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**MUSIC AS UNSPOKEN POETRY:
DEJAN DESPIĆ'S HARMONIC LYRE IN *BRANKOVA LIRA*
FOR MEZZO-SOPRANO, BARITONE, AND STRING
QUARTET, OP. 150**

Abstract: One of the most prolific composers of contemporary Serbian music, Dejan Despić, dedicated over sixty years to composing art songs for voice and various instruments or instrumental ensembles. This paper examines the song cycle for mezzo-soprano, baritone, and string quartet which Despić composed to the verses of the prominent Serbian Romantic poet Branko Radičević and published under the title *Brankova lira* (Branko's Lyre). The focus of this paper will be on the harmonic language of these songs, particularly on the manifestations of various elements of traditional, Romantic harmony within the new context of late 20th-century music. Various forms of third relations between keys, the use of the Balkan minor scale, as well as standard and innovative moments in the application of secondary chords, which largely characterize the music of this cycle, will be discussed. In certain songs, the modal harmonic language represents the primary mode of vertical organization and significantly substitutes tonality as the main system of musical linguistics in the work. Furthermore, the role of harmony in interpreting the meaning of the poetic text of selected Radičević's poems will be examined. The aim of this paper is to discover and

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present the potential of the tonal and harmonic rhetoric of the songs from *Brankova lira*, as well as to further expand the theoretical basis for a hermeneutic analysis of the relationship between music, particularly harmony, and the poetic text in compositions belonging to Serbian lyrical vocal music.

Keywords: Dejan Despić, harmony, tonality, Balkan minor scale, modal harmony, interpretive analysis

Introduction

In 2000, Dejan Despić (1930–2024), a prominent Serbian composer, wrote a song cycle for mezzo-soprano, baritone, and string quartet. This cycle, titled *Brankova lira* (Branko's Lyre) and designated as Opus 150, features selected poems by the renowned Serbian Romantic poet Branko Radičević (1824–1853). The cycle consists of eight songs with the following titles: "Čekanje" (Waiting), "Na studencu" (At the Well), "Pevam" (I Sing), "Prekor" (Reproach), "Vragolije" (Mischief), "K'o i pre" (As Before), "Nikad" (Never), and "Aoj, svete!" (Oh, World!). Despić carefully organized the vocal distribution, creating a dynamic and almost dramaturgical interplay through the constant, contrasting alternation of male and female voices in solo songs and duet songs, respectively. Specifically, the mezzo-soprano performs the second, fourth, and sixth songs, while the baritone is featured in the third and seventh. The cycle's framing songs – the first and the eighth – as well as the central, fifth song, which serves as a climax of the entire cycle, are presented as duets for both voices. It is well known that Branko Radičević's poetry consistently captivated Serbian composers since the late 19th century and throughout the 20th century, leading to dozens of musical adaptations across various genres. The appeal of his work isn't solely due to his status as one of the greatest Serbian lyricists or the simple yet profound beauty of his verses, often enriched by the Orphic myth. It also stems from their inherent musicality and stable meter, which often lend themselves naturally to logical musical structuring.¹ In the preface to the printed score of *Brankova lira*, Despić himself summarized the unique emotional qualities of the young poet's world that prompted him to compose Radičević's verses:

¹ Cf. Стана Ђурић-Клајн, *Музика и музичари: избор чланака и сјудија*, Београд, Просвета, 1956, 41 [Stana Đurić-Klajn, *Music and Musicians: A Selection of Articles and Studies*, Belgrade, Prosveta, 41].

The poet, who died young but remained eternally youthful – eager, in love, enchanted by the world (“if only there were no dying!”) – yet also saddened by his early departure, captivated me with the initial, cheerful part of these feelings, with the bright, silver strings of his lyre. It didn't matter that, amidst them, a melancholic note would occasionally be heard, just enough to remind us of the finitude of our existence, the transience of all our exhilarations.²

The composer dedicated his cycle *Brankova lira* to the thirtieth anniversary of the “Brankovo Kolo” manifestation, held in Sremski Karlovci in 2001.³ However, Despić cites Ana M. Zečević's study-collection titled *Al' što pevah neće propanuti: muzička transpozicija poezije Branka Radičevića* (But What I Sang Will Not Perish: The Musical Transposition of Branko Radičević's Poetry), which focuses on the music composed to the verses of this Serbian poet, as the direct inspiration for the cycle's creation.⁴ Lyrical vocal music marks Despić's entire creative period, and it can be said that the moods shaping his earlier art songs – “moods that build that realm of ‘pure lyricism’: melancholy, longing, nostalgia”⁵ – also prevail in his *Brankova lira*. The humorous song “Vragolije” would be an exception in this regard, as it “represents a hymn to youth and a projection of the hedonistic experiences that attracted the young poet”.⁶

In the following sections of this introduction, we'll first review the stylistic features of Dejan Despić's lyrical vocal music, examining his approach to setting Branko Radičević's poetry, as well as how other Serbian composers tackled the same verses. We'll also briefly highlight the metrical and formal characteristics of the songs within *Brankova lira*. The core of this paper will be dedicated to the most crucial aspects of the cycle's harmonic and tonal

² The quotation comes from the “Author's Note” provided at the beginning of the published score: Дејан Деспић, *Бранкова лира – циклус песама за мецосојран, баритон и југачки кваријетт ой*. 150 [партитура и клавирски извод], Нови Сад, Змај, 2001 [Dejan Despić, *Brankova lira – A Song Cycle for Mezzo-Soprano, Baritone, and String Quartet*, Op. 150 [score and piano reduction]].

³ *Brankova lira* premiered at this event on September 10, 2001. The performers were Snježana Savičić, Predrag Milanović, and the string quartet consisted of four members of the *St. George Strings* orchestra.

⁴ Ана М. Зечевић, *Ал' што певих неће пропаст: музичка транспозиција поезије Бранка Радичевића*, Сремски Карловци, Бранково коло, 1999 [Ana M. Zečević, *But What I Sang Will Not Perish: The Musical Transposition of Branko Radičević's Poetry*].

⁵ Ana Stefanović, “Vocal Lyricism of Dejan Despić”, *New Sound – International Journal of Music*, 26, II/2005, 78.

⁶ Зечевић, *op. cit.*, 407.

language. This includes an exploration of tonal relationships and Despić's use of the Balkan minor scale, the presence of modality in some of the songs, the application of secondary dominants and other secondary chords and their novel role within *Brankova lira*, and, finally, the function of harmony as a means of interpretive analysis of the poetic text.

The Stylistic Orientation of Lyrical Vocal Music by Dejan Despić

A look at Dejan Despić's *Brankova lira* is inseparable from two significant perspectives on his oeuvre that have crystallized in the scientific, musicological discourse on his music: the reflection of Despić's theoretical work on his artistic oeuvre and the neoclassical stylistic position of his compositions. One group of scholars emphasizes the influence of his theoretical, even scientific, thought – primarily in the field of harmony – on his compositions. Thanks to this influence, his compositions achieve remarkable refinement, transparency, proportionality, as well as a concordance of idea and norm, of content and form. In her paper "Život posvećen muzici. U vezi sa stvaralačkom poetikom Dejana Despića" ("Life Dedicated to Music: Regarding Dejan Despić's Creative Poetics"), Katarina Tomašević points out: "Though not immediately obvious, dedicated theoretical work possibly played a crucial role in the early stages of shaping and subsequent maturation processes of the composer's authorial poetics."⁷ We must agree with this observation, at least concerning the harmonic language of *Brankova lira*. As the forthcoming analysis will show, it reflects the musical imagination of a creator so deeply and intimately connected with the most subtle layers of theoretical knowledge of harmony. Even when deviating from such a norm, he, through the asymptotic logic of his creativity formed in this way, actually reaffirms it. Furthermore, understanding Despić's style as Neoclassical is practically a constant in musicological and theoretical works about his music,⁸ even

⁷ Катарина Томашевић, "Живот посвећен музици. О стваралачкој поезици Дејана Деспића", у: Соња Маринковић, Немања Совтић (ур.), *Банатски Фалстаф: комична опера „Пој Ђира и њој Спире“ Дејана Деспића*, Нови Сад, Културни центар Војводине "Милош Црњански" – Музиколошко друштво Србије, 2019, 21–22 [Katarina Tomašević, "A Life Dedicated to Music: On Dejan Despić's Creative Poetics", in: Sonja Marinković, Nemanja Sovtić (Eds), *Banat's Falstaff: Dejan Despić's Comic Opera "Pop Ćira i pop Spira"*].

