

EURO/2003-2004/M4/004

22.04.2004

Duration: 19:20

TITLE: Interview with the composer Janez Maticic

MALE SPEAKER: In the early 1960s, Slovene composer and critic Marjan Lipovšek wrote that Janez Maticič stood out clearly from the group of students who graduated from Lucijan Maria Škerjanc's class in Ljubljana, and that his talent was exceptional. At the same time, Lipovšek could not help but express his amazement at the fact that Maticič's talent revelled in engaging with the sound world and problems of late Scriabin. In reality, it was simply music that had always interested Maticič. His mastery had come to bear with the same intensity in his first late-romantic flavoured works as in his later compositions, created after his arrival in Paris. Paris was, however, a critical turning point for him; it was his confrontation with the world, as well as his confrontation with time. The notion of “contemporary art” was not, in itself, a superlative for Maticič, although he was extremely sensitive to everything that was new. In Paris, he began his research into sound within the framework of the Group for Musical Research, but his first, and therefore perhaps most demanding, Parisian lessons in contemporary composition were with Nadia Boulanger.

MATICIC: In the post-war period, I studied composition in Ljubljana, and after my composition studies I also taught the piano, as a second subject, at the Ljubljana Academy of Music, and theoretical subjects at the Ljubljana Music High School. During this time, I was also establishing myself as a composer, and the world at home seemed narrow and uninteresting. I knew that the outside world was much broader, and that it could offer me a much greater view, so I decided to study abroad. A lot of people, including some of my colleagues, had been attracted by the German scene, but for a long time I had been taken by Paris and French culture. Even in my youth, I had been

interested in French literature and painting; in short, I was drawn exclusively to Paris, and nowhere else. Of the composition professors in Paris, I had heard that Nadia Boulanger was the most highly regarded, so I started to think about studying with her.

A French lecturer at university at that time asked me whom I would study with, and when I mentioned the name Nadia Boulanger he shook his head and said to his secretary “I don’t think that will be possible!”. He was sure that I wouldn’t succeed, because he knew how important Boulanger was. Still, I didn’t arrive in Paris empty handed – I had recommendations from some important Slovene cultural figures. They sent me to Madame Dugardin, an influential lady in French cultural life. When I mentioned the name Nadia Boulanger during our conversation, she simply took the telephone, dialled a number, and after a short conversation turned to me and said “Mademoiselle Boulanger is expecting you at five o’clock on Wednesday”. Nadia Boulanger immediately offered me private lessons.

It was important, and I’ll never forget this, that even at the first lesson I made a terrible slip up: I addressed her as “Madame”. She immediately, and in no uncertain terms, corrected me, “Mademoiselle, if you please!”. She insisted on her role as “mademoiselle”. As she said herself, she was married to music.

MALE SPEAKER: The history of Western music remembers Nadia Boulanger as one of the most important music teachers of the 20th century, and one of the first professional female conductors. Her pedagogical career began at the age of sixteen, and her first teaching position was at the Paris conservatory *Femina-Musica* in 1907. Later she taught at the *Ecole Normale de Musique* and at the *Conservatoire Paris*. She was also one of the founders of the *Conservatoire Américain de Fontainebleau*, where she imparted her knowledge to a generation of students, mainly from the USA. But in Fontainebleau the students were not exclusively from the US; among them in the summer of 1959 was also Janez Matičič.

MATICIC: Usually I waited in the lobby for my turn. When Nadia finished her lesson with the previous student, she would call “Matičič, come in!”. She pronounced my surname the opposite to most French speakers – in correct Slovene! Her mother’s side of the family was Russian, so she had a great respect for everything Slavic. She looked over my work and spoke with me briefly. She asked me how I was progressing. Then she opened a score and we started to speak in depth in connection with a particular musical work, or about some general artistic problem. These discussions went into extraordinary depth, and they were not confined to the field of music, or to musical parameters. Often we strayed beyond the music itself and dealt with various musical themes in connection with my creative work of the moment. Many times we drew parallels with the visual arts or with literature. She had an extraordinary view of these fields – she had a lot of good friends, famous poets, such as Paul Valery, Saint Exupery and so on. She often quoted their works, or used a philosophical analogy. It was never a case of just musical notes, not at all. As well as that, she was also interested in how I lived, how I passed my working day in Paris. It seemed to her that I worked too little, that I wasn’t productive enough. She wanted to know what problems I had. She asked me what time I woke up, how much time I spent preparing lunch, how much I composed, and what my material situation was. She tried to help me somehow with the organisation of my day.

