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SYMPHONIC POEM *NIKOLA TESLA – PREDAWN* BY STEVAN DIVJAKOVIĆ

Abstract: The Serbian scientist and inventor Nikola Tesla (1856–1943) remains at the center of interest within the scientific community even today, as his inventions continue to be relevant – perhaps even more so than in the time they were created. Tesla’s personality also continues to intrigue the world of art. Numerous works bearing his name, including books dedicated to him, visual artworks, and multimedia projects testify to the continuous effort of artists to express their admiration for this genius in various ways. Among the Serbian composers inspired by Tesla is the Vojvodina-based Stevan Divjaković (1953). In his symphonic poem *Nikola Tesla – Predawn*, conceived in a developmental form, he employs a distinctive framing technique reminiscent of cinematographic art. This approach gives the work notable expressive flexibility typ-

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ical of applied music, thereby granting it, in addition to a concert life, further potential to become part of various multimedia projects.

Keywords: Nikola Tesla, Stevan Divjaković, symphonic poem.

The Serbian scientist and innovator Nikola Tesla (1856–1943) continues to be a subject of interest within scientific circles, as his inventions remain relevant even today – perhaps even more so than when they were first discovered. Tesla's personality also continues to intrigue the world of art. Numerous projects bearing his name, including books dedicated to him, visual artworks, and multimedia events testify to the constant effort of artists to express, in various ways, their admiration for the achievements of this genius. If we set aside cinema – which in the past two decades has produced at least three notable works featuring Tesla¹ – as well as fictional and nonfiction publications, which offer even more examples throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries,² and instead direct our attention to the field of art music, we may observe that significant works have also emerged in this domain.

Since the beginning of the new millennium, several sources have mentioned the two-act opera *Tesla – Lightning in His Hand* (2003) by Constantine Koukias,³ a dramatization of Tesla's life with a libretto by Marianne Fisher, featuring soloists, choir, and orchestra, and incorporating one of the first electronic instruments – the Theremin – as well as sound effects of “electric discharges” produced by the so-called Tesla Coil.⁴ Another work is the vocal

¹ *The Prestige* (2006, directed by Christopher Nolan), *Tesla* (2015, directed by Michael Almereyda), *The Current War* (2017, directed by Alfonso Gomez-Rejon) – to mention just a few titles.

² Among the sources, it is worth mentioning *Prodigal Genius: The Extraordinary Life of Nikola Tesla* by Pulitzer Prize winner John Joseph O'Neill (Ivan Washburn, 1944), who was a friend of Tesla; and *Wizard: The Life and Times of Nikola Tesla* (Citadel Press, 1996) by Marc Seifer, who consulted archival documentation, including materials held by the FBI. In the realm of fiction, a prominent example is Vladimir Pištalo's novel *Tesla: A Portrait Among Masks* (Agora, 2008), for which he received the NIN Award, and which Nebojša Bradić adapted and directed as the stage play *Tesla, Izumetnik* (Serbian National Theatre, Novi Sad, 2022). The music for this production was composed by Aleksandra Vrebalov.

³ Cf. Constantine Koukias, *Australian Music Centre* website, <https://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/artist/koukias-constantine>, accessed June 8, 2025.

⁴ This refers to an electronic discharge accompanied by a characteristic sound, which

cycle *In My Mind's Eye: Songs of Nikola Tesla* (2015) by Kenneth Froelich, written for tenor and electronics, with text by Allison Armerding. In this piece, the choice of sound source evokes the “energy” of the Serbian scientist, while the text draws on his autobiographical writings.⁵

Perhaps the most attention-grabbing work in this context is the multimedia opera *The Lives and Dreams of Nikola Tesla as Summoned by the Honorable Spirits of the Grand Gotham Hotel* (2024) by Phil Kline, created in collaboration with filmmaker Jim Jarmusch. The project stands out not only for the striking partnership between these two eccentric artists but also for its decision to cast a countertenor as Tesla – a vocal choice with castrato origins from the Baroque era, suggesting the “supranatural” nature of the Serbian scientist.⁶