⁸ Cf. Vesna Mikić, *Lica srpske muzike: neoklasicizam*, Beograd, Fakultet muzičke umetnosti – Katedra za muzikologiju, 2009, 138–142 [Vesna Mikić, *Faces of Serbian Music: Neoclassicism*]; Сњежана Б. Ђукић Чамур, "Постоји ли аскетизам у српској музици

though Despić himself didn't entirely agree with the use of the term 'Neoclassicism' or 'neo-' styles in general concerning the music of his time.⁹ However, in the aforementioned paper, Katarina Tomašević clearly distinguishes between what in Despić's music is Neoclassical and what, in turn, is Neoromantic and Neoimpressionistic:

In terms of formal architecture and instrumentation, Despić's compositions are impeccably Neoclassically refined. However, their expressive range spans from the Neoromantic and Neoimpressionistic lyrical palette to the Neoexpressionistic sharpness. Consistently staying clear of avant-garde and experimental tendencies, Despić steadily built a recognizable, personal musical expression over time, rooted in the core poetic belief that *music is the language of emotions*.¹⁰

Understanding the stylistic position of his music in this way, Despić's lyrical vocal music is precisely where the neoromantic and neoimpressionistic potential of his artistic imagination will be reflected, primarily thanks to its harmonic means.

Poetic Inspiration and Initial Interventions in the Lyrics of Selected Songs

Despić's approach to the lyrics that form the basis of his vocal and vocal-instrumental works often results in an almost entirely new poetic form, one that breathes new life into the original texts. Ana Stefanović comments on this:

Namely, in his cycles, the composer selects poems from poetic cycles or collections in such a way that, in their new sequence and arrangement, they form an

неокласицизма XX вијека?”, у: Валерија Каначки (ур.), *Српски језик, књижевност, уметност: зборник радова са VII међународној научној скупштини одржаној на Филолошко-уметничком факултету у Крагујевцу*, (26–27. X 2012). Књ. 3, *Музика и неизрециво*; & *Историја уметности – методи и методологија и њихова примена*, Крагујевац, Филолошко-уметнички факултет, 2013, 109 [Snježana B. Đukić Čamur, “Is there asceticism in Serbian Neoclassical music of the 20th Century?”, in: Valerija Kanački (Ed.), *Serbian Language, Literature, Art: Proceedings of the VII International Scholarly Conference Held at the Faculty of Philology and Arts in Kragujevac (26–27 October 2012)*. Vol. 3, *Music and the Ineffable*; & *History of Arts – Methods and Methodology and Their Application*].

⁹ “I’m personally against the beloved ‘neo-’ prefix, because what can it *really* mean today, when all the styles mentioned and all sorts of others (thank goodness!) freely coexist, ‘jumbled’, intertwined – even in an *individual* work, and especially in a composer’s entire oeuvre?”, Ana Kotevska, “Communication via Open Paths: A Conversation with Dejan Despić”, *New Sound – International Journal of Music*, 15, 1/2000, 21.

¹⁰ Томашевић, *op. cit.*, 21.

entirely new, distinctive line of sense, which follows its own poetic, musical, and poetic-musical logic. Thanks to these narrative and dramaturgical gestures, which subsequently integrate poetic structures into 'prose' and dramatic structures, all of Despić's song cycles become unique poems or even dramatic scenes. They thereby point to a poetically different, yet complementary, tendency to the monodramatic setting of the *lied* in the modern era of the genre's development.¹¹

The same can indeed be said of the song cycle *Brankova lira*. Its dramatic shaping, beyond just the selection of lyrics, is undeniably enhanced by the choice of medium. This refers to Despić's decision to conceive a cycle "mostly from the most well-known and many times previously composed texts" in a "less common" way,¹² as he himself noted. In his other works based on various poetic texts, Despić also does the reshaping of the original text. As Snježana Đukić Čamur points out, he "directs it towards relatively precise genre and formal models that attract him".¹³ In other words, he uses only those models that suit the given text and are most suitable for the musical realization of creative ideas inspired by that text. Despić's vocal lyrical oeuvre encompasses the pieces composed within the period of more than six decades. He felt a connection to poetry right at the beginning of his compositional career, and his words bear witness to this:

When I started composing, it was, therefore, quite natural for me to relate some of my first attempts to poetry, feeling that **poetry was, in fact, merely unsounded music**, that is to say, that **music was, in fact, merely unspoken poetry**. (...) this relatedness has always been and after all remained consistently present and perceptible in my musical creation.¹⁴

However, some of our most distinguished musicologists believe that the composer's engagement with this genre for such an extensive period, con-

¹¹ Stefanović, "Vocal Lyricism of Dejan Despić", 76.

¹² Деспић, op. cit.

¹³ Сњежана Ђукић Чамур, "Преплитање жанрова у Деспићевој кантати *Јефимија Лазару*", у: Соња Маринковић, Санда Додик (ур.), *Традиција као инспирација: зборник радова са научној скупштини Владо Милошевић: етномузиколог, композитор и педагог* (6–7. април 2012), Бања Лука, Академија умјетности Универзитета у Бањој Луци – Академија наука и умјетности Републике Српске – Музиколошко друштво Републике Српске, 2013, 322 [Snježana Đukić Čamur, "The Intertwining of Genres in Despić's Cantata *Jefimija Lazaru*", in: Sonja Marinković, Sanda Dodik (Eds), *Tradition as Inspiration: Collection of Papers from the Scholarly Conference Vlado Milošević: Ethnomusicologist, Composer, and Pedagogue* (6–7 April 2012)].

¹⁴ Dejan Despić, "My Vocal Mosaics", *New Sound – International Journal of Music*, 50, II/2017, 230.

trary to what might be expected, doesn't really show development or progression "either in the approach to the vocal-lyrical domain, or in terms of language or style, or regarding the field of meaning, mood, or emotional register encompassed by the chosen poetry".¹⁵ Nevertheless, despite this, as Ana Stefanović states in another paper, in the preface to *Antologija srpske solo pesme* (Anthology of Serbian Art Song), Despić "arrived at a specific poetics which arguably marked a new phase in the development of Serbian art song, in view of both genre and style".¹⁶ So, if this new, pivotal point in the development of the Serbian *Lied* can be linked to Despić's oeuvre in the genre of art songs, then the composer's transposition of the *lied* into a medium where the voice is accompanied by a string orchestra, as is the case in *Brankova lira*, marked a significant moment in the development of his lyrical vocal music as a whole, even though this moment came towards the twilight of his compositional career.¹⁷ After all, regarding the choice of the string quartet for the instrumental accompaniment in this cycle, Despić himself stated the following: "Since all the songs (in some cases only parts of them) are filled, more or less, with diverse *tenderness* as the predominant color, I thought that the soft and noble sound of the string quartet, which is rarely used in this role, would best suit it, unlike the usual piano accompaniment in art songs."¹⁸ Therefore, although the motivation for choosing the medium for composing *Brankova lira* primarily stemmed from the character of the selected verses of Branko Radičević, there's no doubt that the compositional creativity realized in this Despić's cycle largely transcended his initial ideas. Its overall artistic and expressive scope has ranked this work among the most significant achievements of Serbian lyrical vocal music.

¹⁵ Stefanović, op. cit., 75.

