednovanja individue u svakom vremenu i svakom društvenom poretku. Taj opštehumanistički plan Cankarevog teksta, ostvaren je muzikom koja [...] [je izbegla] realistička tumačenja, ostajući decentna, veoma pitka, folklorno obojena, u neobičnim zvučnim kombinacijama instrumenata u orkestru i glasova. To je muzika koja se razlikuje od one u ‘Jami’ i koja tragediju pojedinca slika bez sentimentalizma, ali i bez reskih zvučnih naboja, nalazeći u muziččkoj naraciji mogućnosti izraza za potresna pitanja čovekovog opstanka u nepravednom svetu.” (Radović 1984, p. 11).

77 “Ako bi nešto što je do sada izvedeno na ovogodišnjem Bemusu moglo da se nazove događajem, onda je to, pre svega, sinoćna premijera scenske pasije ‘Sluga Jernej i njegovo pravo’ Nikole Hercigonje. U velikoj dvorani ‘Sava-centra’ do sada je bilo malo takvih priredbi, a 1000 ljudi dugo je aplaudiralo i izvođačima i kompozitoru.” (Tomić 1984, p. 9).

78 “Prostor nam ne dozvoljava da ulazimo u dublju analizu i pohvalu impresivnog Hercigonjinog dela, koje svakako predstavlja vredno obogaćenje jugoslovenske muzike. Ovaj koncert ocenjujemo kao kompozitorski uspeh Hercigonje i izvođački podvig celog ansambla [...]” (Maksimović 1984, p. 8).

79 “Ukratko – djelo koje treba videti i čuti i na koje možemo biti ponosni, jer je u svim svojim elementima, od mašte Nikole Hercigonje, do najmanjeg scenskog pokreta tvorevina istinskog nadahnuća.” (Đorđe Šaula, Radio Zagreb, 1st programme, 18 October 1984, quoted after Simić Mitrović 1988, p. 664).

- Bosnia and Herzegovina

From such a complex synthesis, a moving monodrama emerges whose provenance is in the oratorio [...]. The orchestral and choral parts, with small solos who engage in dialogues with the main protagonist, [...] create a compact whole – rich in sound, clear in dramaturgy. [...] Judging from this first performance, Hercigonja's 'Jernej' represents a grand contribution to our modest contemporary music literature for the stage.⁸⁰

- Slovenia

If truth be told – nobody had foreseen such a success, perhaps not even Hercigonja himself... "This work literally shook me to the bone", said Samo Hubad [a Slovenian conductor], who is staying here in Belgrade preparing a concert [...]. "We finally got the work which will reliably represent the Yugoslav people in the world. Everything was extraordinary. We must have 'Servant Jernej' at Cankarjev dom [in Ljubljana] as soon as possible", Samo Hubad concluded."⁸¹

What we saw and heard surpassed all our expectations. We have received this aesthetic gift from our brotherly South with a feeling of gratitude towards the composer and performers. It was confirmed that cultural exchange is the purest and the most effective form of cohabitation.⁸²

While the reviews of the Belgrade premiere were mostly positive, and they also included praise of the large performing ensemble, there were several more restrained or even unfavourable opinions about the artistic merits of the work or certain aspects of the premiere production. For instance, Slobodan Turlakov was critical of the fact that the work was sung in the Slovene language (as it was written, and in accordance with the composer's intention), instead of being translated into Serbian:⁸³ "Literary texts, of course, lose a great deal in translation, however it all went against communicativeness, as well as effectiveness." He was also unhappy with the semi-staged presentation and with the "expressionist stage framework [...], which was quite removed from the almost melodic music – ranging from Mendelssohn to Mussorgsky – reducing to an even greater measure the scenic aspects of the work. That's why the impression of a mono-opera was prevalent." Finally, he notes that the audience in the Sava Center was quite sparse, and that people were leaving the venue during the performance, so he concludes that this work did not suit the Belgrade audience.⁸⁴ Summing up the qualities and deficiencies of

80 "U ovako kompleksnoj sintezi nastala je potresna monodrama oratorijskog opredjeljenja [...]. Orkestarsko-horski part sa mali'm solima koji dijalogiziraju sa glavnim junakom, [...] tvore kompaktnu cjelinu – zvukovno bogatu, dramaturški čistu. [...] Hercigonjin 'Jernej' sudeći po njegovom prvom izvođenju, veliki je doprinos našoj, ne prebogatoj savremenoj muzičko-scenskoj literaturi." (Pervan 1984, p. 11).

