The Spider: Behind the scene

The Spider Variations by Jasmina Mitrušić Đerić
Innehållsförteckning

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Jasmina Mitrušić Derić

Jasmina Mitrušić Derić was born in Belgrade in 1964. She graduated with honours in 1987 at the composition department of the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, in class of Professor Dušan Radić. Over the past two decades, she has composed music of different genres: spiritual vocal, vocal instrumental, ambient and chamber music as well as music for theatre and film. In 1992 she wrote music for “Pejzaži amnezije” (Amnesia Landscapes), a film that was released by TV Novi Sad and Komuna. From 1987 to 2009 she was composer in residence at the Youth Theatre in Novi Sad. Her music was performed in NOMUS and BEMUS music festivals in Serbia by ensembles Musica Viva, DENSITY and Quaternion. She wrote music on lyrics “Vladaj
Bože” by Bishop Nikolai Velimirovich that was promoted on a CD release “Songs from the East and the West” in 2001.

She participated in creation of the “new wave” in the 80’s and was a member of Luna and La Strada bands. She recorded an LP album with Luna that was praised in former Yugoslavia and is acclaimed nowadays as a classic.

In the beginning of the 90’s she formed the chamber music ensemble “Metatonija” that promoted her own as well as the music of her fellow composers. In 2000 this ensemble was transformed into a chamber choir that was one of the leading in the field of performing contemporary music in both concert halls and monasteries across Serbia. She is a member of SOKOJ (association for composers of Serbia) since 1985.

Musical language of the Spider Variations and fascination with nature

“In my work I always needed to escape from the well known expression. I found grounds for my own musical language in free atonality and this is best presented in my piano music. In Spider Variations such atonality is not free of structure and repetition.

Repetition is of great value to me. It is inevitable in order to depict nature in true fashion as well as to communicate with the audience. A spider always repeats the same movements. This motorics is automatic but every movement is different. Conscious repetition is therefore a natural practice in this piece. I am interested in repetition that holds life in it, that is natural- a varied repetition.”

(Jasmina Mitrušić Derić, Novi Sad, 2011)

“Arachnophobia is a well known and well spread fear of spiders and as such holds fascination for me. The constant presence of spiders and danger that follows them was always very interesting for me to watch. I was keen on observing the way they reproduce and hunt. My father was a biologist and
his admiration for nature was carried over to me. The challenge to connect my unconditional love for animals and nature with music was enabled through composition.”

(Jasmina Mitrušić Derić, Novi Sad, 2011)
INTRODUCTION

I have always had the privilege of working with wonderful, dedicated professors who, from the very start, taught me music in an inspiring way. Playing piano had always meant a constant search for beauty in sound, with approach from an angle "never play the piano". I tend to look for the foundation of my interest in music of 20th and 21st century in such acoustic exploration of piano as if it embodied the whole orchestra and the pursuit of composer's idea and message in a piece from an early point of learning piano.

My first contact with Jasmina Mitrušić Dериć was in 2002, when I performed her piece "War of Ants". She had been teaching counterpoint in music high school I attended, and the topic of her writing piano music for the first time and me performing it came up after I had listened to a performance of her choir music. Very unusual story of a war among insects opened a new door for me and created an appetite for new music.

Approaching to the master’s degree in my studies at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad, I commissioned a new piece. By that time I had taken a class in History of the 20th century music and my initial and somewhere childish interest in new music had taken a more serious form. Trips to different European cities I took for purpose of attending master classes and taking part in competitions always brought along new pieces, ideas and acquaintances. In competitions outside Serbia I started noticing a shift in young pianists repertoires I wasn't familiar with by then.

For my final exam's program I was determined to include a modern piece of music but even though the composer had a strong intention for writing it, due to a lack of time, it was postponed. Nevertheless, she then told me of a program for a piece that would describe a fascinating creature of nature, spider. The intricate storyline made an instant impression on me.