¹⁶ Ana Stefanović (izbor i predgovor), *Antologija srpske solo pesme*, Beograd, Udruženje kompozitora Srbije, 2008, XVI = Ana Stefanović (selection and preface), *Anthology of Serbian Art Song*, Belgrade, Serbian Composers Association, 2008, XVI.

¹⁷ In this departure from the conventional resources of art song (which implies a solo voice and piano accompaniment), a trend also seen among other Serbian composers of lyrical vocal music, Ana Stefanović rightly identifies a return to the older chamber tradition of the Baroque and Classical periods, specifically the monodic profiling of the art song genre (cf. Stefanović /izbor i predgovor/, *Antologija srpske solo pesme*, op. cit., II = Stefanović /selection and preface/, *Anthology of Serbian Art Song*, op. cit., II.).

¹⁸ From the "Author's Note", in: Деспић, *Бранкова лира – циклус њесама за мецсосопран, баритон и њудачки кварићей ой*. 150 [партитура и клавириски извод], op. cit. [Despić, *Brankova lira – a song cycle for mezzo-soprano, baritone, and string quartet*, Op. 150 [score and piano reduction], op. cit.].

The creation of such an authentic lyrical expression also corresponds with free interventions in the original poetic text. These interventions are most often realized as condensations, specifically the omission of certain stanzas and/or verses, as well as minor reformulations within the text.¹⁹ The omission of specific stanzas is most frequently driven by the logic of the musical form, or more precisely, by adapting to the chosen type of strophic, varied-strophic, or through-composed song, where the original text would likely be too long. Radičević's poem "Jadna draga" (Poor Darling) serves as the basis for the first and sixth songs of Despić's cycle: "Čekanje" and "K'o i pre". The fact that Radičević's poem, as Ana M. Zečević observes, "can be divided into two parts",²⁰ also served Despić in his work on this song cycle. Thus, he used the first part of the poem, composed of four stanzas built as triplets and one stanza in couplet form, as the poetic foundation for the song named after the epistrophe of all stanzas in the first part, specifically the line *K'o i pre*. Despić used the second part of the poem "Jadna draga", different in character from its first part, for the first song of his cycle. However, he didn't use the original title for this song either, instead naming it "Čekanje". In this instance, not all the poetic content from that part of Radičević's poem was used; only the first stanza, structured as a decasyllabic quatrain, was employed.

Radičević's poem "Devojka na studencu" (The Girl at the Well) is adapted in the second song of Despić's cycle, with the slightly altered title "Na studencu". Here, the composer uses all 16 verses of Branko's original poem.²¹ In the third song, titled "Pevam", Despić used the text of the love poem "Mini Karadžić u spomenicu" (To Mina Karadžić in Her Album), also in its entirety (12 verses). Again, Despić transforms the original title, taking the first word from its opening line: *Pevam danju, pevam noću* (*I sing by day, I sing by night*). Branko Radičević dedicated this poem to the painter and poet Mina Karadžić, daughter of Vuk Karadžić, with whom he was in love. The text for the fourth song of *Brankova lira* is taken from the poem "Ukor" (Reproach), which Despić, with a slight intervention, titles "Prekor". Originally, the poem has two stanzas, each of which is built from eight verses (octaves), but, for his

¹⁹ Linguistic interventions and reformulations in the poetic text are driven by the composer's artistic intention, adaptations to the musical logic of the phrase, or, sometimes, a desire to avoid certain archaisms in the Serbian language.

²⁰ Зећевић, op. cit., 390.

²¹ There's also a traditional urban version of this song, and some composers have quoted its motifs in their vocal works based on these same verses.

musical setting of this poem, the composer resorts to abbreviation by removing the first half of the second stanza from Radičević's poem.

For "Vragolije", the fifth song of his cycle, Despić chose Radičević's poem of the same name. The original poem has a whopping 14 quatrains. The composer reduced this to ten stanzas – evidently, those he deemed most crucial to the song's narrative – by omitting the sixth, ninth, tenth, and eleventh stanzas from the original poetic text. The seventh song of Despić's *Brankova lira* is titled "Nikad" and is set to Radičević's poem "Nikad nije vito tvoje telo" (Your Slender Body Was Never /Embraced by My Young Hand/). This poem is structured with four stanzas of unequal length – the first two as quatrains and the last two as triplets – all of which the composer retains in their entirety. Finally, for the basis of the last, eighth song of his cycle, Despić takes the prelude, i. e., the introductory part, of the epic poem "Gojko", which was often published as a standalone poem "Gusle moje..." (My Gusle...).²² This poem by Branko Radičević consists of four stanzas, each of which is structured as a sestet, except for the third, which is a poetic octave. Despić performs a significant reduction here, building his composition only on the second stanza, which is fully retained, and a portion of the third stanza, from which only its first three lines are used. Therefore, the song in Despić's cycle does not keep Radičević's original title, as it doesn't contain the opening lines *Gusle moje, ovamote malo* (*My gusle, come hither awhile*) from the original poem. Instead, in this musical adaptation, it receives its title from the beginning of the third stanza: "Aoj, svete!"

The Approach of Other Composers to the Same Poetic Text

All of Branko Radičević's verses that were taken as the poetic basis for Despić's songs in the cycle *Brankova lira* had previously attracted the attention of many Serbian composers, from Davorin Jenko and Stevan Mokranjac all the way to contemporary artists including Dimitrije O. Golemović and Svetislav Božić. The musical transposition of these verses over the period of more than a century generally proceeded in two directions: the artists were composing either pieces for a cappella choir (predominantly for female choir and mixed choir, respectively) or art songs for voice and piano. Before Despić, the sole examples of using a chamber ensemble or orchestra as accompaniment for a voice in songs written to these verses were by Dušan Radić and Stanojlo Rajičić. In his cycle titled *Tri pesme za sopran, harfu i gudački orkestar op. 2*

²² Cf. Зечевић, op. cit., 9.

br. 2 (Three Songs for Soprano, Harp, and String Orchestra, Op. 2 No. 2), Radić adapted Radičević's poems "Jadna draga" and "Devojka na studencu". Rajičić, within the cycle *Lisje žuti* (Yellow Leaves), composed the song "Gusle" for baritone and orchestra, using the text of Radičević's poem "Gusle moje..."²³ Therefore, Dejan Despić's *Brankova lira* represents a unique musical transposition of these verses by Radičević.

Metrics and Texture

In regard to metric organization, the songs that compound *Brankova lira* generally consistently follow the chosen metric pattern (the first, fourth, seventh, and eighth songs), while slight horizontal polymetry mostly appears in the introduction or the initial part of the song (the third, fifth, and sixth songs). An exception is the second song of the cycle, "Na studencu", where horizontal polymetry stands out as one of the means of macro-formal organization, as the stanzas predominantly unfold in 2/4 time, while the introduction and the reminiscence part of the coda unfold in 3/4 time. The texture of the songs in this cycle generally oscillates between a less strict homophony and a specific, Neoromantic-profiled type of apparent polyphony, which results from the constant wavering of the string quartet instruments' role between mere accompanists and somewhat independent polyphonic actors. Polyphony with elements of imitation is moderately expressed in the first song, "Čekanje", and, to a somewhat greater extent, in the fifth song, "Vragolije".²⁴

²³ Cf. *ibid.*, 389, 390, 394, 395, 413.