81 "Istini za volju – takav uspeh niko nije očekivao, možda ni sam Hercigonja... 'Delo me je doslovno potreslo', rekao nam je Samo Hubad [...]. 'Najzad smo dobili delo', rekao nam je Samo Hubad, 'koje će Jugoslovene pozudano predstavljati po svetu. Sve je bilo izuzetno. Hercigonjinog "Slugu" moramo što pre da dobijemo u Cankarevom domu.'" (S. S., correspondent from Belgrade, *Delo*, Ljubljana, 19 October 1984, quoted after Simić Mitrović 1988, p. 665).

82 "Ono što smo videli i čuli prevazišlo je sva očekivanja... S osećanjem posebne zahvalnosti kompozitoru i izvođačima, prihvatili smo ovaj estetski dar s našeg bratskog Juga. Potvrdilo se saznanje da je kulturna razmena najčistiji i najdelotvorniji oblik međusobnog zajedničkog življenja." (Janez Lampič, *Delo*, Ljubljana, 18 December 1984 – following the TV broadcast of the recorded premiere performance, quoted after Simić Mitrović 1988, p. 665).

83 The entire libretto, translated into the Serbian language, was published in the evening programme.

84 "Pesnički tekstovi, naravno, mnogo gube prevodjenjem, ali je sve išlo nauštrb komunikativnosti, pa i delotvornosti. [...] [U] jednom ekspresionističkom scenskom okviru [...], koji je znatno odudarao od gotovo melodijske muzike – koja ide od Mendelsona do Musorgskog – u još većoj meri je suzio sceničnost dela. Tako je utisak

the sixteenth edition of the BEMUS festival, M. Ognjanović observed that what was missing from some 30 programmes performed over thirteen days were “concerts of contemporary composers from the world, whose works would demonstrate contemporary music currents outside of our country: in such way, we could probably comprehend and measure better the works by our contemporary composers which we had the chance to hear during the festival”.⁸⁵

The contribution of Yugoslav Radio and Television to the success of Hercigonja's *Hlapec Jernej* consisted above all in providing technological and other resources so that the work could be seen by as many people as possible in all parts of the country at the time. Also, the music ensembles of RTB took a very important role as a part of the performing body which premiered the work, as they had done on many previous occasions for works by Serbian and Yugoslav composers.⁸⁶

The artistic merits of the work are self-evident, regardless of the composer's stylistic choices and their apparent ‘anachronism’, which no longer appeared so outrageously dated in the 1980s as might have been the case only a decade earlier. Postmodernist pluralism was already underway in Yugoslavia, introducing various ways of engaging with the musical past⁸⁷ and reducing the distance between the works of the older generation of traditionalists and the much younger generation of truly postmodern composers.⁸⁸ Branka Radović rightly suggests that *Hlapec Jernej* represented a synthesis of Hercigonja's entire opus, “a point which focuses and completes all musical processes which had begun in his youth.”⁸⁹ For instance, its topic corresponded to the social themes that had shaped his literary taste and affinities in the years before WWII,⁹⁰ and in which he was the successor of Pavao Markovac and Vojislav Vučković. Ivan Cankar's eponymous novel was well known and read in all parts of the SFRY (translated into official languages of the former Yugoslavia). Hercigonja succeeded in dramatising the novel, abridging the text and creating large dramatic contrasts. He used simple but effective musical means to create sympathy for the main protagonist, such as a predominantly folk-infused idiom (including quotations from folk songs)⁹¹ in contrast to his musical portrayal of the representatives of authorities, whose idiom is motoric and artificial, with quasi-military rhythms depicting their oppressive character.⁹² These characters are only ever present in scenes with Jernej, directly clashing with him, to intensify the dramatic contrast and the gap between the

mono-opere bio dominantan. [...] Na obe predstave [*Turandot* and *Hlapec Jernej*] ‘Centar-Sava’ bio je prilično proređen, s tim što je na drugoj i tokom izvođenja bivao napušten. To je znak da beogradskoj publici nisu odgovarala ponuđena dela.” (Turlakov 1984, p. 9).

