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## **PERCUSSION THEATRE OF NEBOJSA ZIVKOVIC**

### ***Abstract***

The article is dedicated to a Serbian composer-percussionist Nebojsa Zivkovic and one of the aspects of his work – ensemble composition. The creative portrait of the musician and the review of his works for percussion ensembles are given. Ensemble «Trio per Uno» for percussions is in the focus of the article. The artistic idea of the work consists of the musical and technical union of three performers and it is reached by including numerous synchronous playing in the score. The composer often uses forced sound on the percussion, which is a feature in his work. Main performing methods, interpretational tasks for musicians (e.g. technical levels, specificity of percussion playing) are analysed. Methods of research include historical, theoretical, analytic and comparative one.

**Keywords:** Zivkovic, composition, ensemble, multiple percussion, theatricality, means of expression.

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## **ТЕАТР УДАРНЫХ НЕБОЙШИ ЖИВКОВИЧА**

### ***Аннотация***

Статья посвящена одному из аспектов творчества сербского композитора-перкуSSIONИСТА Небойши Живковича – ансамблевым сочинениям. Также даётся творческий портрет музыканта и обзор его сочинений для ансамбля ударных инструментов. В центре рассмотрения статьи – ансамбль «Трио для одного» для ударных. Художественная идея сочинения заключается в музыкальном и техническом единстве трёх исполнителей, которая воплощается, с помощью включения сложной синхронной игры, в партитуру. Композитор зачастую применяет форсированное звучание ударных, что является отличительной особенностью его творчества. Анализируются основные исполнительские приемы, задачи, стоящие перед музыкантами, среди которых не только техническое мастерство, но и специфическая манера исполнения. Методология исследования включает в себя исторический, теоретический, аналитический и сравнительный методы.

**Ключевые слова:** Живкович, композиция, ансамбль, мультиперкуссия, театральность, средства выразительности.

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## **НЕБОЙША ЖИВКОВИЧТИҢ СОҚПАЛЫ АСПАПТАР ТЕАТРЫ**

### ***Аннотация***

Мақала сербиялық композитор-перкуSSIONИСТ Небойша Живкович шығармашылығының ансамбльдік шығармалар аспектісіне арналған. Сондай-ақ музыканттың шығармашылық портреті және оның соқпалы аспаптар ансамбліне арналған шығармаларына шолу жасалады. Мақаланы қарау орталығында – «Біреуге арналған Трио» ансамблі қарастырылған. Шығарманың көркемдік идеясы үш орындаушының музыкалық және техникалық бірлігінде жатыр, ол күрделі синхронды ойынды партитураға қосу арқылы жүзеге асырылады. Композитор соқпалы аспаптардың үдемелі дыбысын жиі қолданады, бұл оның шығармашылығының айрықша ерекшелігі болып табылады.

Негізгі орындаушылық тәсілдер, музыканттардың алдында тұрған міндеттер талданады, олардың арасында тек техникалық шеберлік қана емес, сонымен қатар орындаудың өзіндік мәнері де бар. Зерттеу әдістемесі тарихи, теориялық, аналитикалық және салыстырмалы әдістерді қамтиды.

**Түйінді сөздер:** Живкович, композиция, ансамбль, мультиперкуссия, театралдық, мәнерлілік құралдар.

*«The initial property of the music perception should be at the sensory level, and after that, you can analyze the music to understand why it so deeply «touches» up.*

**Nebojsa Zivkovic**

Nebojsa Zivkovic (Fig. 1, 2) is a Serbian percussionist, considered to be the most performed composer writing for percussion to date. According to his official website, from 2008 to 2012, Zivkovic's works were performed 336 times. And this is not taking into account the concerts, the information about which could not be recorded. After graduating from the Higher School of Music in Belgrade (Yugoslavia), Nebojša Zivkovic moved to Germany and entered the State College of Music in Heidelberg, where he studied percussion, composition and music theory. He holds a Master's degree in composition and percussion from the Higher School of Music in Stuttgart.