²⁴ The most prominent of the motifs subjected to imitation in the course of this song is very similar, at times even completely identical, to the motif of the first theme of Joseph Haydn's Piano Sonata Hob. XVI/44 in G minor, appearing once even in the same key (compare measure 1 of Haydn's Piano Sonata Hob. XVI/44 in G minor and measures 55–57 in the song "Vragolije"). Since this song, with its playful character, youthful vigor, and somewhat hedonistic-seductive atmosphere, conspicuously contrasts with the prevailing sentimental-melancholic atmosphere of the other songs, the connection between the quotation of Haydn's motifs and the character of the song is not accidental, especially considering the words of the author himself, stated in an interview regarding the premiere of his opera: "...I personally feel the need for humor in life, I gladly turn things into a joke, so, naturally, I suppose, throughout my compositional career I also strove for humor in music, for humor of that Haydnesque, benevolent kind" (M. Stajić, "Деспић: Опера 'Поп Ћира и поп Спира' ми је била велик изазов", *Дневник*, 28. 3. 2018, <https://www.dnevnik.rs/kultura/muzika/despic-opera-pop-cira-i-pop-spira-mi-je-bila-velik-izazov-28-03-2018> [M. Stajić, "Despić: The Opera 'Pop Ćira i pop Spira' Was a Big

Relationships between Keys and the Use of the Balkan Minor Scale²⁵

The songs in *Brankova lira* are characterized by a specifically organized tonal language in which most chords have a clearly expressed tonal function, yet simultaneously feature functionally unconditioned, sometimes very free, resolutions. The tonal pattern that defines the basic key development of most songs in *Brankova lira* rests on relationships between keys a third apart. These relationships manifest in almost the same ways as they were manifested in Romanticism: the changeable mode, often referred as *peremennyy lad*, in its original form, realized as an oscillation of relative keys, on the one hand, and chromatic third relationships between keys, on the other. Both key strategies are fully expressed already in the first song, “Čekanje”, through the oscillation of the basic A minor and C major, as well as through modulation from C major to the mediant key of E-flat major. Simultaneously, as a type of stylistic counterpoint, Despić repeatedly uses mixture parallelism, specifically, the parallel motion of diatonic sixth chords in the same song, a clear reference to the Impressionistic style. In this way, the changeable mode is transcended into a kind of changeable stylistic configuration, where the oscillation between Romantic and Impressionistic harmonic idioms crystallizes as the primary driving force of key development in the song. An almost identical key-matrix also figures in the sixth song, experiencing a kind of upgrade in all traced directions. Thus, the fundamental chromatic third relationship to the principal key of G major acts in both directions: upwards, leading the musical flow of the song “K'o i pre” first to B-flat major, and then downwards, leading to a brief modulation into E-flat major. The modal interchange of the principal key into G minor only somewhat mitigates the aforementioned chromatic relationships. In this case, the two keys – B-flat major and E-flat major – are no longer in chromatic, but diatonic third relationship to the key of G minor. However, at the same time, this modal interchange strengthens the changeable mode (*peremennyy lad*), which no longer manifests solely on the tonal axis of relative keys (G minor/B-flat major), but also on the relationship of minor/relative key of the subdominant key (G minor/E-flat major). Furthermore, the harmonic language of the song “K'o i pre” is based

Challenge for Me”, accessed on 5/6/2025]). Although there is no record of the author's testimony about this ‘borrowing’, the impression of intertextuality in this case is hard to resist.

²⁵ This scale has been known by a variety of names, including Ukrainian Dorian scale and altered Dorian scale.

on a tonality expanded by characteristic chords of Romanticism, such as mediants, and even new chords from the corpus of typically Impressionistic chords, like complex diatonic chords – ninth chords and eleventh chords (Example 1). The use of the high mediant chord here can be interpreted as expanding into the area of the relative minor in a non-traditional way – through a functionally free descent of a potential secondary dominant of a VI scale degree by a second downwards (measures 3–4 in Example 1) – and such an atypical expansion is precisely a hallmark of the composer's harmonic style in these songs and doesn't necessarily imply a Romantic resonance. Meanwhile, the dominant eleventh chord truly brings an appropriate stylistic refreshment to the given chordal milieu.

Example 1: Dejan Despić, *Brankova lira – a song cycle for mezzo-soprano, baritone, and string quartet*, Op. 150, “K'o i pre”, for mezzo-soprano and string quartet, mm. 12–15.

MS: $\text{♩} = 66$ a tempo, *poco f*, *f*, un poco stretto
 Vn I: *poco f*, *f*
 Vn II: *poco f*, *f*, crescendo
 VI: *poco f*, *f*
 Vc: *poco f*, *f*, crescendo
 Chords: G: T DS₃ VI⁶ II⁶ T⁶ DS⁷ S⁷ D¹¹₉ T DS⁶ II⁶ M II D⁷

The tonal dynamic at the level of individual songs is not always defined by third relationships. For example, the tonal dynamic of the song “Nikad” is driven by the minor mode but on a relatively simple plane, in a continuous alternation of only two minor keys: C minor and F minor. However, behind this seemingly simplified alternation of two keys lies their mutual interpenetration, achieved through frequent interjections of distinctive tones from one key into the other (for example, the tone D-flat in C minor or the tone

D in F minor), which, understandably, has implications at the chordal level as well. This ultimately created a general key framework dominated by a kind of double-centric system, resting on a pattern that Western theory had earlier recognized as a “double-tonic complex”²⁶ – a unique key in which the tonic of one key and then the tonic of another key is alternately emphasized. A kind of climax of such interpenetration in this Despić's song occurs precisely at its end, which formally, for the sake of an evidently fulfilled intention for tonal closure of the song, ends in C minor. However, due to the appearance of the tone D-flat, it is noticeably filled with a Phrygian modal color, making it also sound like an ending in a dominantized F minor. Although C minor clearly manifests itself before the end of the song with the appearance of the tone D in both melody and harmony, the last four measures again bring the tone D-flat back into the musical flow. Thus, the last two chords emphasize the “double-tonic complex” to its maximum extent: the progression of the half-diminished seventh chord *G – B-flat – D-flat – F* and the dominant seventh chord *C – E – G – B-flat* in this and only this context – with the entire interplay of the two keys in the preceding flow, which almost served as a prelude to the end of the song—can sound simultaneously as a *II⁷-D⁷* progression in F minor and as a progression of seventh chords on the V and I degrees (with the latter containing a Picardy third) in Phrygian C minor (Example 2).

The song “Prekor” stands out regarding its key scheme and the influence of both chord and scale structures on its overall tonal framework. This song is written in F minor and formally contains no modulations. However, throughout the piece, specific oscillations between two types of scales occur that create the *effect* – though not the actual *realization* – of a shift in the keyship center toward the dominant, i.e., towards C minor. This gives the song its authentic harmonic/tonal characteristic. The melody of the solo voice throughout the song primarily corresponds to the Balkan F minor scale, which certainly has implications on the harmonic plane to a certain extent. In this approach to harmonization, an important and likely conscious decision by the composer is observed. Namely, in the history of tonal music

²⁶ Cf. Robert Bailey, “An Analytical Study of the Sketches and Drafts”, in: Robert Bailey (Ed.), *Wagner: Prelude and Transfiguration from ‘Tristan und Isolde’*, New York, Norton, 1985, 121–122, 125–126, 134; Matthew Bribitzer-Stull, “The End of ‘Die Feen’ and Wagner's Beginnings: Multiple Approaches to an Early Example of Double-Tonic Complex, Associative Theme and Wagnerian Form”, *Music Analysis*, 3 (25), 2006, 324.

Example 2: D. Despić, *Brankova lira*, “Nikad”, for baritone and string quartet, mm. 51–55.

$\text{♩} = 75$ *mp*
 BT мис - лим без прес-тан ка...
 Vn I *p* *mf*
 Vn II *mp* *mf*
 VI *p* *mf*
 Vc *mp* *mf*
 C: II⁷ °VII⁷ °III V_F⁷ T⁷ (Ds⁷)
 (Es: D⁷ T)
 Dominant from the Phrygian C minor

based on the Balkan minor scale (and, generally, on other folk scales), whether it is the music composed within a national musical style or the music that is not part of such a context, composers typically choose to harmonize melodies belonging to this scale with regular chords of the harmonic minor, not the Balkan minor. A similar observation can be made for other fundamentally minor scales (the Hungarian minor scale, Lydian minor scale, Phrygian dominant scale,²⁷ etc.). Composers were consciously bypassing the other available strategy, which involved the usage of chords derived directly from the pitches of the Balkan minor scale for the harmonic accompaniment of a melody based on it. However, in “Prekor”, Despić opts for this very type of harmonization. This provides a subtle yet significantly qualitative difference in the overall chordal sound, incorporating pungent and unusual chordal structures for typical diatonic functions. It means that the dominant chord is very often presented as a minor triad and a minor seventh chord. This variant

²⁷ In Serbian theoretical discourse, this scale is known by the name Dominant minor scale.

of F minor is further solidified by its characteristic and, compared to the harmonic minor, distinctive chords, such as the half-diminished seventh chord on the VI degree and the minor seventh chord on the II degree.

