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## Music Saves or the Radio Opera “The Blue Piano”

by Albena Petrovich Vrachanska and Matthias Theodor Vogt



Composer Albena Vrachanska's dream of realising her radio opera project “The Blue Piano” is coming true after a long delay. She is a very respected musician in Europe and especially in Luxembourg, where she has lived for more than 25 years, but she has never lost touch with Bulgaria, where she presents her music.

Her works have been performed at the ppIANISSIMO International Festival of Contemporary Piano Music, at the Sofia Music Weeks, at the MotuArt Festival in Pravets... And now, in the days leading up to the Sofia Music Weeks Festival in collaboration with Bulgarian Radio, we have the opportunity to experience Albena Vrachanska's radio opera, some years after the first opera by composer Alexander Raichev realised in our country - “Your Presence” from 1968. Since then, nothing has been recorded in this genre.

A courageous undertaking! And Albena Vrachanska presented it at a meeting at the National Radio. “This is an extraordinary provocation - to present an international project with famous singers and a German librettist. Here we have to thank the BNR exclusively, especially the producer of the recording of this work, Mario Angelov, Director of Music Production and Composition at the National Radio. It will certainly go its European way, at least it will be heard in Brussels and in Germany - because of the exchange we are doing”, said Momchil Georgiev, Director of the Sofia Music Weeks.



*From left to right Mario Angelov, Momchil Georgiev, Smilyana Lozanova and Albena Vrachanska, Photo: Anni Petrova*

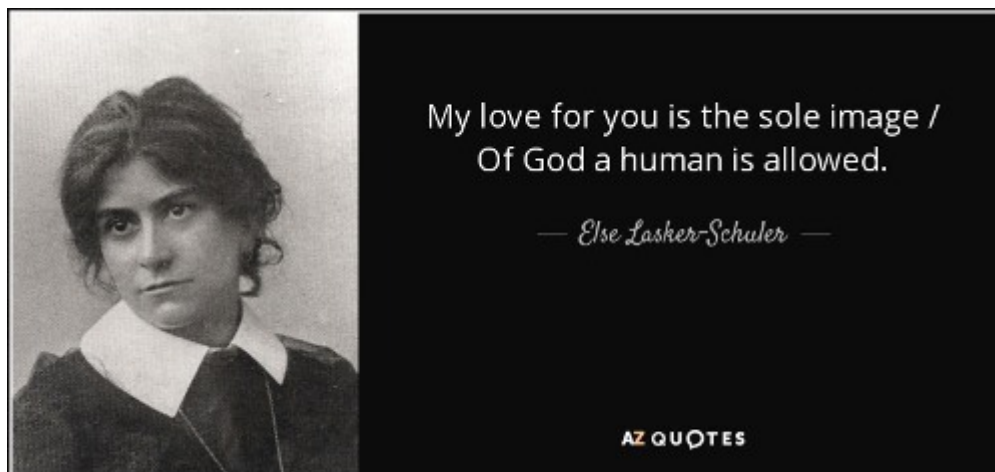
Before we learn Albena Vrachanska's story and her inspiration for “The Blue Piano”, a little clarification on radio opera as a genre that may or may not be disappearing. “Radio opera, by the way, has a long history. It started as radio theatre in the 1930s. We know how little this genre has developed. Radio opera developed especially after the Second World War, when many temples of music were destroyed and radio was an important source of communication and media, also for art. Especially in Italy, all RAI programmes broadcast opera - there were performances by Boris Hristov, Elena Nikolai and other of our singers (we will now try to exchange some recordings from RAI Radio. It seems to be quite expensive, because it is a very valuable archive). Of course, this genre is slowly starting to die out with time. But there are still living examples here and Albena Vrachanska is one example.

And the composer told the story of her work, which she has been working on for years. “Momchil Georgiev, in fact, made it clear that the radio opera is not an opera that is broadcast on the radio, but an opera that was written especially for the radio. It is much more akin to an oratorio than the actual opera that takes place on stage. There is no stage plot involved. Why I turned to this genre is a slightly more personal story. It's not because I've never been a fan of radio operas and radio-only shows. I've always preferred to see something on stage. But there was a ppIANISSIMO festival that was discontinued precisely because of the Kovid pandemic. /exceptional festival of contemporary music with remarkable musicians, great atmosphere - b.a./ .