In 2010, after acquiring master's degree, I left for Sweden. I had previously met professor Staffan Scheja for lessons and auditioned at the Royal College of Music in Stockholm for a master program in solo
performance with chamber music lessons. Moving to Sweden meant working with one of Scandinavia's most renowned pianists but also having an opportunity to engage in music life of Stockholm. Having learned of the active contemporary chamber ensembles and the progressive program of the national orchestras, I knew I was in for a real contemporary treat. By the end of the first semester I already played in several chamber music ensembles. With these ensembles I took part at the school's chamber music festival, Kom och Hör, performing in one evening J.Forsell's Sju Dödssynder, J.Jeverud's Osentimental Lek med linjer and B.Linde's Sonata a tre. Following up on a sharp beginning, I started attending concerts of Swedish Radio Orchestra, with the performance of K.Saariaho's DOM LE VRAI SENS with Kari Kriiku on clarinet, that left an exceptionally strong impression on me. The second year of studies brought a lot of concerts such as Norrbotten NEO: Gerard Grisey - in memoriam, Swedish Radio Orchestra with Daniel Harding performing A. Schönberg's 5 pieces for orchestra op.16, A.Webern's 6 pieces for orchestra op.6 and A. Berg's 3 pieces for orchestra op 6 and also a performance of A. Tarrodi's Lucioles and Flyttfåglar for oboe and strings with soloist E.Laville, Solar Flares by K. Leyman and Breaking the Ice by K. Rehnqvist conducted by M. Bartosch. All these concerts, along with exceptional performances by G. Sokolov, A. Chiff, L. Lang, M. Pressler, R. Pontinen, S. Scheja and many others, inspired me to invest in devoted work on my own performance which resulted in playing a significant number of pieces composed in the 20th century.

When we speak of newly written music and, to some extent, of music written in the 20th century, what the performer sees in the score and what he or she envisions from it, could go quite far away from the original vision of the composer. In fortunate cases, the performer has the opportunity to work with the composer. Each interaction is different, unique. It is unrepeateable. That is why, besides playing an important role in preparation of a piece, it presents a substantial body for research.

In the summer of 2011, I started working with Jasmina Mitrušić Derić
on the Spider Variations. I was given the score gradually, first the themes and several variations. The rest I received by e-mail over the Christmas break, and the last two variations in March 2012. It is interesting to now trace the process that was completely subjective and personal, from commissioning the piece, through communication with the composer (recorded interviews) and rehearsals to its first public performance. (I would like to stress that all the interviews were conducted in Serbian. Upon request by composer herself, I translated all enclosed parts of those interviews.)

My intention in this paper is to show different aspects of the preparation process that preceded the premiere of Spider Variations. In both Memorization and Performance chapters my primary concern was with the three themes. In Memorization chapter, I have explained the principles and shown a model, based on a research done by Professor Roger Chaffin, I used for memorizing this piece. My decision to exercise analysis of themes only was made for reasons of showing a concise example, and a needless follow-up of variations as they were both prepared and performed relying on the same principles. As for the Performance chapter, I tried to describe the essence of the material, as I understood it through interaction with the composer, and talk about how decoding the program of this piece shaped performance decisions. Once again, I found it irrelevant to speak about the variations that follow, as they are developed form the material introduced in the three themes.

For me as a performer to write about any aspect of my performance is incredibly difficult and time consuming. To describe what never needed description but only precise production is to reexamine every decision made in the process and rouse the automatism. At the same time, to review the preparation process and performance itself is to consciously revive it and clarify just how aware I am of the intention-production relation. It is of undisputable value for not just every future performance of the piece referred to but of significant impact on my development as a performer.

What made the music of the 20th and 21st century so captivating was
the new musical language. It led to discovery of new ways of musical thinking, new music, procedures, composers and generally new tendencies in music. Working with composers on their music, learning about the music history of the 20th century, rehearsing and performing both solo and in chamber music ensembles as well as attending various concerts and performances of new music, created a unique platform for transforming a rather restrained attitude, which led to establishing the profile of my future field of interest.
1. MEMORIZATION

1.1 Introduction.

The subject of memorization for performance has been on my mind for several years now. It has first come up during my bachelor studies at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad. Upon enrolment I started programming important pieces of piano literature, among which romantic sonatas, complete opuses of studies, piano concertos and music written in the 20th century. I realized then that the bigger the programmes grew, the bigger the responsibility was and all those little issues such as occasional memory lapses or tension I felt, would now present themselves in a much more unpleasant way.

