New Music in the “New” Europe Between the Two World Wars

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The focus of the present monograph is an exploration of the diversity of styles and compositional techniques that characterised the interwar period and the establishment of a causal relationship between the specific stylistic characteristics of individual segments of history and social changes in the “new” Europe of the period following the First World War. The latter did not only redraw the boundaries of Europe, it also led to a gradual transformation of the national ideologies and mental frameworks of the majority of the European population of the time. Following the Great War, in the new cultural and political reality of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, we Slovenes broke our ties with Vienna, or as Igor Grdina, an expert on life in the Habsburg Monarchy, wittily puts it: the umbilical cord tying us to the capital on the beautiful blue Danube was finally cut.

Certain stylistic and aesthetic shifts in practically all artistic fields had, of course, been prophetically predicting the start of the First World War for decades. In the cultural historical sense, the twentieth century in many ways represented a break with the essential features that had marked the nineteenth century, although in some senses it actually intensified specific characteristics. This applies above all to the emphasis on subjectivism and the desire for innovation. The call for the new, in fact, became one of the central aesthetic postulates of twentieth-century modernism. As a result, the period is marked not only by a retreat from the traditional forms of expression that for the most part still characterised the nineteenth century,

but also by the rapid alternation of compositional techniques and the introduction of numerous new ones. From this moment onwards, practically all composers – to the extent that they were convinced by what appears to have been the only truly significant indicator of the “modern” or progress at that time – would attempt to establish their own compositional rules.

At the same time, however, one might ask whether all innovations, if observed in closer detail, are not for the most part old things that are from time to time simply dressed in new attire or placed in a different context. As an example, we could cite Schönberg – one of the greatest innovators of the first half of the twentieth century – who sought the new above all in an altered context, by looking at the old from a different point of view, as he exhaustively demonstrates in his essay *Brahms the Progressive*.

For new music, a re-evaluation of values thus seems important – or indeed essential in the case of Schönberg’s compositional approach. This means that the “conservative revolutionary” observed the “rules” of composition from a different starting point and actually derived them from old postulates. What was truly new thus came into being as a result of a shift of relations between the vertical and horizontal and because of the changed requirements of structuring the two fundamental principles of building.

This gives rise to a legitimate doubt about the logic of the polarisation between “old” and “new” music, which gained particular currency when Adorno developed his “philosophy of new music” in 1949 and the latter, as an ideological/national construct from intellectual history, more or less uncritically adopted the concept of “development” versus “restoration”. If clear value-based dividing lines between “traditional” and “new” music exist in the historiographical tradition that has prevailed to date – which according to Bekker’s definition of New Music is characterised above all by a post-Adornian mentality – it will be necessary, in the light of the most recent and increasingly unanimous views of various theorists with regard to the earlier interpretation of the history and philosophy of twentieth-century music, to subject its postulates to a thorough shake-up and perhaps base them on different premises.

Last but not least, innovations always appear to depend on the context in which they emerge, or the choice of parameters by which we define them. It would be difficult to rank the Slovene composer Slavko Osterc among the central innovators of the first half of the twentieth century in the broader European context, yet we probably cannot deny him this role in the context of Slovene music. This leads to a unique paradox originating in the question

of whether, say, Osterc's music in the early 1920s appeared new in the eyes of his Slovene contemporaries merely because no one else in Slovenia at that time dared to defend dissonance or was capable of or interested in writing dissonant music. At the same time we could ask ourselves whether, in the reception of interwar Slovene music, which we frequently compare with the hardly comparable "pinnacles" of contemporary European musical heritage, the sense of backwardness, imitation and catching up is not perhaps exaggerated, if we consider that Slovene composers in the twentieth century trained throughout Europe with some of the most influential members of the European avant-garde.

Several leading Slovene and foreign musicologists have attempted to offer reasons for the specific, regionally coloured adoption of stylistic diversity and individual compositional techniques in the context of some of the latest research findings of the project *The Stylistic and Compositional-Technical Diversity of Slovenian Music from 1918 to the Present Day in the Light of Social Changes* (Slovenian Research Agency), and in this way indicate guidelines for further research of Slovene music between the two World Wars. This is undoubtedly still an under-researched field in Slovenia, in part because of the consequences of the previously mentioned "Adornian" mentality in this country. It thus appears that an important part of the journey of researching the specific characteristics of the period between the two World Wars, with all its interesting nuances, still lies ahead of us.