In Serbia, the first musical work to portray the life of Nikola Tesla was the multimedia opera *Violet Fire* by John Gibson, with a libretto by Miriam Seidel, performed in 2006 at the National Theatre in Belgrade during the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Tesla's birth. The production was realized by the Opera Ensemble of the National Theatre Belgrade in collaboration with American artists, creating a symbolic bridge between the two countries where Tesla had lived. Originally written and performed as a project of the Temple University Music Workshop in Philadelphia in 2004, the opera was later revised and staged in Belgrade, directed by Terry O'Riley, with costumes by Boris Čakširan.⁷ *Violet Fire* represented a kind of “musical theatre derived from the oeuvre of Philip Glass and other proponents of the still-active minimalist movement in American music”.⁸ Also in 2006, the multimedia musical stage work (described as a “music-theatre spectacle”)⁹ *Tesla*

can be sampled and used as any other “sound data” in electronic music. Cf. the video demonstrating this phenomenon at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxXpI2UZmqc>, accessed June 9, 2025.

⁵ Cf. Kenneth Froelich, official website, <https://www.kennethfroelich.com/works>, accessed June 9, 2025.

⁶ Cf. Katelyn Simone, “Imagining Nikola Tesla: Phil Kline's New Opera Searches for the Man Behind the Myth”, *San Francisco Classical Voice*, <https://www.sfcv.org/articles/feature/imagining-nikola-tesla-phil-klines-new-opera-searches-man-behind-myth>, accessed June 8, 2025.

⁷ For more details, see Milena Pešić, “The Opera *Purple Fire* by John Gibson”, <https://muzickilimbo.rs/iz-pera-milene-pesic-opera-ljubicast-a-vatra-dzona-gibonsa/>, accessed June 10, 2025.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cf. “*Tesla – Total Reflection* on Saturday at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre” <https://www.>

– *Total Reflection* was performed. The composers Anja Đorđević, Vladimir Pejkoć, Igor Gostuški, and Božidar Obradinović stated that, inspired by Tesla, they composed “anything but boring music”.¹⁰

Serbian composer Miroslav Miša Savić also created an *hommage* to Tesla with his album *Music Hologram Nikola Tesla* (Sokoj, 2016).¹¹ On that occasion, the composer emphasized that his work was not linked to any specific content directly referencing the great scientist. Rather, the musical ideas realized in the genre of electroacoustic music resonate with Tesla’s thought, though not necessarily with its materialization, “which is possible only through art”.¹²

Among the composers who have created works dedicated to Tesla is the Vojvodina-based Serbian composer Stevan Divjaković.¹³ His symphonic

beograd.rs/cir/beoinfo-vesti/a19032/Tesla-totalna-refleksija-u-subotu-u-Jugoslovenskom-dramskom-pozoristu.html accessed November 23, 2025.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ A recording of this cycle can be found at <https://chatgpt.com/c/6846c38b-15e4-8005-a731-24089698cc44>, accessed June 9, 2025.

¹² Cf. the commentary on *Music Hologram Nikola Tesla* by Miroslav Savić <https://miroslavssavic.bandcamp.com/album/music-hologram-nikola-tesla>, accessed April 28, 2025.

¹³ Stevan Divjaković (Novi Sad, 1953), composer, graduated from the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad in 1979 and obtained his Master’s degree in 1995 under Professor Rudolf Bruči. From 1980 to 1995 he worked as a professor at the “Isidor Bajić” Music School, and from 1995 to 2000 he served as the manager of the Serbian National Theatre. Between 2003 and 2018, he was a professor and director of the College of Vocational Studies for the Education of Teachers in Novi Sad. Divjaković’s activities are multifaceted and define him not only as a composer but also as a cultural worker, who revived the NOMUS Festival (Novi Sad Music Festivities) and served as its artistic director (1987–1995). He acted as artistic director of the Vojvodina Philharmonic, introducing the requirement that each concert feature a work by a contemporary local composer. In his creative work, after early experiences rooted in the avant-garde movements of the second half of the twentieth century, Divjaković turned toward a postmodern musical language grounded in new tonality and elements of Balkan musical tradition. He has composed in all genres. Among his most important works are *Festive Overture* (1984) for orchestra, the vocal-instrumental work (later realized as a ballet) *Altum Silentium* (1988), and the opera *Vladimir and Kosara* (2017), among others. His compositions have been performed in many European countries in prestigious concert halls. He has received numerous awards and honors, including: the “Petar Konjović” Award of the Association of Composers of Vojvodina for Lifetime Achievement (2019); the Golden Badge of the University of Novi Sad for outstanding artistic contribution (2012); the October Award of the City of Novi Sad (1989); the Charter of the City of Novi Sad (1986); and First Prize of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) competition for his *Festive Overture* for symphony orchestra