I have always loved performing in public and so experiencing any kind of a setback while on stage made me stop and think. Analysing a perfect performance opportunity that would include good conditions such as an excellent piano, a big audience and a programme consisting of some of my favourite pieces that I prepared thoroughly, it came to mind that there should be no place for any sudden nuisance. The problem was a fear of not knowing the music well enough and having an unpleasant feeling of being in a position to slip at some point during the performance. This was not due to any kind of technical or emotional incapability. It was pure discomfort related to an inconsistent system of memorization, or more precisely, the lack of any.

How pianists learn to memorize is more or less a matter of one’s own individual practice. That common practice, which early on we all learn, consists of a three way learning:

1. By sight
2. By ear
3. By fingers
Most piano teachers talk about visual, audio and tactile memorization putting correct emphasis on how important it is that we must never learn a piece relying on only one, instructing that if one mean fails, the others will support us into finding our way back.

I must imply at the very beginning that I am surely not the first one who realised the cracks in this practice, or the one pianist who discovered conceptual memorization and utilized it in combination with the other three types. It is highly unlikely that any pianist who is concerned with professional performance would rely on a scholarly system and leave the consistency of their performance up to a coincidence. What lead to examination of the process itself was that I was never able to find in the literature about pianists and piano schools a systematic memorization process or a learned and inherited style of memorization. All I could find about pianists way of memorizing was based on personal experience, an individual know-how.

Starting with the elementary music school and my first piano teacher I was taught to sing the phrases (audio), colour separate voices (visual) and come up with specific fingering (tactile). With the usual children’s ability to absorb knowledge, memorizing went fluently. Somewhere along the way my ears, eyes and fingers got used to automatically dividing the work, which, hand in hand with countless hours and effort invested in repetition, led me to believe that my programmes were memorized. Far from the fact that such investment in preparation does not enable some pianists to feel confident on stage, especially if the same programme is performed several times, as the pressure and anxiety that new programmes create, are reduced to a minimum or even disappear completely. For me personally the best example of such preparation is the picture of a pianist waiting to go on stage and looking at the scores until the very last minute. It might work for some…but it definitely does not for me.

This is what triggered my curiosity. I gradually started forming a certain system based on what I later found described as conceptual type of memory. It is not strange that most of the work I found on the subject was...
done mainly by psychologists and musicologists. In my research I
discovered texts on expert memory, in relation to professional musicians
and their preparation for performance. In the work and experiments done by
Roger Chaffin, professor at the University of Connecticut, department of
psychology, as well as professor Francis Dubé at the University Laval and
specialist in the field of memorization of pianists, I found confirmation of
my system and its entirety. Moreover, I found inspiration to do my writing
on the subject of memorization of Spider Variations.

1.2 Memorization act.

“The difference between a good memorizer and a poor memorizer is not so
much “memory power” as mental attitude.” (Blogger)

“Some kinds of memory are recorded in the brain by repetition
without special effort on the part of the individual. Auditory, visual, and
kinesthetic memories, although they can be reinforced by various exercises,
fall into this category. Although they are essential to the pianist in his/her
mnemonic work, none of these types of memory provide for retention of the
musical text. Only conceptual memory, used intentionally, allows a pianist
to integrate this knowledge. To be more precise, a pianist must be totally
aware of what is being memorized to really absorb and retain the score.
Conceptual memory provides total assimilation of the musical text,
including harmony, nuances, phrasing, reference points, and notes. In short,
conceptual memory is acquired by exceptional effort while the three
preceding types are recorded automatically while practicing. Finally, this
memory provides for the synthesis of information into a single brain
concept.” (Dubé F. 2003)

The security of memorized information, in this situation music score,
depends on how we encode the novel material. Virtue of repetition,
especially in the matter of learning atonal music, is of little use unless we
take time to understand the structure of the piece. Memorizing the formal
structure of the piece, for me, is a central part of memorizing the piece. In Spider Variations, as well as I have done with most of the solo repertoire over the last years, the starting point was to look at the score away from the piano. Once the overall picture was clear I started the work at the piano.

