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MILD TEA, MADE OF AIR FOR FLUTE, VIOLONCELLO, AND PIANO BY SVETLANA SAVIĆ

Abstract: *Mild Tea, Made of Air*, a piece for flute, violoncello, and piano (2024) by Svetlana Savić, explores possible ways of working with the text as a basic means of construction in shaping a work of instrumental music. A vocal part set to a poem by Saša Radojčić, *Tea Made of Air*, composed in the first phase of work on the piece but then omitted from its final version, constitutes an imaginative procedure on the author's part, especially in the context of the role of text and voice in her creative poetics. That is why the purpose of this paper is precisely to demonstrate the peculiar strategy of that poetic reduction, whereby the work's textual template is sublimated into a sound devoid of linguistic articulation, but – with multiple poetic layers! – woven into the very compositional logic of the work.

Keywords: Svetlana Savić, *Mild Tea, Made of Air*, Saša Radojčić, Srđan Hofman

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Mild Tea, Made of Air, a piece for piano, flute, and violoncello by Svetlana Savić, was composed in October 2024, shortly before the 33rd International Review of Composers in Belgrade. The work was premièred on the second day of the Review, in the Great Hall of the Students' Cultural Centre. The performers included the pianist Neda Hofman Sretenović, violoncellist Srđan Sretenović, and flautist Marko Sretenović, members of the Construction Site Contemporary Music Ensemble. Given that Serbia's music scene had been left in 2021 by the composer and professor emeritus Srđan Hofman, who would have celebrated his 80th birthday that October, when the Review takes place, both the concert and piece were dedicated to him, brought together under the title of *Mirrors: The Musical World of Srđan Hofman. On the 80th Anniversary of his Birth*.¹ That evening, the programme included works by Hofman's former students, specially composed for the occasion in his honour.

One of those pieces was the work by Svetlana Savić² that forms the subject of this paper.³ It was inspired by the poetry of Saša Radojčić, that is, his poem *Tea Made of Air*, with its peculiar approach to text and voice, which is evident in it, playing a crucial role in the Savić's creative poetics,⁴ although it is manifested here in a somewhat different way. And it is precisely this approach that gave rise to this short, compact, but multilayered piece that sheds new light on the composer's imagination in re-signifying the poetic and the musical and forging deep links between them.

Before we delve into a more detailed analysis of the piece, we will take a look at some basic poetic postulates of the composer's oeuvre, in order to discover a possible key for reading her work. Those poetic postulates con-

¹ A monograph under the same title and marking the same occasion was published by the Faculty of Music (Belgrade, 2024).

² Svetlana Savić was in Prof. Hofman's composition class as an undergraduate and doctoral student at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, and this is the third piece she has dedicated to him. The first two are *Lament* for violin, violoncello, piano, and electronics (2021) and *Three Autumn Nights* for piano and electronics (2022).

³ Svetlana Savić, *Blagi čaj vazdušni* for flute, violoncello, and piano, musical score, Belgrade, the author's edition, 2024.

⁴ Dunja Savić, *Odlike poetike Svetlane Savić sagledane na primeru elektronskih ostvarenja sa glasom* (*Sirota, tužna Don Huanova kći; Soneti, Zarobljena, O vukovima i vozovima*) ["Characteristics of Svetlana Savić's Poetics Surveyed as Exemplified by her Electronic Vocal Works (*Poor, Sad Don Juan's Daughter; Sonnets, Trapped, About Wolves and Trains*)"], unpublished master's thesis, Faculty of Music, Department of Musicology, Belgrade, 2021 (supervisor: Assist. Prof. Biljana Leković, Ph.D.).