poem *Nikola Tesla – Predawn* (2024) “should not necessarily be associated with the literal following of an extramusical narrative, as was often the case in the symphonic poems of Romanticism based on sonata form, but rather as a musical structure in which the composer’s own reflections on the chosen theme are mirrored through varied textures”.¹⁴ Accordingly, “the dedication to the great Serbian scientist is not connected to any extramusical ‘program’”,¹⁵ but rather to “atmospheres” that are formed through specific thematic materials within a kind of developmental form built upon the alternation of sections derived from the key motivic nuclei of three main themes. Their musical content relies on specific harmonic “progressions” involving chromatic mediant relationships, while formally the piece achieves a clearly recognizable reprise-based closure. This “illumination”, achieved through orchestral color and the effort to convey a sonic impression of “expansion” into an ever-widening space,¹⁶ reflects the composer’s understanding of Tesla’s wondrous scientific world.

Since the establishment of orchestral music in Serbia in the early twentieth century, the symphonic poem has been a far more attractive form than the symphony, and therefore more frequently composed. There was a practical reason for this: as a one-movement composition, the symphonic poem had a much greater chance of being performed as an opening piece in concerts featuring works by the great masters of Western European music, thus gaining easier opportunities for premieres or subsequent performances. Audiences, drawn by the classics of art music, more readily accepted new orchestral works by Serbian composers, who in turn sought to shape their musical language so that these works would indeed be well received. The position of domestic orchestral music has not changed much, and even today – more than a century after the creation of the first Serbian symphonic poem,

(1984). In 2021 he received the February Award of the City of Novi Sad, and in 2024 he received the Award for Outstanding Contribution to National Culture of the Republic of Serbia. In 2025, the Serbian National Theatre presented him with the Golden Medal “Jovan Đorđević” for Lifetime Achievement.

¹⁴ From an interview conducted with Stevan Divjaković on April 6, 2025.

¹⁵ Divjaković emphasizes that he consulted literary sources and cinematic works while preparing to compose the score, highlighting Vladimir Pištalo’s novel *Tesla – A Portrait Among Masks* (2023) (https://laguna.rs/n6083_knjiga_tesla_portret_medju_maskama_laguna.html). From the interview conducted on April 6, 2025.

¹⁶ Divjaković’s comment about “depicting the cosmos” at one point in the conversation reveals the “expanded programmatic” concept he had in mind while composing.

Serbia liberata (1904) by Petar Konjović – the single-movement orchestral composition, such as the symphonic poem, remains the most appealing form for large ensembles in Serbia.¹⁷

“*Predawn* – the time before sunrise, when the day breaks through the ‘shell’ of night and light returns after darkness – is such a solemn and wondrous moment that I felt the music dedicated to our scientist Nikola Tesla had to bear that word, that title”,¹⁸ notes Divjaković about his new work for symphonic orchestra *a tre*, featuring an expanded percussion section that includes, besides timpani, bass drum, vibraphone, cymbals, snare drum, bells, and glockenspiel. The composition is based on the sonic potential of a Romantic orchestra enriched with harp and piano, thereby expanding the overall timbral range in line with the idea that the texture should be shaped primarily through color – both instrumental and tonal – while the thematic material is derived from decomposed chordal signals.