*Albena Vrachanska, photo: Annie Petrova*

I was commissioned by the ppIANISSIMO festival to write a piece for them with 2-3 or more pianos. I thought - why not an opera...? ppIANISSIMO” was a cooperation with the BNR - the concerts always took place in Studio 1. And I decided that it should be a radio opera, not just an opera for pianos. The composer's idea developed further and two pianists became the main characters of this radio opera, precisely because it was conceived for the ppIANISSIMO festival. But inspiration for an artist of Albena Vrachanska's stature comes from other sources - from history, from personal destinies, from the drama and tragedy of the times, but always from the experience of music and art in general. And the composer has said in words what we will see and hear in her music, rendered by the performers.



“The themes of the Second World War and the persecution of the Jews are very close to my heart. One of my favourite poets is Else Lasker-Schüler (1869-1945), the greatest German expressionist poet, indeed German expressionist poet (I don't have to say it in the feminine form, for there is no poet equal to her, nor any man who is as good an expressionist). In the years 1933-1935 she had to leave Germany. When the persecution of the Jews began, she was harassed in the streets. She decided to leave Nazi Germany, went to Switzerland, but did not get a visa and went to Jerusalem, where she ended her life's journey. It was a very tragic fate. I could not dedicate the opera to her because she was not a pianist. We used her texts, which were incorporated into the libretto. Matthias Vogt wrote a wonderful libretto - he used texts by Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941) and by Else Lasker-Schüler, with which he linked the fate of the two pianists who are the main characters in the opera. They did not know each other and knew nothing about each other. But each of them had gone through hell - the Nazi concentration camp and the Gulag. “



*Matthias Theodor Vogt, Photo: Archive*

Said Albena Vrachanska, adding why Vogt wrote the libretto and contributed his voice to read, between the poems and the music, the completely surprising bureaucratic texts of the 1935 Law for the Protection of the Nation, passed by the Third Reich and the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. He has been very connected to Bulgaria since 1990, when he and the composer met. When they met by chance in Bulgaria in 2018, she shared her idea for this opera with him, and he told her that he was the right man to write the libretto because he knew Else Lasker-Schüler's work very well. And so it happened.

The heroines of the radio opera are two real-life pianists. Who are they?



*Vera Lothar-Shevchenko, Photo: Archive*

Vera Lothar-Shevchenko (1901-1982) was a French pianist who met a Soviet diplomat in Rome and went with him as his wife to the Soviet Union when his term ended. There he became a victim of the regime - he was sent to the Gulag. She turns to the militia for information about him and is also sent to a camp. In order to survive in the camp, she plays on a board in her imagination and imagines that she is playing the piano.... She never meets her husband again. After about 30 years, she leaves the camp and stays in the Soviet Union - she never returns to France. She was a victim of the Stalinist dictatorial regime. The other victim was the pianist Alice Herz Sommer (1903-2014), a Jewish woman born in Prague. She lived to the age of 110. She survived the Nazi concentration camp Theresienstadt.



*The young Alice Herz Sommer, Photo: Archive*

When Albena Vrachanska told us this, my colleague from BNR, the music editor Rositsa Kavaldjieva-Christova, author of the programme “Caste Diva”, and I immediately responded that we had seen a film about her. The Lady in Number 6, directed by Malcolm Clarke, opened the first

edition of the film festival launched by Nayo Ticin, Master of Art, in 2016. The film won an Oscar in the short documentary category. Alice's husband, also a musician, died in a concentration camp and she was there with their young son Raphael Sommer. After the war, he grew up to be a remarkable cellist, but died in 2001 during a concert in Tel Aviv... After all she had been through, this woman had retained an incredible kindness and love for music and for life.



*Alice Herz Sommer in the film "The Lady in Number 6", Photo: Archive*

But back to "The Blue Piano". This is the title of the poem Else Lasker-Schüler wrote after her escape from Nazi Germany. It is also the title of her last book of poems.

I have a blue piano at home  
 And yet know not a note.  
 It stands in the darkness of the cellar door,  
 Since the world was brutalised.  
 Starry hands played four -  
 The moon woman sang in the boat.  
 - Now the rats dance in the clatter.  
 Broken is the piano door.  
 I weep for the blue dead.

Oh dear angels open to me  
 - I ate of the bitter bread -  
 The door of heaven is already alive for me,  
 Even against the forbiddance.