Creating a mental map of the piece allows managing the material on the go. Analyzing the structure first helps producing “performance cues” afterwards, as Prof. Roger Chaffin explains in “Practicing perfection: How concert soloists prepare for performance”.

“Performance cues are the landmarks of the piece that an experienced musician attends to during performance, carefully selected and rehearsed during practice so that they come to mind automatically and effortlessly as the piece unfolds, eliciting the highly practiced movements of fingers, hands, and arms. Performance cues become an integral part of the performance and provide a means of consciously monitoring and controlling rapid, automatic actions of the hands. Performance cues provide flexibility by allowing the performer to remain mindful of a memorized performance that has become automatic through extended practice…Performance cues are the retrieval cues that elicit the knowledge of what comes not from long term memory, providing the musician with a mental map of the piece in working memory that continuously unfolds as the performance progresses…We can distinguish four types of performance cue. Structural cues are critical places in the formal structure of the music, such as section boundaries, where musical material changes. Expressive cues represent musical feelings to be conveyed to the audience, e.g., surprise or excitement. Interpretative cues are places where some aspects of interpretation requires attention, e.g., a change of tempo or dynamics. Basic cues represent the critical details of technique or musical structure that must be executed exactly for the performance to unfold as intended, e.g., the use of particular fingering in order to set up the hand up for what follows…

During the initial stage, the musician indentifies the formal structure of the piece as well as many of the places that will later become expressive, interpretative and basic performance cues. In later practice sessions, the
musician focuses on basic technique and then on interpretation, revisiting each repeatedly as learning progresses. When the piece is ready, attention returns to expressive performance cues during final preparation for a public performance. Ideally, the musician performs with expressive and structural cues in the spotlight of attention with basic and interpretative performance cues in the background, ready to be called upon if needed.” (Chaffin R. 2006)

Based on readings about conceptual memory and performance cues, I organized the plan for Spider Variations. I will describe here the planning as well as making of the scheme of performance cues, based on the example that Prof. Chaffin showed with concert pianist Gabriela Imreh and her study of the third movement of Italian Concerto by J. S. Bach.

1.3 Formal structure. Performance cues.

Structural cues – section boundaries
Expressive cues – change in expressive intention
Interpretative cues – tempo and dynamics
Basic cues – fingering, gesture units, change of hands and articulation

Spider Variations is a set of variations with three themes, all movements named individually, starting with the themes of spider, net and fly. All three themes are made of contrasting elements from which the variations are developed. With nine variations that follow after the themes, the system for memorizing remains the same as with the themes. For that reason I will present only the examples of planned performance cues for the themes.

Formal structure, the theme of Spider:
A  measure 1-12
B  measure 13-20
A1 measure 21-23
Formal structure, the theme of Net:
A measure 1-6
A1 measure 7-15
B measure 15-18
A2 measure 18-21
A3 measure 22-24

Formal structure, the theme of Fly:
A measure 1-13
A1 measure 14-24
A2 measure 25-35
A3 measure 36-55
A4 measure 56-65
A5 measure 66-78

Structural cues:
Formal structure shapes structural cues. They are based on section boundaries and each letter (A, B, C) as well as letters with a numbers (A1, A2, B1…) provide listing of different material.
“The sections and subsections of the formal structure provide the upper levels of the hierarchy, with expressive cues further dividing subsections into expressive phrases. Interpretative and basic cues are embedded within this hierarchical organization, providing different types of information about critical points of interpretation and technique.” (Chaffin R., 2006)
Expressive cues:
The pursuit was very personal but based on dialog with the composer, following up on storyline told in the very beginning of the process. Expressive cues are verbalized expressive intentions showing mood changes and development. The story unfolds with every movement and so the emotional investment grows.

Interpretative cues:
Even though I tried to respect to the utmost existing dynamic contours in the score as well as the expected consistency of the original tempo, there is a massive amount of minutely changes strongly connected to my own view of spider’s movements. I hold to the fact that work on details is imperative to giving a strong and unique performance. Such acoustic exploration of the instrument and awareness of ways it supports my ideas of design and colour of specific material represents the most interesting and creative part of everyday practice. The result of the work on details is presented in repeated use of pedals, dynamic nuances and acceleration or relaxation of tempo.