85 “Ono što je možda nedostajalo ovom BEMUS-u jesu koncerti savremenih kompozitora iz sveta čija bi dela pokazala sadašnja muzička kretanja izvan naše zemlje: na taj način verovatno bismo bolje mogli da razumemo i vrednujemo dela naših savremenih kompozitora, koja smo za vreme trajanja smotre imali prilike da čujemo”. (Ognjanović 1984, p. 11). Besides Hercigonja's *Hlapec Jernej*, two more works by the contemporary Serbian composers Rajko Maksimović and Vitomir Trifunović were performed.

86 See Janković-Beguš 2015.

87 On postmodernism in Serbian art music see e.g. Veselinović-Hofman 1997 and Masnikosa 2010.

88 On the issue of the convergences between the poetics of older/oldest and younger/youngest generations of Serbian composers during the 1970s and 1980s see Medić 2004, pp. 21–26.

89 “‘Slugu Jerneja’ doživljavamo kao sintezu celokupnog stvaralaštva i žižu u kojoj se prelamaju ali i dovršavaju svi muzički procesi započeti još u ranoj mladosti.” (Radović 2000, p. 259).

90 Ibid., p. 258.

91 Branka Radović identifies about a dozen of quotations of folk songs, which are all transformed to a certain extent compared to their original forms. See *ibid.*, p. 249.

92 The antagonists – Young Sitar (the landowner), First Judge, Second Judge, The Lawyer, The Pastor – are not musically distinguished in detail, since they are presented as representatives of the oppressive and unjust authority, and not as individuals. To enhance their symbolic similarity, the composer trusts all these roles to one singer (tenor voice).

social classes of the oppressors and the oppressed.⁹³ The role of the ‘people’ – which is not so developed in Cankar’s novel – was expanded and differentiated by Hercigonja, following the model set in Russian operas from Borodin and Mussorgsky to Prokofiev and Shchedrin. The large choral ensemble is divided into several groups (mixed choir, the Choir of the Evangelists, a children’s choir), each of them receiving different, complex treatment. The mixed choir narrates the story, providing a commentary on events but also taking an active role in them, siding with either Jernej or his prosecutors. The Choir of Evangelists is also used to narrate and to provide commentary. Its role is very important with respect to the musical dramaturgy because its archaic, three-part harmonisation in faux-bourdon style provides a stark musical contrast to the surrounding textures at its every appearance. The children’s choir is also used to great effect, including the poignant ‘genre scene’ of Jernej with children (Act I, Scene 3) which, in Branka Radović’s opinion, bears a distant resemblance to the scene with the Holy Fool (Yuródiviy) and children from Act 4 of Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*.⁹⁴ This can be understood as yet another homage to Hercigonja’s greatest role model and favourite composer.

Conclusion

To answer my initial question as to why Nikola Hercigonja’s *Hlapec Jernej* achieved such success in Serbia and in all the other Yugoslav republics where it was presented and broadcast on TV, we must take into consideration the circumstances of the composer’s life and career as discussed above, the context of the performance and broadcasts and other relevant factors. At the time of *Hlapec Jernej*’s premiere, Hercigonja was 73 years old and considered a ‘living legend’ in Yugoslav cultural life. His previous large-scale works, notably *Gorski vijenac* and *Jama*, had achieved considerable success with critics and audiences alike, and his popular ‘mass’ songs were still widely performed in Yugoslavia, even in the last decade of the country’s existence. It was probably Hercigonja’s ongoing significance in Yugoslav cultural and political life that made it possible to gather so many different institutions to support this premiere.

The reception of *Hlapec Jernej* at the time of its premiere is the most intriguing aspect of this work’s history. We may conclude that this ‘scenic passion’, fully embodied the idea of ‘Yugoslav national music’. As observed by Srđan Atanasovski, Hercigonja had for several decades taken an active role in promoting ‘Yugoslav state nationalism’ in culture – a concept ideologically based on the broad feeling of unity and solidarity that had been created during WWII and in the years thereafter.⁹⁵ Radović also observes that Hercigonja’s opus as a whole (including his final large-scale work) “fits in the currently inexistent, imaginary history of Yugoslav music (the history of the music of the former Yugoslavia).”⁹⁶ Or, to paraphrase Nemanja Sovtić’s reflection on Rudolf Bruči (Brucci), another prominent Yugoslav composer of Hercigonja’s time, Hercigonja aptly used the “imaginary geography of Yugoslav music folklore”⁹⁷ to reinforce the