Beyond that, the two keys, C minor and F minor, engage in a unique and, it seems, even more intriguing interaction in this song. This stems from the composer's exploitation of an interesting property of the aforementioned Balkan minor scale. Since the harmonic minor scale is equal to the Balkan minor scale starting from its fifth scale degree (and vice versa, the Balkan minor scale sounds like the harmonic minor scale starting from its fourth scale degree), a relatively simpler, diatonic harmonization could easily sound like a harmonization belonging to the dominant harmonic minor – in this case, harmonic C minor.²⁸ Consequently, the song creates the impression of a continuous tonal inclination of the main F minor towards the dominant C minor. At times, it even gives the impression of an oscillation between the two keys, along with the accompanying “double-tonic complex” effect. All this ultimately results in a complete shift to C minor at the song's conclusion (“Prekor”, mm. 48–52). Although the cadence can also be interpreted as ending on a minor dominant triad of the Balkan F minor – as the minor triad is typically placed at the V scale degree of the Balkan minor – it appears this ambiguous ending, or the possibility of a double interpretation of the song's ending, was intentionally left by the composer. More precisely, it functions as an interpretive gesture of the harmony itself in elucidating the lyrics: just as the poem ends with the question *ta kako si moga?* (*how could you?*), omitting the answer, so too does the harmony leave the listener with the question of whether the song ends in F minor or, indeed, in C minor. If this dilemma is possible at the song's end, the inclination toward C minor is less pronounced within the song. This is primarily due to the use of altered chords with diminished third in their typical functions and chord forms, such as the Italian sixth functioning as -VII_D (“Prekor”, m. 7) or the six-four chord with augmented sixth functioning as -DD (same song, m. 35), which appear in these roles precisely in the principal key of F minor.

Davorin Jenko composed the art song “Gde si dušo, gde si rano” (Where Are You, My Soul, Where Are You, My Sustenance) for voice and piano accompaniment, set to this poem by Radičević. Jenko's piece, with partial melodic alterations, “became popularized and is often sung today in that altered

²⁸ It is important to note the key signature in the song's notation, which indicates C minor (three flats), even though the song begins and largely unfolds in F minor.

form as a traditional urban song”.²⁹ Dejan Despić retains some elements of this version in his art song “Prekor”. These include the key (F minor), the beginning of the melody with the tonic fifth, and especially the characteristic auxiliary motion to the Lydian fourth in the opening motive, as well as the melodic cadence on the supertonic in the song’s theme (the first stanza in Despić’s song). In this context, it’s crucial to note the brief embrace of the relative key of dominant minor, i. e., E-flat major (“Prekor”, mm. 30–32), just before the start of the third stanza. This significantly corresponds to the modulation to the relative major found at the same point in the traditional urban version of this song. Interestingly, Despić also turns to the Balkan F minor scale in the fifth and longest song of the cycle, “Vragolije”. Although the principal key of this song is formally C major, its functional system is much weaker than most other keys throughout the cycle. Nevertheless, the Balkan F minor, consistently used in the vocal part in the first two stanzas, further oscillates with the harmonic F minor, and, by the end of the fourth stanza, with the parallel key of F major as well. This imbues almost the entire first part of the song with a pleasant atmosphere of refined tonal nuance against the backdrop of a unified F tonal center.

Modality

The use of modes and specific modal harmonic turns represents an important characteristic of the musical language in *Brankova lira*. Given that such harmonizations appear in other compositions by Despić, modality proves to be a significant expressive constant in his harmonic language.³⁰ The song ti-

²⁹ Зечевић, op. cit., 395.

³⁰ Cf. Stefanović, op. cit., 78; Сњежана Ђукић Чамур, op. cit, 320; Срђан В. Тепарић, “Тоналност као симбол: однос језика и стила у композицији Финале за два клавира и четири извођача Дејана Деспића”, у: Валерија Каначки (ур.), *Српски језик, књижевност, уметност: зборник радова са V међународној научној скупи одржаној на Филолошко-уметничком факултету у Крагујевцу, (29–30. X 2010). Књ. 3, Женско писмо / српска музика у европском контексту*, Крагујевац, Филолошко-уметнички факултет – Скупштина града Крагујевца, 2011, 142 [Srđan V. Teparić, “Tonality as a Symbol: The Relationship Between Language and Style in Dejan Despić’s Composition *Finale for Two Pianos and Four Performers*”, in: Valerija Kanački (Ed.), *Serbian Language, Literature, Art: Proceedings of the V International Scholarly Conference Held at the Faculty of Philology and Arts in Kragujevac (29–30 October 2010). Vol. 3, Women’s Writing / Serbian Music in a European Context*]; Atila Sabo, “Pesme iz Mokranjčevih horskih kompozicija u Počasnici Dejana Despića”, u: Miloš Zatkalik (ur.), *U čast profesora Dejana Despića: radovi sa Osmog godišnjeg skupa Katedre za muzičku teoriju, Muzička teorija i analiza 2010*, Beograd, Univerzitet umetnosti – Fakultet muzičke umetnosti, 2012, 162

tled "Pevam" particularly stands out in its use of modes and modal harmonizations. Considering the through-composed, almost rhapsodic form of this song, a specific type of harmonic organization can be considered one of the most important cohesive factors in the piece. In the case of this song, it is modality, which exists throughout the song, from beginning to end, with sporadic interruptions. Regardless of the changes in modal centers and irrespective of the appearance of various modes throughout the song, modality remains a crucial constitutive factor, internally, but also externally, bearing in mind that precisely on this parameter – the consistent use of modal harmonic language – this song distinguishes itself from others in *Brankova lira*. Thanks to the appearance of various modes in the song, keys are substituted by modes, allowing us to speak of a high "modulatory frequency", which, however, is formed by modal configurations rather than tonal ones. From such a complex network of modally constructed segments, three main lines of alternation or oscillation between different modes in the song can be identified. The first line of oscillation is formed by the Dorian mode in E, which the song begins with and which throughout the piece shifts to its two closest centers: the subdominant modal sphere in A and the dominant modal sphere in B (both in their Dorian variants). The second line involves the shifting from the principal mode, the Dorian mode in E, towards the Lydian mode in G. The latter mode represents a relative mode – if we adopt strictly tonal terms – to the Dorian mode in E, given that both scales are based on an identical sequence of tones. This relationship then transfers to the 'purely' tonal sphere, resulting in an oscillation between keys of G major and E minor. At this point, it forms a relationship known as the changeable mode (*peremennyi lad*), particularly at the ends of the first and last stanzas. Thus, the modal-tonal relationship of E-G, as the main harmonic axis of the song, gains a multidimensional meaning. Finally, a kind of parallel mode appears in the song. This is represented by the first modal modulation in the song, from the principal Dorian mode in E to the Mixolydian mode on the same root.³¹ One

[Atila Sabo, "Songs from Mokranjac's Choral Compositions in Dejan Despić's *Počasnica*", in: Miloš Zatkalik (Ed.), *Homage to Professor Dejan Despić: Refereed Proceedings of the Eighth Conference of the Department of Music Theory, Music Theory and Analysis 2010*].