*Fig.1 Nebojsa Zivkovic*



*Fig.2 Nebojsa Zivkovic*



The creative activity of Nebojsa Zivkovic develops in three directions:

1. *Pedagogy.* Zivkovic has been teaching for more than 30 years and regularly conducts international master classes around the world (USA, Asia, Europe, including several times in Russia), as well as Annual International Summer Academies for marimba and multi-percussion. Besides, Zivkovic is the creator of an extensive methodological material for keyboard percussion instrument. One example is the famous «Funny» series of plays' collections, consisting of five books. Currently, he holds the position of Professor at the Vienna Conservatory and Professor at the University of Novi Sad in Serbia.

2. *Performance.* Nebojsa Zivkovic is one of the world's best marimbists and percussionists, performing both solo and accompanied by leading orchestras.

3. *Compositional creativity.* As already mentioned, Zivkovic is the most performed composer for percussion. His works have taken a strong place in the concert repertoire of professional ensembles and soloists and have been performed in more than 40 countries around the world. To date, the composer's list includes about 113 compositions, of which only 40 opuses are marked with numbers. In addition to music for percussion, he has written works for symphony orchestra, chamber and vocal music.

Nebojsa Zivkovic is a great example of a modern drummer who creates original music for his instrument. Feeling the percussion by soul, knowing its features, he composes original works, being at the same time performer. The sound of drums in his music has a fundamentally new quality.

What distinguishes Nebojša's works from those for percussion by other composers? Composers began to compose exclusively for percussion in the 1930ies. This was primarily due to the latest trends in the art of that time. Among the pioneers of music for percussion are Edgar Varese with the «Ionization», Johann Beyer with «Car Accident», George Anteil with «Mechanical Ballet». This list also includes such iconic figures as John Cage, Carlos Chavez, Sofia Gubaidulina. These composers were innovators and experimented with percussion, thinking about the sound picture, but they did not always take care of how it would be performed, how complex and possible would be one or another performing technique?

Zivkovic knows the peculiarities of percussion from the inside which is undoubtedly reflected in the technical aspect of the performance and the quality of sound combinations and techniques. The means of his musical expression are to be called purely «percussive». Often using forced but musically-designed sound production, he achieves a new sound and unusual colour. These features distinguish his works from many works of modern composers.

One of the most striking manifestations of percussion music by Maestro Zivkovic is the programming and theatricality. Theatricality is inherent in all of his drum ensembles. Among them: «Mournful Song and dance of the Barbarians», «Hurricane Sandy», «Sex in the Kitchen», «Restless Souls», «Inner Silence», «Dance of the little Witch», etc.

*Fig.3 China plate*



For example, «Quintet for Five Soloists» ends with the following action: the performer must take a rolled-up thick metal chain in his hand, go to the proscenium and throw it on a metal sheet of iron placed there in advance. At the same time, the other performer must take the cups of two China<sup>1</sup> plates (Fig. 3) and, sitting down on one knee, hit the floor with them.

In «Sex in the Kitchen», in addition to the rage, anger and passion of the musicians prescribed by the composer, there are blows of a real whip. In the middle of the piece, one of the musicians approaches a table on which various metal kitchen objects are lying: pots, cans, etc. and sweeps them away with one quick and strong movement so that they all fall to the floor with a crash.

In «Restless Souls», percussionists even perform as vocalists. In the final part of the composition, the drummers sing a song without words in unison during the performance. The contemporary French composer and percussionist Emmanuel Sejournet later used this technique in the Suite for marimba (2007).

Playing percussion instruments is always directly related to the physical action on the stage and in the works of Nebojša, this is especially emphasized. One of the most illustrative examples is the composition «Trio per Uno» (Figure 4). The work was written in 1995-99 and was first performed in 1999 at the Schleswig-Holstein Music Festival.