It was Goethe who, in his book "Die Farbenlehre" (The Theory of Colours), coined a metaphor for man's simplification of the world as the lack of human respect as an inability to see the colour blue (acyanoblepsy): "If we take blue out of the colour spectrum, the sky becomes pink and everything green appears in shades of yellow and brown-red. Brown" and "red" was indeed the world around Vera Lothar-Shevchenko and Alice Herz Sommer, without the blue in the sky.

"In the original conception, when the work was commissioned by ppIANISSIMO, there were other actors, but now we have made a production with the MYX'D ensemble. The production is meant to be exported abroad. That's why we chose these singers - Cynthia Knoch, a soprano from

Luxembourg, and Naama Liani, a mezzo-soprano - she herself was born in Israel and studied singing there before going to New York. Albena Vrachanska also told us about it.



*Smilyana Lozanova, photo.*

“As a contemporary music ensemble, it has always appealed to us to work with a living composer. Because when you perform a work by composers who are no longer with us, no matter how great they are, no matter how much information there is about them, you can never ask your own questions. And that is the most beautiful thing about working with a living composer - whenever there is something, you can ask your questions, you can really clarify the composer's concept and try to translate as accurately as possible his idea of what he wants to present on this stage,” said our great violinist Smilyana Lozanova, founder of the MYX`D ensemble. And further about her meeting with Albena Vrachanska: “Our relationship began long before we met Albena - through our pianist Miroslav Georgiev, who had performed her works before: not only as a pianist, but also as a conductor of her operas staged on stage. He was very familiar with her work, having worked with Albena.

When we received the invitation to this project after our first international concert on a Luxembourg stage, he was the one who best explained what to expect. The score required intensive study. It's really interesting - it's something we're encountering for the first time, even though we've all played as soloists and in other chamber ensembles; we've played contemporary music. (Smilyana Lozanova is also concertmaster of the Rousse Philharmonic Orchestra - b.a.) But this score is very interesting - I personally spent many hours just with the score before I picked up the violin: to be able to familiarise myself with all its peculiarities. Because it's not only about playing, but also about using various other techniques. For our pianists and performers on other instruments, for example, it was a very nice challenge that took us out of the usual way of thinking when studying a piece.”



*Albena Vrachanska at the Sofia Music Weeks Festival, 2019, photo.*

We recall that a few days after the presentation of her opera “Stone Feast” with a libretto by the poet and translator Yana Bukova, a performance of the opera *Stara Zagora* at the MuArt Festival 2021 in Pravets, Albena Vrachanska told “despite.com” in an interview that they exchanged ideas with the outstanding musicians of “MYX'D”, a chamber ensemble focused on contemporary music. The musicians of the ensemble profess the philosophy that serving music means sharing it with many people. The members of MYX'D are inspired by the idea of creating unique experiences for their listeners and want to present classical music in a way that is spontaneous and interesting to the perception of modern man. This was very inspiring for the composer for his upcoming projects. /you can read the whole conversation here/

And now to her concrete work on the radio opera: “The first version of the opera was for two pianos, percussion, readers and two singers. Then I did the arrangement with a string orchestra and a string quartet to achieve a greater depth of sound. With 2 pianos it's very difficult to convey that tonal atmosphere - I needed the strings. It is a chamber opera. If we had entrusted Smilyana Lozanova with a string orchestra, she could have done it. And what is a string quartet - a string orchestra! Smilyana Lozanova added: “Our ensemble MYX'D was founded three years ago with the main idea of presenting contemporary music. Music that is written today, in this day and age, by living composers with whom, as I said, we can connect, collaborate and challenge the creation and recording of new music. To our ensemble, which consists of 2 violins, cello and piano, we have two guest soloists: Stefania Yankova (viola) and Boris Budinov (percussion), both from the Radio Orchestra.”