³¹ In 1977, Kornelije Kovač composed the pop song "Pjevam danju, pjevam noću" (I Sing by Day, I Sing by Night), performed by Zdravko Čolić, using this Radičević's poem, adapted to the Ijekavian pronunciation. Two years later, the song was included in the musical of the same name, directed by Jovan Ristić with a screenplay written by Ristić and Dušan Savković. This composition remains one of the most popular songs by this Yugoslav and Serbian pop music singer to this day. The form of Kovač's adaptation of

of the most striking illustrations of the modal conception of the song could be found in a section in the Dorian mode in A, within the first stanza of the song. It is presented through the parallel movement of chords and freer, yet simple, progressions of adjacent diatonic triads and seventh chords, typical of modal harmonic language (Example 3).

Example 3: D. Despić, *Brankova lira*, “Pevam”, for baritone and string quartet, mm. 13–14.

BT $\text{♩} = 80$ *mf*

(hy) to i mo - gu,

Vn I *mp*

Vn II *mp*

VI *mp*

Vc *mp*

Dorian mode
in A: ^oIII IIb^7 t IIb^7 t

Radičević's verses consists of three musically distinct sections, functioning either as two stanzas and a chorus, or as a stanza-bridge-chorus tripartition, a common structure in pop and rock music. What's particularly noteworthy for our analysis, however, is the fact that these distinct sections fully correspond to the three stanzas in Despić's through-composed setting of the same verses. It's as if Despić had Čolić's interpretation in mind when he approached these lyrics more than two decades later. Beyond the broad similarities in musical form, there's also a significant, large-scale tonal resemblance between the two compositions. Both songs are based on a minor mode as their fundamental mode. In both, there's a subtle engagement with the sphere of the relative key, whether through a sequence in the natural minor (which always penetrates the realm of the relative major) in Kovač's song, or through the occasional and unobtrusive oscillation of two 'relative' modes on the same sequence of tones – the Dorian mode in E and the Lydian mode in G – in Despić's song. Thus, both in terms of form and keyship/modality, a subtle correspondence exists between these two settings of Radičević's verses.

Innovations in Expanded Tonality – Secondary Chords in Their New Roles

Secondary chords, generally speaking, represent some of the most important chords in the harmonic language of the cycle of songs *Brankova lira*. In most songs, they appear in the complete range of their usage as they had in the Romantic era: as secondary chords of both the dominant and subdominant functional sides of the tonality. The former are represented by the seventh chords of secondary dominants, and the latter by the half-diminished seventh chords of secondary II degrees. They stand out not only by the sheer quantity of their use but also by their quality, which primarily stems from the unusual constructions in which these chords sometimes appear in these songs, but also from the less conventional ways of their resolution, as well as from their positioning at all crucial points of the musical flow. With such a wide palette of manifestations in the cycle, these chords collectively contribute to a new sound of secondary harmony. Such a sound can only be brought forth by a creator whose compositional language reveals not only 'craftsmanship' empiricism and absolute mastery of all elements of traditional, especially Romantic, harmonic language, but also a perfect and precise theoretical awareness of their significance, role, and scope in the process of the expansion of tonality.

If we exclude the already quite common chords, such as dominant of the dominant, and partially its substitute (the seventh chord on IV#) – which, as in most works based on traditional, albeit greatly expanded, major-minor tonality, also play a significant role in this Despić's cycle – the key harmonic-expressive impetus to the composition, generally speaking, is given by secondary dominants and their substitutes (the secondary VII seventh chords) directed towards the chords with subdominant functions. This is illustrated by an unusually large number of examples in the cycle. Thus, already in the first song, "Čekanje", two prominent and tritone-distanced keys are expanded towards the subdominant tonal sphere (in the principal key of A minor towards the subdominant triad itself /mm. 5–6/, and in E-flat major towards the triad on the II scale degree /m. 11/). Likewise, in the song "K'o i pre", the use of the secondary dominant seventh chord for the subdominant provides a crucial chordal characteristic to the main melodic materials of the song (see Example 1). The fact that this chord appears as many as three times within a four-measure segment, and each time resolves differently, confirms the great potential of its diatonic resolutions, a quality

rarely seen in the history of tonal music (in Example 1, the resolution of the DS seventh chord to VI sixth chord in m. 1; to subdominant seventh chord in m. 2; and to II six-five chord in m. 3).

In the song “Na studencu”, however, the repertoire of secondary chords is transposed to the level of an absolute structure, forming a general sound framework fundamentally traced through the constant alternation of two, essentially, secondary strategies. Primarily, this involves a kind of dominantization of the tonal flow, more precisely, the frequent appearance of dominant seventh chords with a dominant harmonic function. We’re talking about three chords of this type – the diatonic dominant seventh chord and two secondary dominant seventh chords directed towards triads of a subdominant harmonic functions (DS^7 and D_{II}^7) – which continuously appear throughout the song, almost one of them in every measure. While in the rest of the song these chords have more or less standard, traditional resolutions (categorized in theory as perfect /resolution into their temporary tonic/ and deceptive /resolution into an adjacent upper scale degree, mimicking a deceptive cadence/), in the first part of the third stanza, the free resolutions of dominant seventh chords, and generally their prevalence in the harmonic flow, highlight dominantization as the absolute driving force of harmony in the song. Part of this dominantization process includes the appearance of unusual intervals within the construction of these chords. This refers to the appearance of a theoretically ‘inappropriate’ major ninth within the dominant ninth chord for the II scale degree, which, due to the resolution into a minor triad on the II scale degree, should be a minor ninth. Related to this is the appearance of a minor seventh in the secondary VII seventh chord, which, for the same reason, should be diminished (essentially, then, it’s the same pitch, in this case, C-sharp, see Example 4). Such a harmonic solution, given within the conditions of clear tonal shaping and, precisely for that reason, expected to conform to the rules arising from such tonal shaping, not only creates a specific musical atmosphere in the song but also generates a corresponding and, in a harmonic-aesthetic sense, very significant auditory dilemma for the highly harmonically sensitive listener regarding which types of chords he/she could expect as the resolution of the aforementioned secondary chords. It seems all the more unusual and surprising that this composition is signed by an author whose theoretically impeccable discourse in the science of harmony has repeatedly pointed out the appropriate and unchangeable type of ninth and seventh in these chords. As a counterpart to the mentioned dominantization, the composer implements a procedure that

could be described as subdominantization of the harmonic flow. This arises from the also very frequent use of the half-diminished seventh chord, which, except in the described situation in which it represents an unusual kind of secondary VII seventh chord, generally represents a seventh chord of the diatonic or secondary II scale degree. Since the author himself, now in the role of a music theorist, rightly called both of these chords functionally characteristic chords whose structure unequivocally points to the corresponding function, such an identity of these chords continues to clearly manifest in the song, supporting the functionally organized tonal language of the piece: the dominant seventh chord in *Brankova lira* almost regularly acquires the function of a diatonic or secondary dominant, while the half-diminished seventh chord acquires the function of a diatonic or secondary II degree (with the difference that the latter receives its standardized corresponding resolutions much more often than the former).

Example 4: D. Despić, *Brankova lira*, “Na studencu”, for mezzo-soprano and string quartet, mm. 20–24.

The musical score for Example 4 is presented for five parts: Mezzo-Soprano (MS), Violin I (Vn I), Violin II (Vn II), Viola (VI), and Violoncello (Vc). The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 88$ and the initial dynamics are *mp* and *pizz.* The lyrics are: "О-ве ре-чи, слат-ке стре-ле, ми - ну-ше ми гру - ди бе - ле." The score shows a progression of chords: D: VII_6^b , D_{II}^9 , II^7 , VII_{II}^{11} , VII_{II}^2 , II_3^4 , D_7^b , and T . The VII_{II}^{11} and VII_{II}^2 chords are highlighted with red boxes, and an arrow points to the VII_{II}^{11} chord with the text "In the fourth inversion".