This compositional technique aligns with Divjaković’s typical creative strategies, in which the composer carefully departs from traditional means only to return to them again, striving to create music “that achieves the maximum of expressivity with the minimum of means”.¹⁹ This characterization applies to his entire oeuvre, within which special places are held by *Festive*

¹⁷ In addition to Petar Konjović, symphonic poems were written by Miloje Milojević, Stevan Hristić, Petar Stojanović, Vojislav Vučković, Stanojlo Rajčić (who composed four), Dragutin Čolić, Mihajlo Vukdragović, Dragutin Gostuški, Petar Stajić, Petar Ozgijan, Slobodan Raicki, and Predrag Repanić, among the older or mid-twentieth century composers. However, in the last decades of the twentieth century, the symphonic poem ceased to be a relevant musical form to which composers explicitly turned, even though many single-movement symphonic works appeared whose formal affiliation with the genre is not emphasized, yet whose inspiration from literary or other extramusical sources somewhat ties them to it. Thus, symphonic “movements”, “frescoes”, and “overtures” with programmatic titles appeared. In the postmodern landscape of the 1990s, an increasing number of single-movement orchestral works emerged, inspired by fairy tales, mythological heroes, (contemporary) historical events, and various literary or non-literary contents. However, the writers often did not concern themselves with categorizing these works within the “classical” framework of the symphonic poem. The same seems to be the case with twenty-first century orchestral music, in which the titles of certain single-movement symphonic works do not indicate their generic or formal affiliation.

¹⁸ From an interview conducted with Stevan Divjaković on April 6, 2025.

¹⁹ Dušan Mihalek, *Program Booklet of the Serbian National Theatre* for the premiere of the ballet *Altum Silentium*, Serbian National Theatre, Novi Sad, November 20, 1998.

Overture (1984) for symphony orchestra, *Simfonieta* (1991) for accordion orchestra,²⁰ the vocal-instrumental work *Altum Silentium* (akin to *Songs of Space* by Ljubica Marić), as well as more recent compositions such as the opera *Vladimir and Kosara* (2017), the symphonic poem *Phoenix*, and *Orchestral Fantasy* with its allusions to folklore.²¹

“A musician in the best sense of the word, in the sense of absolute mastery,”²² who “does not lose himself in experiments or in the pursuit of effects,”²³ Divjaković upholds the belief that “the imperative of creation” lies in communication with the audience, mutual understanding, and recognition, which he consistently implements in his mature creative period.²⁴

In his symphonic poem *Nikola Tesla – Predawn*, Divjaković, as already noted, does not rely on a specific program, nor does he adhere to the “formal and textural discipline”²⁵ characteristic of this predominantly Romantic structural model. Instead, the work shapes three thematic units²⁶ that develop in such a way that – thanks to their constant progression through chromatic mediant tonalities – they evoke an impression of expanding sonic space.²⁷ In a certain sense, this creates an association with the spreading of light, which, on another level – one that could even be described as *pro-synesthetic* – alludes to the context with which the figure and work of Nikola Tesla are almost synonymous.

The first theme of this developmental form, however, bears an echo of the tradition to which Divjaković is fundamentally inclined. It is rooted in Russian symphonism, primarily in the *sound world* of Prokofiev (Сергей Сергеевич Прокофьев) and Shostakovich (Дмитрий Дмитриевич Шостакович). Thus, the introductory broken motif of the tonic triad in the cellos

²⁰ In the printed edition of the German publisher “Jetelina”, this composition is titled *Simfonieta Dramatica*.

²¹ This work was composed for the gala concert celebrating the presentation of Novi Sad as the European Capital of Culture in 2022.

²² Dušan Mihalek, op. cit.

²³ Zoran Hristić, composer, *An Evening with Stevan Divjaković*, Cultural Centre of Novi Sad, June 6, 2005.

²⁴ A similar view was expressed by Rajko Maksimović in an interview conducted by Ivana Vuksanović: “Communication as an Imperative of Creation (Interview with Rajko Maksimović)”, *New Sound*, 6, 1995, 5–15.

²⁵ Cf. Mirjana Veselinović Hofman, “Serbian Music and the ‘Frozen’ History”, *New Sound*, 9, 1997, 16.