Basic cues:
“Imposer un doigté ne peut logiquement s’adapter aux différentes conformations de la main…” “On n’est jamais mieux servi que par soi-même.” Cherchons nos doigtés!” (C. Debussy)
As an introduction to his 12 etudes, Claude Debussy explains why he has not put decided fingering in his etudes. He teaches us not to blindly follow composer’s fingerings but create our own. This is one of the best advices pianists can find on fingering. Each one of us has different hands and each one needs individual fingering. The fingering is what allows further work on articulation, speed, relaxed wrists and movements of arms. In preparation of Spider Variations, proper fingering played a crucial part. It made the
articulation possible, which further on developed gesture units. Fingering, articulation, change of hands and gesture units are all basic cues.

1.4 Examples

Following examples will be the themes of Spider, Net and Fly. Performance cues and measures are shown in abbreviations:
Structural cues: S
Expressive cues: E
Interpretative cues: I
Basic cues: B
Measures: m
(Measure numbers are given in the scores, at the beginning of every new row)
Spider

Jasmina Mitrusic Djerić

(1964.)
E: m1-m7: crisp and clear, m8-m12: build tension and end the phrase secretively, m13: spider’s creeping, m15-16: playful, m17-20: solid sound and strict rhythm, m24-27: humoristic, m30-32: repeat the crisp sound from the beginning, a little bit more mysterious, m33: pressing, m34: fade out

I: m1: mf with immediate decresc, m2: echo, with a fermata, end of measure going back to mf sound, m9: right hand-mf, left hand-f, every beat emphasized with a short right pedal, m11-12: long dim. and prolong the sound with the right pedal in pp (syncop pedal), m13-16: very minimal accelerando toward the m16, m17-20: stop accelerando, steady pulse and right pedal as accent on every chord, m21-23: forte dynamics, m24-27: as shown in the score, dynamics-2 beats piano, 2 beats forte, insist on contrast, m28-29: add more reverb with right pedal, m30-31: pianissimo, reminiscent of the beginning, m33: forte, m34: echo in piano, m35: sudden accent, m36-37: fading out B: m1-8: same fingering for sevenths-1/5 for both right and left hand, long gestures interrupted by fermatas, m10-11: active hand rotation, m13-16: same gestures in both hands, m24-27: continue same articulation, m28 until the end: same fingering (1/5) S: m1-12: A, m13-20: B, m21-23: A1, m24-27: B1, m28-32: A2, m33-34: C, m35-37: A3
The Net
E: m1-6: nocturnal atmosphere, no intense cantabile, only light sway, m7-12: more austere sound,
   m13-15: start building tension and end the phrase solemnly, m16-17: lightweight chords, m18-21:
   calm and playful, invention-like, m23-24: disappearing
I: m1-6: piano dynamics, tempo sliding but with a steady pulse, use pedal only lightly to connect what
   fingers can not connect, m7-9: piano and secco, m12-15: slowly build crescendo and finish the phrase
   in forte, m15-17: growing sound and fading away, deep chords, all connected with right pedal,
   starting and ending with the left pedal, stretch the end of phrase, m18-21: light and continuous
   sound developing in m21 to mf dynamics, m22-24: pp dynamics with a sfz and a fermata before
   fading out
B: m1-6: quasi legato, connecting 2 or 3 quavers and forming gestures, later constructing two-bar
  phrases, m8-15: baroque-like articulation, m15-17: legato chords, no sudden hand movements,
  same articulation until the end of phrase, m18-24: same baroque-like articulation, non legato and
  transparent
The Fly