The main idea of the composition is to unite the three performers into a single musical instrument, a «creative organism». Even in the name itself, an unusual concept is laid down. The

<sup>1</sup> A type of hanging cymbal derived from the Chinese gong. The difference between these plates is the dome of a cylindrical or truncated-conical (that is, in cross-section rectangular or trapezoidal) shape. The edge of the plate is turned up, that is, against the main direction of the bend of the body. It is used both as part of a drum kit and as a pair of cymbals. The cymbal makes a loud, sharp, slightly dirty sound, which is used to create particularly powerful accents.

thinking of the ensemble members in the temporal, dynamic and instrumental senses should be as identical as possible. All three parts, by the way, are equal in complexity, creating a common pattern of unity of performers both musically and technically.

Here is what the author himself writes in the annotation to the work: “The music here expresses the principle: ‘three bodies – one soul’. A large number of rhythmic patterns are mainly played in unison, and are also divided between the performers, which accurately expresses the above-mentioned principle.”

The composition consists of three parts. The extreme parts are energetic, fast, and frenetic. All the instruments are noise-instruments (idiophones and membranophones) there. As you know, they do not produce sounds of definite pitch. Each performer must be assigned the same set of instrumentp. One of the points that should be emphasized is the sections that prescribe free improvisations to the performers in the first and last parts of the work. The middle part is lyrical and has a contemplative mood. In it, high-pitched metal percussion is soloed, to which metal noise instruments are also added. This arrangement of parts resembles the form of a concert.

For the performer to immerse himself in the image, the author supplies his description with poetic metaphors: “the perfection of the savagery of an ancient ritual cult”, “the island of silence between two volcanoes”, “the serene mood” of “meditative contemplation”.

Let's take a closer look at each part of the work.

**Movement I.** The ensemble includes a large drum, three pairs of bongos, six Chinese small gongs (peacock gong). The big drum has a dual timbre role as a membranophone (playing on plastic) and an idiophone (playing on a hoop).

The very arrangement of the instruments in the first part (Fig. 5) clearly illustrates the title of the work. The performers stand around one large drum set horizontally, each with a pair of bongos and a table with two gongs on it. Thus, the musicians share a large drum, playing it either simultaneously or each at their own time. It is the special task of playing a single instrument that creates an interesting effect of strict unison and an exciting visual show during a concert.

*Fig.5 Arrangement of instruments in the 1<sup>st</sup> movement*



*Fig.4 Trio per Uno – title*

**Nebojša Jovan Živković**  
Небојша Јован Живковић

**TRIO PER UNO**  
FOR PERCUSSION TRIO



The photo shows Professor Zivkovic in the centre and graduates of the Percussion Instruments Department of the Gnessins Russian Academy of Music Rostislav Sharaevsky and Vladimir Terekhov (Fig. 6).

*Fig.6 Zivkovic at a concert in the Rachmaninoff's Hall*



The difficulty of the performance is in achieving absolute rhythmic and dynamic accuracy. Most of the material is played in unison, sometimes splitting in the form of a canon. Rhythmic melodies are divided between the ensemblists, equalizing their workload. In example # 1, the melody is divided into several segments. There is a question, why not commit the performance of this melody to one person? Zivkovic does things differently. This gives a bright spectacular effect, although it adds additional complexity for the performer.

*Example 1*

Visually, an action close to the shamanic rite is created. Even the robotic movements of the musicians give a trance state to the whole piece. “Mechanico”, indicated by the author at the beginning, emphasizes this point.

The form of this movement is ternary. In the middle, the performers take turns playing improvisations laid on a repeating groove. Zivkovic gives this remark: “Improvise, ... but do not forget about the pauses”. By the end of the part, the tempo is rhythmically accelerated to the limit. The piece ends with a joint blow to the centre of the big drum of all three performers.