²⁶ It is well known that Tesla was obsessed with the number three.

²⁷ The scheme of the work could be described as IT – IIT – IIIT – Reprise of IT – Coda.

in E minor, accompanied by the signal of the English horn and then taken up by the clarinet and bassoon, recalls the striking beginning of Prokofiev's movement *The Montagues and Capulets* from the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. However, the reinterpretation of this familiar signal is achieved through a kind of softening of its aggressiveness, so that the resemblance is recognizable but perceived merely as a coincidental association, since the tempo is *adagio* and the dynamics *piano*.

A new "face" of this motif emerges with the *pizzicato* articulation in the cellos, combined with *tremolo* in the violins and violas, while the first thematic material is presented in unison by the cellos and double basses (Example 1). This material modulates from G minor to B-flat minor, G major, and E major, before "slipping" into D-flat major (enharmonically C-sharp major), setting off on a further chain of mediant tonalities beginning with A major, and continuing in a similar sequence up to B-flat major. Divjaković notes that he employed the cellos in what he considers their most noble register,²⁸ as throughout the entire musical flow he sought to highlight the instrument registers traditionally regarded as the most sonically refined. The "expansion" of the first theme through chromatic third relationships concludes with chromatic modulation in C major.

Example 1: Stevan Divjaković, Symphonic poem *Nikola Tesla* – *Predawn*, Adagio, mm. 1–5.²⁹

Score in C

Praskozorje

Adagio ♩=42 Cor Anglais

Stevan Divjaković, 2024.

²⁸ From an interview conducted with Stevan Divjaković on April 6, 2025.

²⁹ All musical examples in this paper are taken from the manuscript score of Divjaković's symphonic poem *Nikola Tesla* – *Predawn* and are used with the author's permission.

The second section – essentially the second theme of the work – begins with the horn in F major, played in the register where the instrument achieves its most expressive sonority (in the small and first line octaves). This later evolves into a chorale texture for the four instruments of the horn section. Accompanied by *pizzicato* in the violins and violas, this section serves as a striking contrast that clearly delineates the developmental passages of the first and third themes (Example 2).

Example 2: Stevan Divjaković, Symphonic poem *Nikola Tesla – Predawn*, Adagio, mm. 35–40.

The musical score for Example 2, measures 35-40, is presented in a standard orchestral format. The top staff is for the Horn 1 (Hr. 1), followed by Horn 2 (Hr. 2), Clarinet 1 (Cl. 1), and Clarinet 2 (Cl. 2). The bottom staves are for Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major/G minor), and the time signature is 3/4. The tempo is marked as Adagio, with a metronome marking of ♩=54. The score begins at measure 35, marked with a rehearsal symbol '4'. The horn section enters with a melodic line in F major, marked 'mp'. The string section plays a rhythmic pattern in G minor, marked 'pizz.' and 'mp'. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

The impulse for the beginning of the third theme is given by the English horn, accompanied by the dense texture of the harp. With a *crescendo*, this material is taken up by the full orchestra, leading into the climax of the entire poem. The dramatic intensity of the orchestral *tutti* is heightened by the loss of a tonal center, increased tempo, and the participation of bells. The brief effect of atonality, however, stabilizes through a return to G minor, followed by modulation to B-flat major, thereby preparing the reprise of the first theme (Example 3).

Example 3: Stevan Divjaković, Symphonic poem *Nikola Tesla – Predawn*, Adagio, mm. 51–58.

The repetition of the first theme section, however, does not signify a return to the opening tonality. Here, the reprise does not appear as an attempt to bring the material back to its point of origin, but rather to continue the development of the first theme through the full sonority of the orchestra, with a strong sweep of bells and a powerful chorale-like support of the brass instruments. The subsequent *decrescendo* has a clear purpose: the material of the first theme is presented by the solo violin, accompanied by an imitative interplay with the solo cello. The development proceeds in a manner similar to the beginning of the composition, with the movement in sextuplets in the lower strings being taken over by the piano. Finally, with a tonic G major chord in *forte fortissimo*, the coda begins – described by the composer as “a great sonic explosion”³⁰ – from which emerges a graceful oboe theme, a distant reminiscence of the slow movement of Antonín Dvořák’s *Symphony from the New World*.