cern, on the one hand, the text as the basis in almost all of her oeuvre so far, which one may trace all the way back to her student works, and its multiple uses – as an emotional and creative motive, as the main sonic/musical potential for deriving her musical materials, and finally, as the carrier of narrativity; on the other hand, her choice of instruments – in this case the flute, piano, and violoncello – which are likewise peculiar to Savić. These instruments indeed form the basis of her sonic universe; instruments whose timbres may vary and include electronic variants and yet, with tonal and timbral potentials suitable not only for combining them with the human voice, but also with one another. Although in this instance the voice is omitted, the violoncello and flute appear to assume its role, not, however, by transposing the vocal part into one of their parts, but chiefly by reminding us of the voice with their sonic qualities. This is enhanced by the way different techniques are used for producing tones and sounds (flageolets/harmonics, flat tones, blowing air into the flute without producing tones, blowing air into the flute without completely covering the embouchure, causing the air to “split”). Given the work’s reductive means of expression, as well as equal treatment of the expressive means and roles of the flute, violoncello, and piano, and, finally, their specific functions in shaping the texture of the piece, one is under the impression that the composer used tools for a “literal” translation of the title of the work into the language of music.

Although in the context of *Mild Tea, Made of Air*, one may speak, conditionally, of all three modes of employing the text, as well as the absence of the voice as the main tool for materializing a piece of text in music, the focus of our thinking here moves to the voice, that is, its absence, and the function or meaning of that absence in this work. When she talks about the voice as “[...] an instrument with which we are born and can do anything: communicate, ask, give, say what we feel”,⁵ the composer perceives it as an “extension” of her own self.⁶ Linking the human voice to herself, in “first person singular”,⁷ to her “mother’s singing when she was a child”,⁸ Savić reveals deep layers of herself and her approach to composing, realizing that music and the voice enable her to speak in the very act of creating perhaps more “loudly” than she

⁵ Ksenija Stevanović, “The Sound is My Personal Diary. Conversation with Svetlana Savić”, *New Sound International Journal of Music*, 56, II/2020, 5 [Ксенија Стевановић, “Звук је мој лични дневник. Разговор са Светланом Савић”].

⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸ Ibid.

otherwise could, in line with her calm and quiet nature.⁹ She takes the female voice, ubiquitous in her vocal pieces, as “the voice of nature”,¹⁰ sensing “great strength” in it¹¹ and a link between a female voice and choir (in *Poor, Sad Don Juan’s Daughter*).¹² Another factor causing Savić to opt for writing vocal music lies in the suitability of the voice to a “laboratory” type of approach. That would mostly apply to working with recorded voices, which is not the case in *Mild Tea, Made of Air*, which is why we will leave her other views on this subject for another discussion.

Apart from that, when the voice is reserved for textual delivery, Savić “reanimates” the natural sonority of words or, less often, establishes a traditional relationship with the text. Therefore, concerning her vocal works, we may discuss the voice as an external, phenomenal entity, the voice as a part of music, i.e. a musical instrument, as well as symbolically: the voice *qua* personal expression, internal being, internal *I*. This internal *I*, constant but also variable in its modes of existence, is “revealed” in every work by Savić individually. First, the voice is part of a musical idea, the voice performs the author’s idea, the voice is the instrument that will most faithfully represent her ideas. On the other hand, the voice of Svetlana Savić is indeed the source of her music. It is an emotional liberation. The internal voice of Svetlana Savić is put forward and made visible through a musical idea. When she is not composing, then “I lose my voice, I love [having] the power to express myself”.¹³ In that regard, we “hear” the author’s internal voice when it is at its most discernible, transparent, and loud – when it communicates with us through music. At times her voice is solitary, isolated, and intended for a soloist (this is the case, for instance, in *Poor, Sad Don Juan’s Daughter, Trapped*, and *About Wolves and Trains*); at times her voice exists in a community, through a women’s choir or small ensemble or duet (likewise in *Poor, Sad... and Trapped*; in *Sonnets* there are different and more complex combinations of interrelating the voice/voices due to their electronic modification (of male and female voices alike), while at certain times, it exists as laughter, a sob, moan, cry, scream, weeping, lamenting (in *Trapped*).¹⁴ However, given that, specifically, *Mild Tea, Made of Air* features none of those three modes of

