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WATER, AN AUDIOVISUAL WORK BY VLADIMIR KORAĆ – NOMEN EST OMEN

Abstract: The composer Vladimir Korać (b. 1986) creates works for solo instruments, various chamber ensembles, symphony orchestras, electronics, and electro-acoustic works, which constitute the main part of his oeuvre thus far. In this area, his works are recognizable in terms of his preferred tools, which include reduced textures, stemming from spectral sound analysis; using prepared electronic structures and controlled “live” processing, as well as working with the temporal dimension of the piece. The high point of Korać’s oeuvre so far is the audiovisual composition *Water*, which won the 2023 Stevan Mokranjac award for best work of Serbian art music. This paper addresses the main analytic aspects of the work and attempts to sketch an initial possible reading of the metaphor of water as it figures in the piece.

Keywords: Vladimir Korać, water, Mokranjac award, electroacoustic composition, “live” electronics, accordion

In recent production of Serbian contemporary music, works that are longer in duration and more ambitious are rare and getting rarer still, especially

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when it comes to instrumental music, in particular music written for larger ensembles. Nevertheless, in *Water*, a composition by Vladimir Korać, we find significant dimensions, artistic ambitions and accomplishments within the framework of a chamber genre, albeit with an electroacoustic direction. It presents 70 minutes of unbroken musical flow comprising two main layers of sound: electronic and acoustic, the latter performed on an accordion. In addition, it also features a video work,¹ which likewise stands in a dynamic relationship with the musical parts, since it is triggered by sound events themselves. In essence, *Water* is basically a multifaceted piece, while all of its elements simultaneously serve as initiators and receivers of impulses for further shaping of this intertwined and minutely shaped electroacoustic flow. Amid that all-pervasive coordination of its individual parts, this work metonymically “resembles” the fascinating nature of water itself, its simple molecular organization that enables not only its many aggregate states, but also its ubiquity in and around us.

Water combines all the experiences of Korać’s oeuvre thus far, but also deepens and expands his opus. The composition, namely, came to be as a kind of challenge. The accordionist Luka Lopičić had requested from the author a shorter work that might be performed in a concert of his, but then reformulated his request, asking for a score whose dimensions would fill an all-evening concert. Seizing this opportunity to write such a substantial piece, Vladimir Korać used it to exhibit all the multi-dimensionality of his poetic voice in and through it.

This poetics is chiefly predicated on sound itself, its quality and constructive potential. What makes Korać’s creative process unique is the profound interrelationship between its systematic and analytic character on the one hand and, on the other, the subtlety and poetic character of his works’ final sonic results. He succeeds – and in this regard *Water* is certainly no exception – in translating the inherent rationality of a creative act into a mystic quality, that is, in allowing the work’s pre-prepared components to be tested in time, in confronting their own multiplicities and the possibility of chance, albeit highly controlled.

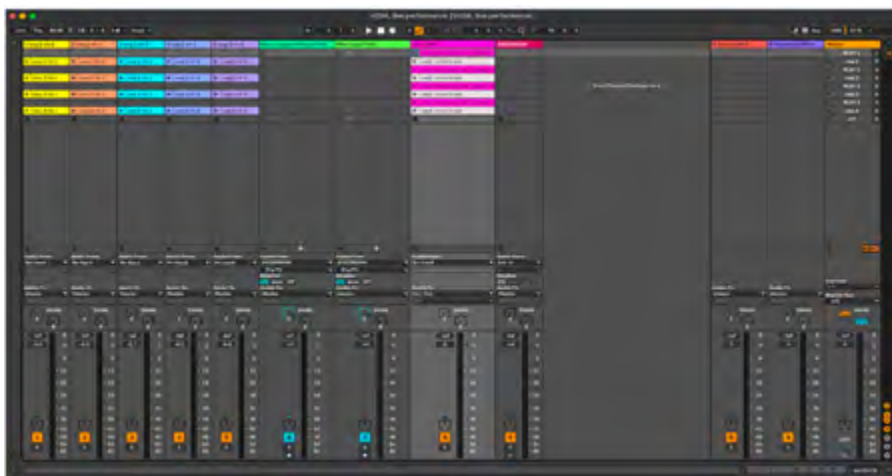
That is why it would not hurt us to describe, briefly and in broad terms, the compositional and musical components that Vladimir Korać employs in this piece and the ways he does it. As I already noted, the author begins with

¹ This text does not address the visual component of the work, because it is included in the score as optional.

concrete samples of Luka Lopičić's playing, that is, with precise sampling of sonic figures played by the accordionist and recorded by the composer. Then, the material is analysed by means of software technology, primarily by using spectral analysis, examining the aliquot potential of the material itself. Choosing what might find its place in the "sounding" of the work, the composer begins working on the piece itself, which ultimately emerges as a solid edifice, fully formed and written down, from beginning to end. The score of *Water* thus features not only the solo accordion part, but also all the entrances of the electronics,² as well as their interaction with video sequences.