E: from m1: constant monotonous sound
I: from m1 until end: as fast as possible
   m1: secretive piano, m7-m12: phrase using cresc and decresc m14-m24: insisting
   annoying sound,
   m24: the first fermata (this one as well as the rest of them consider as pauses in fly’s
   movements
   and let go of the pedal before them, so the sound stops immediately), m36: hands move
   up to the
   higher part of the keyboard, the sound is lighter until the end
B: m1: right hand leads, m4: left hand comes in, m7: use pause for a new gesture, m10:
   new gesture,
m12: last gesture in phrase, m14: left hand leads, m16: right hand come in, until m24 keep the same parallel hand movements, m36: left hand leads, m37: right hand comes in, m45: left hand leads,
m46: right hand comes in, m56: left hand leads, m57: right hand comes in, m56-65: ensure precise execution through same gestures in both right and left hand
2. COLLABORATION BETWEEN COMPOSER AND PERFORMER

2.1 Introduction.

In piano literature of the 20th and 21st century we can distinguish a large part of it as inspired, written or dedicated to a specific pianist. Collaboration between composer and performer vary in every single case. In some, the completed score is given to the performer as such, with composer trusting the performers’ ability to present it to the public. In others, the collaboration goes beyond. What is common, and what urges new generations of performers to form and develop relationships with composers, is contribution to the repertoire. Not every piece has the potential of being a milestone in the piano repertoire, but so many have pioneered a particular technique or built up the spectrum of expressive or sonorous in piano playing.

Many of these relationships were in effect ‘complementary’ collaborations. A very interesting example of such collaboration is one between John Cage and David Tudor. David Tudor established himself as a pioneer in the performance of new music as early as 1950, when on December 17th, in New York, he gave the American premiere (and second performance anywhere) of Pierre Boulez’ Deuxième Sonate pour Piano. From the early 1950s on, Tudor became John Cage's closest associate. Cage stated that all of his works until about 1970 were written either directly for Tudor or with him in mind. Tudor also gave first or early performances of works by Earle Brown, Sylvano Bussotti, Morton Feldman, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Christian Wolff, Stefan Wolpe, and La Monte Young, among others. These composers often wrote works expressly for Tudor and a number of them stated that Tudor's unerring ability to find his own imaginative and virtuoso solutions to the often puzzling and sometimes deliberately difficult problems of notation and performance was essential to the actual composition of their music.

Another example of a long collaboration between a pianist and
composer is Olivier Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod. Messiaen saw in her somebody whose dazzling technique and phenomenal memory could interpret his music as he saw it. Messiaen once described her as 'unique, sublime and a brilliant pianist, whose existence transformed not only the composer's way of writing for the piano, but his style, vision of the world and modes of thought”. (Goléa 1960) Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jesus, Visions de l'Amen, Catalogue d'Oiseaux, La Fauvette des Jardins, Petites esquisses d'oiseaux and most of the piano parts in his orchestral works are all dedicated to her.

These collaborations, along with so many others, resulted in an enormous contribution to the repertoire and produced some of the most astonishing piano works of the 20th and 21st century.

2.2 Interaction

Interaction with Jasmina Mitrušić Đerić on Spider Variations held significance in managing three different perspectives-creation of the piece, reaching for guidelines for future performance and observation of composer-performer interaction.

Any collaboration between a composer and performer requires trust and understanding. Working on interpretation of a musical work presents commitment and depends on a creative dialogue. Collaboration between Jasmina Mitrušić Đerić and me happened through mutual respect, in regard of both musicianship and on a personal level. Being willing to give everything in terms of time, energy and creativity is, on my part, strongly influenced by admiration of her artistry and expertise. In return, I am always aware of her appreciation and gratitude for my efforts, especially on the field of premiering her work. The collaboration started with my initiative but is developing into a serious and very active one through satisfaction on both sides.

My observation of composer-performer interaction was based on frequent meetings and interviews. Time span of the work was approximately
two years, from the commission to the first performance. Before leaving for Sweden I was presented with the program, but the composing of it started only after I left. Jasmina Mitrušić Đerić created the first sketch in the winter of 2010 that I saw in December. Afterwards our communication was limited to e-mails. I spent two months in Novi Sad in the summer of 2011 when we conducted most of the work. At that time I received the score and started learning it. The collaborative work consisted of rehearsals but also of numerous face-to-face meetings and interviews that were recorded. These interviews are one of the key elements in the process of writing, as relying on my field notes and memory proved to be inconsistent.