At the same time, there's a barely perceptible tension between dominantization, on the one hand, and subdominantization (represented by the seventh

chord on the II scale degree), on the other. This can be understood as a kind of interpretive lens through which the meaning of the song's poetic content is viewed. Just as there's a constant oscillation between these two spheres of the song's tonal system, with neither gaining precedence and leaving the created tension unresolved until the end, so too do we not witness an epilogue to the emotional relationship at the core of the poem: the girl herself, at the end of the song, admits she won't see the young horseman she fell in love with again. After smashing her water jug in exhilaration upon seeing him, she realizes he's gone and asks: *Još od njega leže crepi, / ali gde je onaj lepi?* (*Its shards still lie here, / but where is that handsome one?*). She finally expresses a wish to see him again, but this too will likely be an unfulfilled dream: *Kad bi sada opet došo / ma i ovaj drugi prošo!* (*If only he would come again now, / even if this other one passed!*).

Considering all that's been said, the song "Na studentu" can serve as a paradigm for the entire system of harmonic relationships within the macro-form of the *Brankova lira* cycle. While elements of both Romantic and Impressionistic styles are discernible in the musical language of Despić's cycle, and despite our attempts to categorize his style as Neoclassicism to better understand the resemantization of these techniques in a new era, perhaps the truth lies in an entirely different kind of understanding: one that views the composer's style as an authentic 'Despić's Romanticism'. In this sense, it's a unique form of Romanticism where the new is, in fact, the old expressed in a novel way.

Harmony as a Means of Interpreting the Poetic Text

In one of his reflections on his vocal lyrical oeuvre, Dejan Despić stated the following: "It goes without saying that when one allows oneself to develop new shapes of one's own and different wholes based on *someone else's* material, such a person tries to do it as meaningfully as possible, guiding his thought as a dramaturgical thread along new paths of meaning and associations."³² These new paths of meaning fundamentally imply opening up possibilities for music to interpret the poetic text, something that has been repeatedly proven in analyses of other lyrical vocal works of Dejan Despić, published in the past few decades. If we start from what the musical content of the songs from *Brankova lira* offers, it's not an exaggeration to say that it is inherently conceived not only to enable interpretation but, as Lawrence

³² Despić, "My Vocal Mosaics", op. cit., 234.

Kramer emphasizes, it “must be made to yield to understanding”,³³ meaning it opens itself up to interpretation. Although examples of harmony being used as a means of interpreting the meaning of the poetic text can be found in almost all the songs of this cycle, it seems that the most striking instances are presented in the songs “Čekanje” and “K'o i pre”, both based on parts of Radičević's poem “Jadna draga”.

In the song “Čekanje”, multiple elements of the musical language contribute to a specific interpretation of its poetic text's meaning. This interpretation fundamentally rests on symmetry, which manifests on several musical planes and corresponds to symmetry on the textual level. The thematic symmetry isn't just a result of the reprise – the repetition of the thematic material introduced at the beginning of the song. It also stems from *how* that repetition is executed. Specifically, the repetition of the thematic material assigned to the mezzo-soprano and baritone at the end of the song brings a change in the repercussion of that material, creating a distinct thematic symmetry: the melody given to the mezzo-soprano at the beginning is given to the baritone at the end, and vice versa. Additionally, the two-part free polyphony formed by these two voices maintains an identical one-measure distance between their entrances in the reprise (compare mm. 1–7 and mm. 19–23 in “Čekanje”). The tonal symmetry is relatively easy to observe. It is marked by a movement from the principal key of A minor, through the relative key of C major, to E-flat major (this key and a principal one are at a distance of a tritone) in the middle of the song, and then a return via C major to A minor. (The almost perfect tonal symmetry is only ‘broken’ by F major appearing between E-flat major and C major.) All these tonal language procedures correspond to the symmetry in the poetic text, and together they enable the interpretation of the textual meaning. The composer's intervention in the original poetic text – specifically, the decision to repeat the first line of the song at the end, and, related to this, the profoundly significant decision to end the song with the word “čekanje” (waiting) – indicates the perception of this action as a permanent category within the song's semantic sphere. In other words, it suggests that the waiting will most likely not have a happy outcome and will forever remain just that – only waiting. Furthermore, the ellipsis at the end of this final word symbolically reinforces this semantic interpretation, which is supported on the harmonic plane by an almost madrigalistic gesture: the appearance of a

³³ Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – Oxford, University of California Press, 1990, 6.

dominant chord at the song's conclusion. In this way, the form remains – traditionally speaking – harmonically open, almost perfectly representing waiting as an endless, and thus open, process. At the same time, the thus created circling of music and poetic text, a kind of *perpetuum mobile* within the song, as a reflection of the pulsation of silent yet infinite sorrow in the tacit meaning of the song, allows for an outgoing interpretation that is complemented by the form's closedness, not its openness: circling is an endless process, but it is also a closed structure. It seems as though the composer here additionally 'explained' the poet himself, interpreting the unwritten epilogue of the poem – that there is no longer hope for a reunion with the beloved person.

The song "K'o i pre" also offers an outstanding example of the interpretive role of harmony, and indeed melody, in relation to the poetic text. This sentimental love song, almost a lament for a loved one who will never return, is written in just ten lines, which Despić structures into five short melo-poetic stanzas. Each stanza ends with almost the same words, from which the song takes its name, referring to past, happy times. However, this figure of speech, epistrophe, subtly changes the given phrase at the end of the sentence over the five stanzas, which is significant from an interpretive analysis perspective. The first three stanzas end with the line *k'o i pre* (*like before*), while the last two conclude with a very similar, yet different, line: *kao pre* (*as before*).³⁴ This seemingly insignificant linguistic change not only conceals an interpretation of the poetic text but also gains a musical, specifically harmonic, correlative that further enhances the poetic meaning. When the statement in a stanza ends with *k'o i pre*, it conveys a 'simple' nostalgia for past times, mentioning various elements of a typical pastoral ambiance, such as "wind", "linden", "spring", and "leafy mountain" (e.g., *Vetrić piri, lipa miri, / k'o i pre. / Vrelo žubori po lisnoj gori, / k'o i pre* – *A breeze wafts, the linden smells, / like before. / The spring murmurs on the leafy mountain, / like before*). This suggests that the person singing the song has essentially not changed (*Ja sam mlada ovde sada, / k'o i pre. – I am young here now, / like before.*). However, when the statement in a stanza ends with *kao pre*, there is a shift and a change in atmosphere. Not only is it communicated through negation (*Sunce bega – The sun flees* in the fourth, or *Nema sunca milenoga – There is no beloved sun* in the fifth stanza, and *nema njega – he is not there* in the fourth,

³⁴ This change in epistrophe also occurs in Radičević's verses, with Despić extending the original couplet in the fifth stanza into a triplet by repeating the epistrophe, but in the form as it appears in the fourth stanza, i.e., *kao pre*.

or *nema moga voljenoga* – *my beloved is not there* in the fifth stanza) that the idyllic situation suggested by the first three stanzas is no longer what it was, but it also expresses sorrow that the beloved person will never return. Musically, the composer similarly ‘sonifies’ this change in the poetic epistrophe. The first three stanzas end with identical harmonic and melodic cadences: the harmonic ending of these stanzas is marked by a half-cadence with the same chord progression of five chords in expanded G major. In the solo voice part, melodic cadences in these stanzas end with the same melodic movement, containing a descending fifth and ascending second (H-E-F#; see measures 3 and 4 of Example 1). The last two stanzas, however, bring different melodic and harmonic cadences. In the fourth stanza, there is a modal interchange to G minor and the use of entirely new chords such as the chords of the diatonic and Phrygian II degree (Example 5). In the solo voice part, the melodic cadence is marked by a descending trichordal movement within Phrygian G minor (B-flat – A-flat – G). Finally, in the cadence of the last stanza, there is a return to G major. The same or similar chords of the extended key of G major appear as in the first three stanzas, but in a different order, while the identical fifth-second melodic movement is retained. In the subsequent repetition of the phrase *kao pre*, the content of the harmonic accompaniment is completely changed, and the motive in the vocal melody is augmented (Example 6). In this way, the change in the harmonic and melodic cadences of the last two stanzas, relative to the first three, supports the corresponding change in atmosphere expressed in the poetic text. This ‘decrecendo’ of mood is subtly interpreted through carefully conceived key architectonics: the song slowly transitions from the relatively optimistic atmosphere of the initial key of G major to the somber environment of G minor, where it ultimately ends. Based on these examples alone, it becomes clear that what Ana Stefanović correctly concluded in her paper on Despić’s songs set to the verses of Ivo Andrić holds true for *Brankova lira* as well: “Despić’s musical rhetoric (...), precisely thanks to harmony, is always also hermeneutics, an interpretation of poetry.”³⁵