93 Radović 2000, pp. 247f. Radović observes that the musical contrast between Jernej and his oppressors is established already at the first scene of the work (“Dismissal”): “The absence of even allusions to folk melodies in the vocal line of the new landlord – [young] Sitar is a testimony to his alienation from the people and soil of which he has become the boss, and to the dehumanization of the new class of landowners and capitalists who place profit above everything else.” (“Odsustvo čak i aluzije na citate narodnih melodija u deonici novog gazde – Sitar, svedoči o njegovom otuđenju od naroda i zemlje čiji je postao gospodar, pa samim tim i o dehumanizaciji nove kapitalističke i zemljoposjedničke klase koja će smisao profita staviti kao svoj zaštitni znak.”) Ibid., p. 218.

94 Ibid., p. 220.

95 Atanasovski 2015, p. 140.

96 “[O]vaj opus se uklapa u trenutno nepostojeću i imagiranu istoriju jugoslovenske muzike (istoriju muzike bivše Jugoslavije).” (Radović 2000, p. 257).

97 Sovtić 2020, p. 128.

idea of a 'supra-national' Yugoslav identity in his works. Unfortunately, since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, Hercigonja's *Hlapec Jernej* has disappeared from the concert and opera stages of the smaller, independent countries that emerged, and has fallen into obscurity with respect to general music audiences. This 'oblivion' also includes the testimonies of the monumental endeavours of RTV Belgrade (with RTV Ljubljana) in bringing this work to audiences in the former Yugoslavia. The programme booklet of the performance is nowhere to be found. In the archive of the RTB/RTS there is information about the recording of the work (or segments of it) on a very old type of TV tape that would take a lot of time and effort to digitise,⁹⁸ and which is in any case unavailable to researchers or audiences, just like the rest of the RTB/RTS archive.

The question remains: did Hercigonja really deserve to 'disappear' from the collective memory, along with the ideology of 'Yugoslavism'? It is difficult to give a clear answer to this question, especially given the size and diversity of Hercigonja's creative oeuvre. In my opinion, his mass songs would have little meaning in today's Serbia, given that they serve to glorify the revolutionary past, Tito and the Communist party. But some of his music-theatre works – including *Hlapec Jernej* – do not deserve the same fate because their topics, and their musical merits, are not limited to the confines of a certain point in time and space. Even their musical language, while 'backward-looking', is hardly their biggest 'fault' if we consider that the Serbian composers of different generations currently active include several who write operas in the traditional sense and who freely appropriate music languages of the past, including Russian models, albeit in a completely different ideological context.⁹⁹ Of course, Hercigonja's works would have to undergo an 'ideological re-designation' (i.e., be fully appropriated by Serbian culture, regardless of the composer's wish to be regarded posthumously as a 'Yugoslav') if they were to be fully understood and relevant in modern-day Serbia or elsewhere. However, there remains the question of languages and the origins of the literary texts that Hercigonja used. For example, *Hlapec Jernej*, based as it is on a Slovene literary work and with a libretto in the Slovene language, can hardly be regarded as a 'Serbian' work. Such an assessment would also represent a betrayal of Hercigonja's original intention, since he was keen to find universalities in particularities and was attempting to (re)connect diverse Yugoslav 'spaces' with his activities instead of isolating them. The same is also true of his other works, and even more so of those which were composed before his integration in the cultural life of Belgrade and Serbia. Paradoxically, Hercigonja's oeuvre shares the destiny of many Serbian composers of his generation whose major works (operas, symphonies, etc.) have been consigned to oblivion due to the lack of published editions (both scores and parts) and recordings, and which are rarely – if ever – performed on the concert and opera stages in Serbia. Also, the previous role of the RTB/RTS in conceiving and creating original artistic programmes is all but forgotten today, when the Serbian national broadcasting service is forced to compete for viewers both with commercial TV and its reality programmes and with the attractive content available on the Internet. This essay therefore aims to offer a modest contribution to a possible reappraisal of Nikola Hercigonja's legacy in hopes of future performances of his works.

⁹⁸ Nikolajević 2011, p. 179.

⁹⁹ I have in mind composers such as Svetislav Božić (b. 1954), Miroljub Aranđelović Rasinski (b. 1958) and others.

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