MALE SPEAKER: Matičič recalls how Nadia Boulanger had extraordinary terms for offering instruction. She expected her students to be either gifted or rich. A person who were both, she once joked, would be impossible to find.

MATICIC: For her I was primarily a pianist. “Matičič”, she would say, “you’re a good pianist, but you never work!”. She was well aware that the piano was my great love, that it was irresistibly attractive to me. She had an excellent gift for searching the souls of young people. My problem was that I didn’t have anywhere to practise. Sometimes I was able to practise at Madame Dugardin’s place. Many times Nadia invited me to use the Steinway piano that she had received as a gift from Princess Edmond de Polignac. She told me

that Stravinsky, Poulenc and many other important composers had played on it.

MALE SPEAKER: Matičič gratefully recounts how his two years of study with Nadia Boulanger did not cost him a cent. His material status was far from ideal, but his talent drove him further and continually opened new horizons to him. He received several important prizes for his work, among them the 1960 Prince Rainier Prize for his first piano sonata.

Nadia Boulanger wanted to know her students to their very essence. “Every lesson was a special adventure”, recalls Matičič, “and you never knew which way it would turn. You always had to calculate with the incredible flexibility of thought that distinguished my mentor.”

MATICIC: She considered that with every student it was necessary to find the right approach, that it was necessary to understand his abilities, his intentions, and to be different for each one. Every person has his own vision, his own desires, his own difficulties. The role of the teacher is to awaken the student’s curiosity, his desire for knowledge and comprehension, and to force him to find his own path. I recognised this immediately, while I was writing my first piano sonata, a work that is actually dedicated to her. When I came to the exposition and the subordinate theme, she asked me, “What now?”. I answered, “Now I will start preparing the *second group*”. She replied in an agitated voice, “Why?! You’re not German, why do you have to create in that way? Be Slavic! Find your own way, be independent! That will be incomparably better, and more interesting!”

MALE SPEAKER: In this way, as Matičič recalls, Nadia Boulanger had incredible, almost shocking, intuition. He realised this when he once presented his *Etudes* to her.

MATICIC: At the end of one of these etudes she stopped me and asked, “Were you satisfied with that bar when you wrote the piece?”. I was amazed. Exactly in that place I had, when composing the piece, wavered between two

variants. Even today, I don't know how she realised this just from the score of the composition. She had incredible intuition! She could effortlessly work out how a composer had composed a piece and where he had had difficulties.

MALE SPEAKER: Nadia Boulanger had a special attitude to the question of changing and improving music in general. She believed firmly in the first inspiration.

MATICIC: She firmly advised against the use of an eraser! Whenever I corrected a composition she always wanted me to keep the earlier versions. She said, "It's necessary to retain the old one, because in the end it could well turn out that the first version is the best".

MALE SPEAKER: Janez Matičič likes to emphasise that two composing personalities dwell within him; the first is traditional, the second has a radical orientation. Nadia Boulanger's mission was to awaken the latter.

MATICIC: When I showed her my work from the previous years she first noted that, in a technical sense, she didn't have anything much left to advise. At the same time, when looking at my piano Etudes, she expressed a sincere wish that I go forward stylistically. "Everything is clear to you", she said, "construction, form, counterpoint, harmony. There is just one thing you lack: you have to modernise your style!"

MALE SPEAKER: When Matičič tried to follow her advice to update his compositional style, he encountered quite a few problems. He recalls his flirtation with bitonality in his piano Pavane.

MATICIC: I had written a pavane in what was, for me, a new bitonal style. The left hand I had written in B major, the right in e minor. When I showed her the score, I said, "Look, this composition is bitonal!" She stared at the score for some time, then she sighed, "Matičič, this is already very old! Go forward, Matičič, go forward! This is nothing yet!"

With this, she didn't have in mind that I should employ a radical technique, such as dodecaphony. She always had a very reserved attitude towards Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. She was a great supporter of Stravinsky, and she considered that dodecaphony didn't offer fertile ground for the development of a composer's personality, and for true musical content. A lot of composers of the time had stagnated precisely because of their enthusiasm for purely structural innovation.