³⁵ Ana Stefanović, “Pesme Dejana Despića na Andrićeve stihove”, u: Miloš Zatkalik (ur.), *U čast profesora Dejana Despića: radovi sa Osmog godišnjeg skupa Katedre za muzičku teoriju, Muzička teorija i analiza 2010*, Beograd, Univerzitet umetnosti – Fakultet muzičke umetnosti, 2012, 114 [Ana Stefanović, “Dejan Despić’s Songs Set to Andrić’s Verses”, in: Miloš Zatkalik (Ed.), *Homage to Professor Dejan Despić: Refereed Proceedings of the Eighth Conference of the Department of Music Theory, Music Theory and Analysis 2010*].

Example 5: D. Despić, *Brankova lira*, “K’o i pre”, for mezzo-soprano and string quartet, mm. 24–25.

The musical score is for a mezzo-soprano (MS) and a string quartet (Vn I, Vn II, VI, Vc) in 3/4 time, key of D major. The tempo is marked $\text{♩} = 66$. The lyrics are in Cyrillic: "пре, ка - о пре! Не - ма". The score includes dynamic markings (*mf*, *mp*, *p*) and articulation (accents, slurs). The string parts feature a melodic line with a triplet in the final measure. Chord symbols are provided at the bottom: g: VI, $\text{t}_{\text{5}}^{\text{6}}$, N^{6} , II^{7} , F^{7} , Ds^{7} .

MS *mf* $\text{♩} = 66$ *mp* *p* 3
пре, ка - о пре! Не - ма

Vn I *mf* *p*

Vn II *mf* *p*

VI *mf* *p*

Vc *mf* 3 *p*

g: VI $\text{t}_{\text{5}}^{\text{6}}$ N^{6} II^{7} F^{7} Ds^{7}

Example 6: D. Despić, *Brankova lira*, “K'o i pre”, for mezzo-soprano and string quartet, mm. 30–35.

The musical score is for a mezzo-soprano and string quartet. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 66$. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The score includes the following parts and markings:

- MS (Mezzo-Soprano):** Lyrics: "ка - о пре... ка - о пре!". Dynamics: *f*, *mf*, *slentando*.
- Vn I (Violin I):** Dynamics: *f*, *mf*, *p*.
- Vn II (Violin II):** Dynamics: *f*, *mf*, *p*. Includes a triplet of eighth notes.
- Vi (Viola):** Dynamics: *f*, *mf*, *p*. Includes a triplet of eighth notes.
- Vc (Violoncello):** Dynamics: *f*, *mf*, *p*. Includes a triplet of eighth notes.

Chord progressions at the bottom:

G: DS⁷ S II⁶ M̃ VII⁶ II⁴ S₃ Ds ⁹II⁶ D g: D⁶ D 7

Conclusion

Dejan Despić's song cycle *Brankova lira* for mezzo-soprano, baritone, and string quartet, Op. 150, stands as one of the pinnacles in his vocal lyrical oeuvre, a genre he cultivated for over six decades. The ways in which he used chord progressions, particularly chromatic and secondary chords, and specific modal harmonic turns, attest to his mastery in crafting a musical language that is both rich and expressive. The harmonic language of *Brankova lira* demonstrates an extraordinary vitality of major-minor key, a quality not frequently encountered in the music of the late 20th century. Despić successfully injects new vigor into seemingly exhausted tonal harmony by employing free chord progressions and a carefully balanced apparent polyphony. This approach results in unusual and bold solutions in harmony, creating a unique musical expression that deeply resonates with the poetic content. To the extent that his harmony in these songs affirmed the Romantic stylistic model, it also departed from it: when standard secondary chords were used, they appeared in unusual progressions; when secondary chords were used in conventional progressions, they were employed with less common or less

typical chordal construction; and when modal harmonization was applied, it served as a complete substitution for tonal harmonization, taking on all its expressive parameters. And so forth. This is why his Romanticism in these songs is simultaneously Neoromanticism. Overall, Dejan Despić's lyrical vocal music represents a significant contribution to Serbian art music of the 20th century and at the turn of the 21st century, where harmony and poetry merge into a unique whole that achieves essential interference with the enduring verses of Serbian poetry. Through his authentic style of *Lied*, enriched by the chamber sound of the string quartet – and *Brankova lira* can rightly be considered a paradigm of such a style – Dejan Despić reveals a profound synthesis of harmonic and poetic principles. In this synthesis, music not only accompanies but actively shapes the meaning of the poetic text. If his music, as he himself stated, can be considered “unspoken poetry” – clearly reflected in his ability to convey deep emotions and meanings from poetic texts through musical means – then the music of *Brankova lira* is not merely written on poetry; it is itself *a form of (unspoken) poetry*.

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Summary

This paper examines the specific characteristics of the harmonic language in Dejan Despić's song cycle *Brankova lira*, Op. 150, for mezzo-soprano, baritone, and string quartet. The cycle is set to selected poems by the Serbian Romantic poet Branko Radičević, with compositions alternating between solo voice songs and duets. Adapting these poems for solo or duet performance with string quartet accompaniment necessitated interventions in the poetic texts, including omitting stanzas or making specific linguo-stylistic reformulations of the original. Each song in the cycle generally

adheres consistently to a chosen metric pattern, with horizontal polymetry being rare. The texture primarily oscillates between a less strict homophony and a distinct, apparent polyphony in its Neoromantic version, stemming from the partial emancipation of the individual string quartet instrument lines. The stylistic position of Despić's *Brankova lira* is primarily rooted in a Romantic musical expression, derived from the work's fundamental compositional rhetoric, yet shaped by Neoromantic and even Neoimpressionistic stylistic techniques. This stylistic imprint largely results from the manifestation of diverse aspects of its harmonic language. Third relationships between keys form the main characteristic of the cycle's harmonic language. These are realized either through the concept known as the changeable mode (the oscillation between relative keys) or through chromatic third relationships between different keys. These procedures also led to the emergence of the "double-tonic complex" as a special concept in building the tonal structure of certain songs, where a constant oscillation between two tonics occurs. The Balkan minor scale, consistently rooted in F, represents the most prominent specific scale of the cycle. It functions as the melodic basis for as many as three songs, and in one of them, it also serves as the basis for chord construction in the harmonic accompaniment, a rare occurrence in tonal practice. The use of modes and specific modal harmonic turns is an important characteristic of *Brankova lira*'s musical language. At the macro-formal level, a particular mode can become the main expressive means, almost completely substituting tonality as the primary system of musical linguistics in the piece. Secondary chords, primarily seventh chords of secondary dominants and secondary II degrees, are among the most significant chords in this song cycle. They stand out not only by their quantity but also by the wide range of ways they are applied: from unusual chordal construction and less conventional resolutions to their strategic positioning at all crucial, almost dramaturgical, points in the musical flow of individual songs. This pervasive elaboration of secondary, as well as diatonic, chords of dominant and subdominant functions has also led to a specific dualism of dominantization and subdominantization, which is a key determinant of *Brankova lira*'s harmonic language. Despić's style is characterized by a refined and profound interpretation of poetry. His music is, as he himself stated, "unspoken poetry", clearly reflected in his ability to convey deep emotions and meanings from poetic texts through musical means. Both melody and harmony participate in the interpretive process; they not only support the basic meaning but sometimes lead to the understanding of entirely new meanings within the poetic text.