Example 1. Software excerpts

WATER – Ableton project



All the materials appearing in the composition are interrelated and mutually derived, interacting within a rather precise sonic ecosystem, comprising the concrete part of the amplified instrument and electronics in two guises: prepared "patches" and live processing in real time. This sort of sonic "habitat" rests on re-examining electroacoustic interrelation as such and betraying our aural expectations and postulates, which is accomplished by suspending hierarchical relations. In other words, none of the sounds used in the piece enjoys primacy – they are all equal and co-exist in relation to one other. The accordion thus sometimes sounds like electronics and vice versa, which is further emphasized by amplifying the instrument, using directed sound

² The author used Ableton software to prepare the piece and enable its live performance.

boxes, and abolishing “spatiality” as operative in the reception of the work. In this highly controlled situation, which recalls an almost laboratory sort of setup, with the author controlling every parameter of input and output, participating, furthermore, in the very creation of the work as a performer, something unforeseen does, nonetheless, occur. And that is the entirely intuitive inscription of the temporal dimension, that is, the listener’s experience, which becomes fluid, mobile, contemplative, and event-based.

Example 2. The opening of *Water* by Vladimir Korać

Scene 1

$\text{♩} = 60$

Accordion

Electronics

The musical score for Scene 1 of 'Water' by Vladimir Korać is presented for two instruments: Accordion and Electronics. The tempo is indicated as $\text{♩} = 60$. The score is written in a system with five measures, each with a different time signature: 4/4, 3/4, 4/4, 3/4, and 4/4. The Accordion part consists of two staves (treble and bass). In the first measure (4/4), the bass staff has a half note with a circled '1' and a fermata, followed by a half rest. The treble staff has a whole rest. In the second measure (3/4), the bass staff has a half note with a circled '2' and a fermata, followed by a quarter rest. The treble staff has a whole rest. In the third measure (4/4), the bass staff has a half note with a circled '3' and a fermata, followed by a half rest. The treble staff has a whole rest. In the fourth measure (3/4), the bass staff has a half note with a circled '4' and a fermata, followed by a quarter rest. The treble staff has a whole rest. In the fifth measure (4/4), the bass staff has a half note with a circled '5' and a fermata, followed by a half rest. The treble staff has a whole rest. The Electronics part is a single staff. In the first measure (4/4), it has a half note with a circled '1' and a fermata, followed by a half rest. In the second measure (3/4), it has a half note with a circled '2' and a fermata, followed by a quarter rest. In the third measure (4/4), it has a half note with a circled '3' and a fermata, followed by a half rest. In the fourth measure (3/4), it has a half note with a circled '4' and a fermata, followed by a quarter rest. In the fifth measure (4/4), it has a half note with a circled '5' and a fermata, followed by a half rest. Dynamics markings include 'f' (forte) under the first and third measures of the Accordion part. The Electronics part has markings 'v-seq. 1 start' and 'seq. 1 play' under the first measure.

In formal terms, Vladimir Korać’s *Water* features several cycles of development or presentation of material, which the author calls “Scenes”. The choice of this denominator for the work’s seven main segments is not insignificant. *Water*, let us stress once more, possesses an inherent performativity, abstract narration, and a sort of silent “staged” character. In macro-formal terms, *Water* presents the following sequence: Scene 1 / Scene 2a / Scene 3 / Interlude 1 / Scene 2b / Scene 4 / Interlude 2 / Scene 5 / Scene 6 / Scene 7. All of these segments are relatively similar in duration, ranging from approximately 7 to 10 minutes, while the interludes go on for around two minutes. However, the number of sonic events among these, one might say, symmetric sections

varies, generating the effect of thickening or expansion in the listener's perception of time.

The opening scene is that of "genesis": it presents the work's primary sonic objects, which grow and emerge out of the electronic layer, while, in the accordion part, sound is slowly awakening – starting from its percussive potential (tapping and knocking on the instrument's body, bellows, and keys) and the aerophone sound of the bellows themselves. In other words, from breathing and tapping, from the domain of noise, the work arrives at sound and prepares the way for the appearance of figurations that are characteristic for this instrument in Scene 2a.