On the other hand, she had an extraordinary attitude to tradition. Here I should mention the so-called *Cantata Wednesdays*, a collective afternoon class in music analysis. There we analysed music from Monteverdi's time (as we know, Nadia Boulanger actually rediscovered Monteverdi's madrigals), as well as earlier music. A regular guest of these meetings was, of course, J.S. Bach, with his Cantatas. The contemporary composers who featured regularly on the programme were Stravinsky, Bartok and, of course, Gabriel Fauré. His *Requiem* was an obligatory work, and we all had to analyse it. Fauré had been, as we all know, her professor, and she respected his work very highly indeed.

MALE SPEAKER: A love of the tradition peacefully coexisted in Nadia Boulanger's musical vision alongside an openness to everything new and contemporary. Janez Matičič, himself a great lover of Johann Sebastian Bach's music, remembers that Nadia Boulanger's musical "bible" was always open on her piano – Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. She respected the old models, but at the same time treated them with a cautious distance, and with a well-considered awareness of to what extent one could apply these models in the construction of contemporary music.

MATICIC: In view of the fact that she had been Fauré's pupil, and that her upbringing had, as such, been limited by traditional standards, and also considering her love for early music, she had an extraordinarily open feeling for contemporary music. She had close friendships with Debussy, Dukas, Ravel, and other important composers. Of course, her first great model was,

apart from Bach, Igor Stravinsky. In fact, she often compared Stravinsky to Bach, as if to say “view the works of Stravinsky with the same respect you feel towards Bach”. She said this to me many times.

MALE SPEAKER: Igor Stravinsky played an extremely important role in the life of Nadia Boulanger. As well as by the historical records, this is evidenced by numerous letters. Although their friendship may have had its ups and downs, we can clearly speak of a deep mutual respect. How often did Nadia Boulanger mention Stravinsky’s name in the presence of Janez Matičič?

MATICIC: She always mentioned Stravinsky, and hardly a lesson passed without his name coming up. I remember that when I had to decipher some rhythmic notation she would scold me loudly, “Count, count” (with her, one had to count aloud) “Mr Stravinsky also always counted!”.

MALE SPEAKER: History, however, tells a somewhat different story. Even Stravinsky was, on many occasions, the target of her criticism. When they played piano duets together, she allegedly shouted angrily: “Count, Igor, count!”. In spite of these anecdotal details, the name of Igor Stravinsky was inscribed in large golden letters in her consciousness.

When Janez Matičič and Nadia Boulanger discussed musical problems, her own work also often came up. Boulanger’s modest and self-critical attitude to her own artistic work made a lasting impression on Matičič.

MATICIC: When we spoke of her own work, she waved her hand and said, “I have created unnecessary music!”. Her music was, in her own opinion, completely unimportant. She was, however, a great proponent of the work of her sister, Lily, who died so young. She constantly took care of the performance and publishing of Lily’s work. Nadia actually dedicated a great part of her life to Lily, who was really an extraordinary talent, much greater than Nadia herself. In a mere six years, Lily had created works of incredible

technical complexity! And these were not based on an outside model; she created directly from herself. Nadia was amazed at this; Lili succeeded in going a very long way with the basic compositional tools with which Nadia had equipped her.

MALE SPEAKER: As fate had it, Lili Boulanger passed away in her 25th year, at a time when she perhaps would have taken a deserved place among the stars of composition. This tragic event marked Nadia Boulanger for the rest of her life. Matičič says that they did not often speak of Lili, but that Nadia showed great respect for her memory on each occasion.

MATICIC: In the room where we had lessons, and throughout her home, memories of Lili were everywhere, whether in the form of a statue that stood above the fireplace, beside which burned an eternal light, or in the form of a photograph on the piano. Nadia cultivated a real cult of personality around her sister. Every year on 15 March, the date of Lili's death, there was a requiem mass. Nadia invited all of her students, and I was there many times myself, right up to the last year the mass was held. Even after Nadia's death, I made an effort never to miss the occasion; not for religious reasons, but simply because of the cult of personality that had been deeply instilled in me. In recent years, of course, the mass has awakened in me the ever more foggy, but at the same time extremely deep, memories of my student years in Paris.

End

This programme was prepared by Radio Slovenia music producer GREGOR PIRŠ