The piece concludes in the tonic key of G major through the arpeggiation of the tonic triad across the entire orchestra, accompanied by a dramatic tremolo in the strings. Yet this effect gives the impression that the composer sought to “dissolve” the sound rather than to bring it to a halt. The entire coda thus functions as a kind of climax in which the composer strives to *liberate* sound rather than to end it.

The developmental form of the poem *Nikola Tesla – Predawn* resists being placed into a specific formal pattern, such as sonata form, the classical

³⁰ From an interview conducted with Stevan Divjaković on April 6, 2025.

three-part structure, or the like. Divjaković, in fact, applied something that directly evokes filmic recording techniques. He constructs the musical flow as a series of sections that alternate like shots, but in a “sonic” sense: each of them has a clearly defined timbral and harmonic atmosphere, which either “expands” (zoom out), as in the first theme, or abruptly cuts to a new “shot,” as in the entry of the second theme, or shifts to a “wide shot,” as in the appearance of the third theme. This kind of organization of musical content relies on linear thematic development, in which the expansion and contraction of texture act as a sonic equivalent of optical zoom. In this way, the composition aligns with the poetics of associative thinking, noticeable from the very beginning, where the birth of the day is simulated in piano dynamics. This approach is rooted in the broader tendency to create music based on creative methods from other arts, present since the early twentieth century, to which many composers “succumbed”. Divjaković’s approach to composition in *Predawn* is undoubtedly influenced by extra-musical sources, primarily literary and cinematic, which the composer consulted during the preparation of the score.³¹

This aligns with a broader phenomenon widely present in contemporary artistic creation – the increasingly intense interweaving of the poetics of different media. Camera techniques, once exclusively characteristic of film art, have over time become a structural principle in the creation of art music. In an era when short video formats, such as those on social media (especially TikTok), shape not only reception but also the very formation of sonic material, this is unsurprising. The influence of contemporary media on music is becoming ever more visible, not only at the level of production and presentation but also within the very process of composition. In this context, Divjaković’s approach in the poem *Nikola Tesla – Predawn* can be seen as a reflection of a broader trend in which the boundaries between artistic disciplines are increasingly blurred, and their methods interpenetrate in the search for new forms of sonic thought. This very aspect of the new work by Divjaković gives it additional potential as applied music, which could be utilized in certain documentary or narrative “moving-image” projects.

³¹ It should be noted that Divjaković also made sketches for a future opera about Tesla during the process of composing this score. Ibid.

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Summary

Among the many artists inspired by the life and inventions of the Serbian scientist Nikola Tesla (1856–1943) is the composer Stevan Divjaković (1953), who dedicated his symphonic poem *Nikola Tesla – Predawn* to him. Motivated by the earliest hours of the day, when “its shell cracks” as a metaphor for Tesla’s extraordinary contribution to the “conquest of light”, Divjaković constructs a straightforward developmental form composed of three contrasting themes that follow one another. While the first, introduced in the broken chords of the cello and double bass in E minor, unfolds through mediant chordal connections, the second is realized as a choral section for brass instruments. The third theme is performed by the English horn together with the flute, supported by the dense texture of the harp. This material is taken up by the orchestra in a crescendo leading to a climax, where a clear slip into atonality occurs. The recapitulation unfolds in B-flat major (which is not the key of the opening), making it evident that Divjaković does not intend to achieve tonal closure, but rather to “liberate” the first theme. This is accomplished immediately after a delicate interplay

of solo violin and cello in a brief decrescendo section. The “Big Bang” of the coda begins in G major, whose material allows the sound of the first theme to “disperse” rather than come to a halt. In this work, Divjaković employs techniques reminiscent of various cinematic framing methods. This approach gives the piece a potential akin to that of applied music, enabling it, in addition to its concert performance life, to be integrated into diverse multimedia projects.