Example 3. Scene 2a (figurations)

The image displays a musical score for 'Scene 2a (figurations)'. It consists of two staves of music, each with a corresponding rhythmic diagram below it. The first staff begins at measure 101 with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 60$ and a dynamic of *f*. It features a series of eighth notes, followed by a rest, and then a sequence of eighth notes with a dynamic of *fp* and a crescendo leading to *f*. The second staff begins at measure 107 with a dynamic of *p*, followed by a series of eighth notes with a dynamic of *f* and a crescendo leading to *fp*, and finally a series of eighth notes with a dynamic of *f*. The rhythmic diagrams below each staff show the timing of these notes and rests, with some measures containing a 3/4 time signature.

At this juncture, we will turn our attention to an important dimension of understanding this sonic back-and-forth of *Water*. It concerns the timbral similarity between the electronic part and that of the accordion – which is for the most part employed in its high, descant register. In that way, the boundaries between the instrument and its electronic partner are rendered permeable and blurry, while their equality is absolute and formative. At the same time, it is clear that certain sounds may, viewed ontologically, belong only to “electronics”, just as others are “acoustic”, but Korać, intentionally, tries to amalgamate them as much as possible. The transitions between the scenes make use of that blending as well as economy of the selected and employed material, recalling an almost theatrical alternation of situations with the aid of movable stage panels.

Example 4. Transition between Scenes 2a and 3

183 $\text{♩} = 60$

185

194

196

16"

ad lib.

fade in

maximum level (in balance with the electronic part)

improvisation with PitchLoop (fade out at the end)

fig. 1

Scene 3

199 $\text{♩} = 60$

200

v-seq. 2 start

seq. 2 play

fade out

PitchLoop - inf. dB

In that regard, the dramaturgy of *Water* consists of finely linked scenes, with each one of them being, as Vladimir Korać says, “a window into a microcosm”, which is independent and connected to the preceding one on a deep level, stemming from the interrelations between aliquot tones themselves and their fundamentals. However, those links originate not only from that “molecular” level of the piece, but also materialize in the prevailing atmosphere of individual scenes, which alternate and thereby provide the necessary contrast.

If Scene 2a, as noted above, presents a musical flow comprising figurations, flutterings set in motion, tremolos, then Scene 4 is constructed as lyrical, slightly also lamenting in mood. In it, the sound image opens up vertically and, moreover, rather formally, by introducing clear chordal structures for the first time in the piece. The electronic part itself also gains in breadth and begins to occupy a broad sonic spectrum. This fourth scene was pre-

pared with certain procedures, already in Scene 3, but is separated from it by the appearance of Interlude 1 and Scene 2b, with contracting contents.

Example 5. Scene 4

The musical score for Scene 4 is presented in two systems. The first system, starting at measure 546, is marked with a tempo of 60. It consists of a treble and bass staff. The treble staff contains a 'Gitar' annotation and a series of notes and rests. The bass staff contains a series of notes and rests. The second system, starting at measure 551, also consists of a treble and bass staff. It includes dynamic markings such as 'p', 'mf', and 'f'. A 'take a loop' instruction is present, along with a 'delayPitchLong' box containing 'vib. level: - inf.' and a 'fade in' instruction.

The vertical, we might also say “radiating organization of sound” mentioned above finds its counterpart in the closing, seventh scene, which likewise employs similar tools. Toward the end, the piece as a whole arrives at a decisive and well-lit major tenth (b-flat-d) in the accordion part, whereafter the musical flow slowly vanishes, leaving only fragmented electronic reflections in its wake, as the primary source of sound. The preceding scenes, no. 5 and 6, were, in turn, entirely contrasting in atmosphere, with a large number of sonic events, dramatic, cluster-oriented, intended to thicken the sound. Also, in those two scenes the musical flow is set an octave below the opening register of the piece. They feature an acceleration of one’s aural experience of the flow of time, which makes the relaxation brought about by the final scene entirely expected and dramaturgically justified, which one might classically interpret as a substantial coda, that is, a big fade out of the piece as a whole.

Example 6. Scene 7 and the ending of *Water*

[illegible]

The score itself, as well as the permanent recording of the piece, includes numerous details, inscriptions, an entirely specific relationship between the strictly controlled and improvised sections, and that which only sounds like “improvisation”, bringing forth additional layers and inputs for future analytic elaboration. In that regard, Vladimir Korać accomplished a highly complex work that upon every listening and analytical look yields something new, retaining at the same time a certain mysteriousness and even eeriness in its very atmosphere.³

Of course, all of these epithets relate to the problematic that has occupied the heart of highly diverse works and projects in experimental electronics over the last few decades. And that is the constitutive ambivalence of contemporary electroacoustic music in today's era of highly individualized tools for