As a rule, the audience reacts to this part of «Trio per Uno» very enthusiastically. Here is the statement of one of the listeners, published on the Forum «Classics»: «Three as one! This is some kind of six-armed hydra with an amazing sense of rhythm, coordination and drive. This is not even synchronicity, but a collective meditation, an ecstatic ascent with flashes of whimsically clear accents».

With the help of a relatively small amount of expressive means and within a short time interval, the composer manages to create a dramaturgically constructed composition which is successfully performed, often separately, as an independent work.

**Movement II.** In the second movement, we see the transformation of the performers (into a different disposition, as well as a new sound of metal percussion instrumentp. Let's look at the specifics of the ensemble composition here. Crotales (antique cymbals) in two octaves, suspended cymbal, glass chimes<sup>2</sup> (fig. 7), rainstick<sup>3</sup> (fig. 8), double bass bow for the soloist. The second and third performers have a three-octave vibraphone.

*Fig.7 Glass chimes*



*Fig.8 Rainstick*



Zivkovic again instructs the musicians to play the same instrument at the same time. It doesn't look quite normal. A similar technique was used, for example, by Rodion Shchedrin in his «Carmen Suite» in 1967. But, in Shchedrin's case, the performers from the percussion group of the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra share a marimba. This was most likely because in the years of writing the suite the marimba was available in a single copy at the Bolshoi Theater, possibly in the whole country. For Zivkovic, this is a positional technique, when in addition to the pure ensemble task of perfect rhythmic alignment vertically and an acute "sense of the elbow", a visual role is also realized. The action takes place at two points: the monotonous and rhythmic tinkling of bells on one side and the free (out-of-rhythm) sounds of rain, cymbals, chimes, and crotales on the other. The whole vibraphone part is built on the undulating motion. One bar waves up, another bar waves down that creates a calming "meditative" mood. The soloist, while preparing a gentle and colourful melody of the crotales, beautifully intercepts the sound of rain and plays the glass chimes, and also uses a double bass bow on the crotales. Zivkovic leaves a remark about the possibility of performing on two instruments in the presence of a second vibraphone and the desire of the performers themselves.

Such a set of metal<sup>4</sup> tools may seem, at first glance, not at all "heavenly", moreover, not quiet. Taking into account the fact that he asks to play the crotales with brass-headed sticks, and

<sup>2</sup> Glass or bar chimes is a self-sounding percussive musical instrument related to traditional Asian wind chimes. It was introduced to percussionists by the American Mark Stevens, after whom it received the original name, widely used in the West. Metal tubes of different lengths, from which the instrument is composed, sound from contact with each other. A musician playing a class-chymes runs his hand or a metal stick over the bells, setting them in motion. Depending on the direction of movement, an ascending and descending glissando is possible. The bells of the instrument are not tuned to a specific tone, but most often, the difference in the sound of neighboring tubes is approximately equal to a semitone.

<sup>3</sup> Rainstick, other names: rain noise, rain tree, rain staff, rain flute, is a kind of idiophone; a long hollow pipe, blindly closed at the ends, with internal partitions located along the entire length, partially filled with small loose filler (cereals and other seeds, small stones, beads, other solid granules). The partitions form a spiral inside the pipe and can be made of plant thorns, pins, toothpicks, etc. When the rain stick is turned vertically, its contents are poured through the spiral obstacle to the opposite end of the pipe, producing a sound similar to the sound of rain.

<sup>4</sup> The only exception is the rainstick but a modern non-ethnic instrument can be made of plastic and filled with metal balls.

the vibraphone with extra-hard (xylophone) sticks, the loud instruments themselves are even more forced by the attack of hard accessories. But this is exactly the sound that the composer needs to embody the sparkling ocean, crystal clear air and serene, even on a cosmic scale, work.

This piece is written for a large scene, where the sound “flies” in space and the sharp attack is smoothed out, softened in the overall sound flow. All that remains is something like a crystal chime, or like falling droplets in a cave full of stalactites and stalagmites. This new combination of keyboard percussion sounds is the result of Zivkovic’s imagination – a contribution to the treasure trove of sounds extracted from percussion instruments.