⁹ Ibid., 5.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Dunja Savić, *ibid.*

working with the voice discussed above, since it is omitted from the final score, this type of treatment, that is, its (physical) absence may be understood as disappearance/departure/vanishing (which is certainly the meaning of the poetic template used in the piece),¹⁵ as the arrival of silence and sorrow or as a sort of lamentation without words. As the author put it herself, the work was also written “for the hidden vocal part that sings the verses, but is not present in the score. The music continually follows the narrative and atmosphere of the poem, so, even though there are no words in the score, everything else is there”.¹⁶ In other words, the verses were indeed set to music¹⁷ and the remaining instruments’ parts were shaped accordingly, but the author, for now, has held on to her idea of “hiding” the vocal part.¹⁸

The poetic content of *Tea Made of Air* concerns a departure, leaving one’s home, street, space, odours that make up everyday life. The title is poetic and evokes something that is at once concrete and elusive, generated by adding the adjective *mild* before *tea made of air*.

In such a title, *mild* suggests tenderness and the almost fragile nature of sound; *tea* may be interpreted as a symbol of something that is intimate, “ritual” and contemplative – a moment of attention and silence – while the quality of something that is *made of air* suggests something weightless, something that “floats” and passes by. These elements shape a sort of ritual that is rhythmically slow, reminding one of drinking warm tea. The entire piece works as a sound image that “breathes”, which is enhanced by ample spacing between musical events, that is, by separating the instruments’ individual appearances with bigger breaks, by the predominantly *piano* dynamics almost at the lower limit of audibility, opening space for a deep internal experience and an attentive, careful listening to details. Calmly and slowly, the opening section lends shape to musical events, first in the violoncello part (sustained notes with trills and harmonics); this transparent music material in *piano* dynamics is set up in the opening bars of the work (Example 1); then, it is

¹⁵ Saša Radojčić, ed. Alen Bašić, Kulturni centar Novog Sada, 2023.

¹⁶ Programme notes from the 33rd Review of Composers.

¹⁷ The source of this information is my personal correspondence with Svetlana Savić conducted in February and March 2025. The fact that the vocal melodic line was completed but then omitted stimulates many ambiguous interpretations.

¹⁸ The stipulations for works to be performed at the concert dedicated to Prof. Srđan Hofman did not include vocal music as an option, which certainly directed the development of the composer’s idea and physical omission of the voice. However, she has emphasized that one may glimpse the presence of a voice singing the text.

joined by a similar passage in the flute part that brings an airy quality, producing tones and glissandi only occasionally, which generates the impression of “breathing” and spatiality. The piano part, as the most massive instrument, is likewise reductive, without a harmonic function but with a percussive function instead. The piano part is shaped in such a way that its appearance initiates movement, since it features short and quick passages comprising only a few notes, which then sound together in a chord that encompasses the entire phrase, although this function would later on change.

Totalling 61 bars, the musical content of the work is shaped as a binary form with a coda, which corresponds to the tripartite form of the poem by Radojčić.¹⁹ The **first section** corresponds to the verses of the first and second textual units²⁰ and may be divided in two smaller segments: **a** (bb. 1–21) and **a₁** (bb. 22–32); the **second section** is an extended musical period (bb. 33–50), matching the following two textual units,²¹ while the **third section** is a musical sentence comprising 10 bars, which forms the coda and formally corresponds to the closing lines of the poem.

The opening segment of the first section (bb. 1–21) – marked with a tempo and character indication that reads *Very slow, freely*, which remains dominant almost throughout the piece, except in the second section, which is subtitled *animato* – rests in the first four bars on the note *c*, which first appears in the violoncello part (the second section adds natural harmonics, which become a permanent presence in the subsequent course of the piece), then in the flute part, with *air*, which instructs the flautist to apply his breath without producing a specific tone, alternating with *natural*, that is, producing tones. Following a glissando in the flute part (first in bar 7, then in bar 11), the piano enters the musical flow for the first time, featuring a quintuplet.

¹⁹ The schematic rendering of the poem highlighting the musical divisions of the piece comes from the author of the work.