³ Incidentally, eeriness has been a trope in electroacoustic music over the last few decades. In that indecipherable as well as indiscernible embrace between the diverse natures of the sounds it employs – purely electronic, noise, concrete sounds, field recordings, and acoustic formations, a *surplus* emerges and that surplus often attracts interpretations that summon the notion of the “supernatural”. Of course, there are projects that mobilize this quality precisely for the sake of emanating the “otherworldly” in sound, like those of Robin Rimbaud, also known as Scanner.

digital sound design. Erasing at the very moment of performance the relationship between the acoustic and electronic parts, which in turn, by the recording, remain documented only as a “digital” input, opens the way for reflecting on the entire listening experience and process, as well as the meta-physical horizon of the “sonic sphere”. In other words, is the sound of an acoustic instrument, played by human hands, a sufficient signifier of “the other” in the tapestry of digitally processed electronic sound? In this concrete case, is the accordion part, originating from a digital analysis of its sonic grids, sufficiently independent, in ontological terms, to subsist “outside” of the electronic sound that surrounds, directs, and opposes it? And what is the role of the listener, both the one who attends a live performance and one who listens to the piece as a digital, fixed, sound recording, when everything in that recording is subordinated to the very concept of the piece – that differentiating between acoustic and electronic sound is, in essence, redundant?

Water addresses these questions on a deep level and allows us to think about them, in manifold and complex ways, even in a sort of “post-listening” fashion.

Namely, just as the very title, *Water*, appears only at the end of the composition, as a sort of simple conclusion, in the same way most of these questions, ideas, discursive and theoretical insights occur “afterwards”, because the very act of listening to this piece is extraordinarily demanding and obligating.

And that is why we shall now, if only briefly, touch upon that almost magical word, water. For, just as water is needed “daily”, so its semantic range is all-encompassing and potent, and yet clear, unequivocal, and elementary.

But *nomen est omen*, the name is a sign, meaning that water amid its mighty semantic frictions turns out to be a good frame of reference for thinking about Korać’s *Water*⁴ and its discursive ramifications, although there is nothing banally descriptive in the music itself. The aquatic world of this piece is a second-order world. It does not concern water as we encounter it in works from the Western musical canon, since the descriptive aspect, so prominent in all those plays involving water, fountains, waves, and reflections, is entirely absent here. But in a highly peculiar way, this composition is close to water in terms of its quality. In other words, its musical flow acts

⁴ *Water* is such a pregnant word and occupies such a complex and challenging relationship with Vladimir Korać’s piece that one might imagine many more texts that would address this topic.

like water, in a material, almost physical sense; it is liquid and flowing, generating a sort of “liquefied time” in sound. That time captures real time and turns it into something that flows and evolves, emerges and disappears, without comprising real minutes or seconds. That time, to the contrary, exists in the musical dimension, as a sort of parallel reality, the reality of *Water*, wherein the very act of listening and watching, like a sort of abrogation of the perennial acceleration of time and inevitable banality of the everyday, which we also call transience.

Amid this liquefaction of sound, *Water* by Vladimir Korać allows us to experience sound-time and come out of that encounter transformed and ready to reflect not only on the current nature of the electroacoustic medium itself, but also the site where our aural cognition takes place. And that place is today’s world, whose horizon no longer comprises the abstract dimensions of sound or any other art, but entire realistic and bleak days that will see us searching for clean, refreshing, and by no means metaphorical water.

Summary

This article analyzes *Water*, an audio-visual composition by Serbian electroacoustic composer Vladimir Korać. *Water* earned the 2023 “Stevan Mokranjac” award and is seen as a pinnacle of Korać’s work up till now, showcasing his innovative use of electroacoustic and digital techniques.

This 70-minute piece, with the duration that is rare for recent output of Serbian contemporary music, combines live accordion performance, electronic sounds, and video elements, embodying the transformative essence of water. Rather than depicting water literally, the composition, in a secondary glance, refers to its structural, almost primordial organization and fluid adaptability. Acoustic and electronic elements are interdependent, with Korać sampling the sounds and subjugating them to spectral analysis and further digital transformation. The work challenges traditional distinctions between roles of acoustic and electronic sounds, making them mutable and interchangeable.

Formally organized into “scenes”, each segment of the composition explores unique sonic textures, linked through carefully designed transitions and correspondences. There is a clear dramaturgical organization of the scenes that create a distinct sound world, contemplative and active and energetic at the same time.

Water transcends its technical achievements to become a profound artistic statement on our perception of the world through manipulation and transformation of time. In other words, this composition opens up, as an after-thought of the listening experience itself, a question what water means – in its musical emanations, but also more profoundly and more urgently, what does it mean to us in this world and time?