Before returning to the recapitulation, the composer adds new paint to another metal instrument – a tremolo on a suspended cymbal. And again, as if the simple sound of the cymbal is not enough for him, he forces the sound, demanding to play the tremolo with the iron bows of the triangle.

One of the many features of metal instruments is that the sound does not fade immediately, thus creating a constant overtone aura when playing continuously. The timbres of these instruments, both articulated and voluminous, form a kind of «ringing», metallic atmosphere. As a result, Zivkovic manages to achieve a dense sound texture with a small ensemble.

**Movement III.** Zivkovic begins the finale of the work in contrast with an unexpected explosion of emotion. He adds the screams of performers to the noise space of the membranes. This technique is also used by the Japanese composer Keiko Abe, who is his mentor and teacher in the composition «Wave» for percussion ensemble (2000). Zivkovic will add the voices of performers in his further compositions: «Tak-Nara», «Restless Souls».

In total, he uses several types of exclamations: HA!, Ya!, HO!, HOO!, long A-A-A. Almost the entire movement is played in unison. There are a lot of variable time signatures and extreme nuance. A melodic-rhythmic line is often divided between performers on a single note. Performing this part technically perfectly requires extreme teamwork and coherence of the musicians (example # 2). The same set of instruments in the ensemble also equalizes their role.

Example 2

There is no leading part and no side voices, all three parts are equal. Before the coda, the author gives instructions for improvisation, in which, according to the composer’s remark, the musicians literally have to become wild, shout a lot and run around the instrument.

The exceptional brightness of the «Trio per Uno» became the basis for a truly theatrical production. In 2013, the Opera House Garnier in Paris premiered a ballet set to the music of «Trio per Uno» by the choreographer Sebastian Bertaud<sup>5</sup> (Fig. 9). The ballet is subtitled «Between Light and Shadow». The three parts are distributed by two male dancers and one female dancer.

<sup>5</sup> Born in 1982, Choreographer-in-residence at the Paris Opera Choreographic Academy. In March 2019, Sebastian presented his new creation White Night to the music of Philip Glass with Dior costumes based on the order of the Roman Opera Ballet.

Fig.9 Sebastian Bertaud



The director described his idea as follows: “Faced with the development of the score’s three of the and the vividness of the three percussionists’ interpretation, I wanted to contrast the three dancers of my generation with modern rigidity and, at the same time, with elegance and classical refinement. In the process of working on the production, the sensitive dialogue between the musicians and the dancers, as well as the search for various semantic depths, formed a choreographic structure, which I see as an invitation to ‘see’ the music and ‘hear’ the dance”<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 10).

“Three movements, three groups of instruments, three musicians and three dancerp. The first movement is violent. The dancers (men) dance with each other, express their movements and roles in the fight, ending with a mirror reconciliation. The second movement, more pleasant and bright, brings serenity to the world of cruelty. The solo dance of a pretty girl at the beginning turns into a joint trio with both friendp. In the final movement, the dancers and music become ‘wildly’ percussive,” – The Lodge Aymeric edition.

Thus, the main innovations of Živkovic in the field of ensemble music for percussion are the following: from the performance’s point of view, Živkovic’s music for percussion has an increased level of complexity, since musicians require physical endurance, technical flexibility, speed of thinking and an extreme degree of ensemble flair. The visual effect is also one of the main featurep. The actions of the percussionists in his compositions fascinate with their consistency and thoughtfulnessp.

The percussionist for the innovator Nebojša is not just a musician, he must also be an actor who plays a musical instrument and feels his partners on the stage. This is music that one should not just listen to, but also see. Živkovic seems to be returning to the origins of percussion, their ritual nature, if you like, to their authenticity. The sound aspect of the compositions only benefits from this and has incredible energy.

Fig.10 Trio per Uno ballet’s fragment



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