²⁰ The first and second textual segment:

I closed the door / turned the key twice / and now I'm standing / hesitant to go down the stairs / for I know / I won't be coming back / to this small town / never again will I walk / through the door I / just closed / and locked / I won't be walking the street / lined with old linden trees / whose fragrance I already feel.

Saša Radojčić, *ibid.*

²¹ The third and fourth textual units:

Mild tea made of air / a remedy for melancholy / I breathe it in slowly / it fills me / giving me new strength / to fight against nonsense / in that fight sometimes / I win.

Saša Radojčić, *ibid.*

This movement in the piano part (alternating quintuplets, triplets, and sextuplets) is activated in a short timespan, stopping right before the beginning of *a₁*, in the first section mentioned above (bb. 22–32). The content of this segment is similar to the preceding one, except that it is repeated on different pitches and with some minimal changes of rhythm, while an additional difference concerns the inclusion of the piano in the musical flow with the marking that reads *block strings* (b. 28), enhancing at that moment the sonic equality of all three parts.

The second part (bb. 33–50) brings a contrast in terms of character, texture, in melodic-rhythmic terms, as well as on a semantic level. The section marked *animato* features a different, more lively and agile character, intended only for the piano, rhythmically more stable, with a pronounced waltz rhythm in the left-hand part serving as the basis for brief melodic moves in the right-hand part, which is further developed and texturally complicated in the homophonic treatment of the musical tissue in the subsequent course of the work. In the overall context of the work as a whole, at this point we must mention a certain postmodernist procedure (such procedures are evident in previous works by Svetlana Savić as well, especially in *Sonnets*, her doctoral artistic project). By all intents and purposes, the central section represents a pseudo-quotation. The piano's solo introjection following the preceding finely arced musical thought arrives unexpectedly and is indeed a sort of "excerpt" from a different kind of music, whose origin and affiliation we cannot quite locate but which, in this case, judging from its harmonic language and leading melodic line, corresponds to minimalism. In order better to understand this section, let us remember that the author herself, in the process of writing the piece, had, at this spot, the following segment of the poem in mind: *mild tea made of air / a remedy for melancholy / I breathe it in slowly / it fills me / giving me new strength / to fight against nonsense / in that fight sometimes I win*. Therefore, fresh musical content entirely matches the mood of Radojčić's lines and represents hope in change, with this change being initiated in the music as well, by an ingenious stroke on the composer's part. After eight bars in the solo piano part, with a brief introjection from the violoncello and flute (bb. 41–43) that belongs to the motive familiar from the opening of the piece, with the same tempo indication of *very slow*, the same dynamic and character plain from the beginning is established again, but this time in a compressed form. The abrupt break, i.e. beginning of an external extension comprising the following 18 bars until the beginning of the coda, grows in importance by virtue of arriving precisely after that brief interpola-

tion. The chordal setup with a prominent top part, based on material presented before and once again without the violoncello and flute may be interpreted in the overall context of the piece as a final initiation of movement in contrast to the predominantly static musical flow up to that point.

The third segment or coda (bb. 51–61) is informed in the flute part by a reductive version of the motive from the opening bars of the piece, reducing the flute's melodic line to four notes (**e²**, **g¹**, **b¹**, **e³**). That said, in the remaining two parts one may note new musical material (Example 3). In the piano part only the right hand is active, performing short gracenotes and ornaments, while the violoncello part consists of pizzicato harmonics in crotchets. It is interesting that at this moment all three instruments are heard together during a longer period of time (that is, throughout the third segment), while the coda's specificity also stems from the violoncello and piano's respective parts being at first close in terms of tonal quality (it is almost impossible to distinguish between a pizzicato (i.e. plucked) harmonic in the violoncello part and the short gracenotes in the piano part) and, besides, they are also close in terms of compositional and technical treatment: when the violoncello's melodic line ascends, the melodic line in the piano part descends, and vice versa. The rest of the piece goes by in ever softer dynamics, its character calming down, while all three instruments come together in their top registers and rather elegantly, with light movements amid a translucent texture, the piece "evaporates" into silence, the way it began.