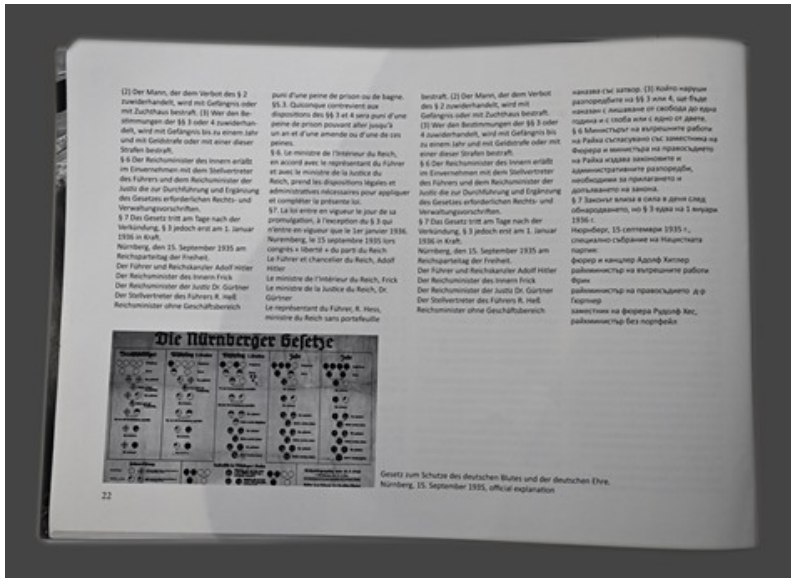
*Smilyana Lozanova and Albena Vrachanska, photo.*

Speaking about the work itself, the violinists shared their personal enthusiasm as musicians for *The Blue Piano*: “The theme is very topical, even though it happened 80 years ago, it is extremely relevant. There were wars 100 years ago, there were wars 200 years ago, and as we can see, there are wars now. The victims of these wars are human beings, very often the same numbers for us, but their fates are different. And people deal with this trauma in very individual ways.

We as musicians can identify with these two ladies who were able to overcome this trauma through music, or at least music helped them a lot to survive the horrors of the concentration camps. We are entering a world where music can be an influence, a force in difficult and hard times, a light.”

Albena Vrachanska spoke about the piece itself and her work on it with an invitation, “Basically, I don't deal with this subject exactly in time itself. It is something eternal for me as a theme. I avoid time-specific plots precisely so that I don't have to use quotes from the music associated with that particular era. But the expressionist aesthetic of the text helped me here - have a listen, you can see the score later. Despite this contemporary compositional style and the language I use, the expressionism comes through in the texture - I render what the text brings in a kind of melody that is close. I very often go with melody, although the instrumental parts of my pieces have a more contemporary language - avant-garde, sometimes experimental. I have managed to take out some

of my stylistic devices, but the melody is always there. The singer always has something to sing. That's part of my aesthetic. Here it sounds expressionistic.”



From the Blue Piano programme booklet

At the meeting for the upcoming premiere of The Blue Piano, the joy of the composer, the musicians in the person of Smilyana Lozanova and the partners in the shape of Momchil Georgiev and Mario Angelov was palpable. Each of them appreciates in their commitment that they cannot grow if they do not face the difficulties involved in mastering a new, avant-garde and different work. They do not see it as a difficulty, but as a challenge after which they can become better. Especially for the MYX'D ensemble and the instrumentalists of the ensemble, as Smilyana Lozanova said enthusiastically: “We will develop our contacts, we will develop our technical and musical skills. So for us it's just a step up - it expands our abilities.”

The premiere of the radio opera “The Blue Piano” will take place on 3 May at 7 pm in Studio 1 of the Bulgarian National Radio, for which there is a beautiful programme booklet in six languages with the poetic texts, explanations and photos, compiled by Matthias Vogt.





At the end of the meeting, Momchil Georgiev made the first announcement of the 54th International Festival “Sofia Music Weeks” (23 May to 30 June) under the motto “Unity in Diversity”.

The focus will be on the ensemble MYX'D, the artist Mincho Minchev, the genre of symphonic music, the instrument percussion, the country Austria and the composer Assen Avramov.

A number of anniversaries will also be celebrated: 190 years of Johannes Brahms, 150 years of Sergei Rachmaninov and Fyodor Chalyapin, 125 years of George Gershwin, 100 years of Dobrin Petkov, Mikhail Milkov, Peter Stupel, Radosveta Boyadjieva, Trifon Silyanovsky, György Ligeti, Maria Kalas, 90 - Svetozar Donev, Dimitar Hristov, Union of Bulgarian Composers, Symphony Orchestra-Sliven and Academic Choir “Angel Manolov”, 75 - to Vladimir Panchev, 70 - to the Pleven Philharmonic Orchestra and 50 - to Symphonietta, Vratsa.

The events also include another opera by Albena Vrachanska, dedicated to the 100th birthday of Peter Stupel, which will be premiered on 25 June at the Sofia Opera House, with a fairy-tale plot.

We are looking forward to it. The programme will be presented in detail on 16 May. ≈