Analysing *Mild Tea, Made of Air* for flute, violoncello, and piano by Svetlana Savić once again sheds light on the most important elements of her creative poetics. One of the work's key aspects is the complex poetic position of the text as a disembodied but structural and semantically quite prominent factor. The text, therefore, served as initial inspiration for the making of the work, as well as the vocal line made during the composition phase. They were then removed from the final version of the musical structure and score, with these procedures pointing to an important poetic gesture: transforming the text into a purely musical experience, devoid of semantic specificity, but fully submerged in it. That means that the text, although absent on the level of the score, is nonetheless present in the very fabric of the piece – in its choice of materials and means of expression, in setting up and shaping its character, as well as in the direction of its musical flow and phrasing.

In other words, conceived in this way, the piece implements a peculiar strategy of poetic reduction, wherein its textual material is sublimated into

sonic matter, bereft of linguistic articulation, but “coloured” by the poetic “impulse” active in the compositional logic itself.

As for the omitted voice, that is, the physical absence of the voice and text, it commands a double symbolic value: on the one hand, it points to the transience, fragility, and ineffability of the poetic content, while, on the other hand, placing the listener in the active position of an interpreter, who fills the void of the missing voice with their own listening experience. On that level, the work appears to be an acoustic emanation of the poetic text, its echo that demands no articulation, but only internal “reading” on the listener’s part. Abandoning the text embodied in the voice that would perform it is not just a compositional decision, but also a poetic standpoint that problematizes the boundaries between word and sound, presence and absence, materiality and spirituality.

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Summary

This paper explores the role of poetry in *Mild Tea, Made of Air* (2024), an instrumental piece for flute, violoncello, and piano by Svetlana Savić. Special attention is paid to Savić’s creative procedure whereby the text of *Tea Made of Air*, a poem by Saša Radojčić, originally served as the basis for the piece, but was later omitted from its final version. This reduction of the vocal part is not about discarding the text, but transforming its function – poetry remains essentially present in the work’s sonic and formal structure, despite the absence of linguistic articulation. Poetry, as an important element in the creative poetics of Svetlana Savić, performs multiple roles: it is an emotional and creative impulse, source of musical ideas, and carrier of narrativity. In the case of *Mild Tea, Made of Air*, musical expression represents a sublimation of the text, that is, title and content of Radojčić’s poem and one of the possible ways of “translating” the text to music, both by expressive means and by articulating a musical logic in line with the tripartite structure of the poetic whole in terms of form and character.

The paper links this piece with earlier vocal works by the same author (*Sonnets; Poor, Sad Don Juan's Daughter; Trapped; Orpheus in the Capital City*), where the lyrics played a central role. However, *Mild Tea, Made of Air* brings a new quality: its poetic content is transposed into a purely instrumental musical environment, where its absence becomes a layer of meaning in its own right. Since the paper points to an example of a specific strategy of poetic reduction, where a text is inserted into the compositional matrix not as “silent” or “invisible”, but as the fundamental basis of musical articulation, space opens up for surveying the broader issue of the relationship between text and music – not only as structural, but also as poetic and aesthetic principles of Savić's creative poetics.

Appendix 1:

Tea Made of Air

I closed the door
turned the key twice
and now I'm standing
hesitant to go down
the stairs

for I know
I won't be coming back
to this small town

never again will I walk
through the door that I
just closed
and locked

I won't be walking the street
lined with old linden trees
whose fragrance I can already feel

mild tea, made of air
a remedy for melancholia

I breathe it in slowly
it fills me
giving me new strength
to fight against nonsense
in that fight sometimes
I win

but not now
not in this poem

Saša Radojčić, *Tobogan*, Kulturni centar Novog Sada, 2023.

Example 1: Svetlana Savić, *Mild Tea, Made of Air* (bb. 1–3)

Very slow, freely

Flute

Violoncello

Piano

Example 2: Svetlana Savić, *Mild Tea, Made of Air* (bb. 34–38)

34 Animato ♩=56

5

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

con Ped.

Example 3: Svetlana Savić, *Mild Tea, Made of Air* (bb. 53–56)

53 ♩=48

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.