2.3 The influence of the first performer

The question of the role of a performer is a subject of polemic. Some studies limit the importance of performers to providing solutions to ideas that have already been created, and in doing so reduce the significance of their involvement, presenting them as mere technicians through which the piece is presented to the audience.

In the performance of contemporary classical music creative animation is crucial. "It may well be that any score is not only a poor translation of a composer's inner imaginings, but also something incomplete. Those inner imaginings may not take the form of an imaginary performance but something slightly more abstract: something ready to explode into performance. In that case the performer has the job of completing the composition, even if they think of it as merely interpreting." (Goss and Leathwood, 2007)

I have not investigated the extent to which the roles of the composer and performer are expansible and, in this paper I do not challenge their conventional dichotomy. My concern is with understanding of performer's influence on creation and life of the piece.

In her study "From sketches to First Performance: The influence of
First Performers on a Musical Work" Marjaana Virtanen raises a question of musical parameters of the composition-in-progress which can be influenced by performers. "The...question relates to the received hierarchies of musical parameters in the western art music tradition: the "primary parameters" (e.g. pitch, rhythm), determined by the composer, are conventionally seen as more essential for the identity of the musical work than the "secondary parameters" (e.g. tempo, dynamics, sonority), which are more typically and obviously influenced by the performers...The hypothesis here is therefore that the performers influence on the musical work goes beyond the treatment of the secondary parameters." (Virtanen M. 2009)

Notation of music is in close connection to performer’s role. In this case the composer decided on approach of having the performer take on a role of a full-time animator of music as opposed to one functioning on a pure interpretive level. To a large extent we were discussing the aspect of notation. Jasmina Mitrušić Čerić set out to compose relying on program of the piece to be a clear indication of how the piece needed to be performed.

"The score imposes the style of performance. How one needs to approach it is clearly visible in the score itself. Fully noted music has precise requirements, and a serious performer should strive to fulfill them. When the composer leaves such elements out, it suggests that the performer has a creative freedom. It is the principle.

In this piece, every theme draws out its own character. The theme of the spider has consistent rhythm made of semiquavers. The same pulse, regardless of the pauses, imposes a fast tempo. Theme of the fly suggests a very fast tempo, again with the semiquavers pulse, it goes without saying. If played slowly, it loses its skeleton. Theme of the net addresses movements created by spider while netting, and the expected tempo is understandably slower. In a slow theme, tempo is a "sliding " one, very free. It tolerates changes all the way through. The beauty of a score without the tempo indications, especially the metronomic ones, is that this element of expression can be exercised in full freedom."
(Jasmina Mitrušić Čerić, Novi Sad, 2012)
In the case of Spider Variation secondary parameters were not just influenced but somewhere entirely conceived by the performer. While the composer chose to rely on the program to be a dictation of the tempi and chose not to put any metronomic indications, I defined and incorporated other aspects such as dynamics, phrasing and articulation. Some of them Jasmina Mitrušić Derić wrote down in the score and some she left out with the intention of allowing me to reexamine them during a public performance.

Provided with a creative panel and encouraged by the composer, I set out to create, develop and display my interpretation of naturalistic behavior and the interplay of spider and fly.

As for the primary parameters, I did not influence them in any way after she started writing the piece. What can be regarded as contribution is that the Spider was primarily written with my hands and the range of fingers in mind. Jasmina Mitrušić Derić was a close listener at my concerts for years and I always enjoyed discussing music with her. She was aware of my small hands and their natural ability of playing minute and light textures with ease. The whole piece was written with intervals not bigger then sevenths. Variations were conceived as technically demanding and extremely active.

Concerned with the visual image of the spider on the keys, she wrote bits of music that would set fingers and hands into motion in such way so that they match spider's movements. In the early stages of work, I played parts of phrases in order to see if technically it could be done. Even though some small changes were introduced, most of the music imposed new ways of activating the performing apparatus, ways that would urge a performer to think outside the limits of traditional upbringing of a pianist. After playing it several times, with different sets of fingerings and in different tempi it proved to bring about one of the most intriguing elements of her music: a genuine setting in which visual and acoustic elements are connected and propose a new way of experiencing music.


3. PERFORMANCE

3.1 The storyline and the preparation for its presentation

"Spider Variations is a piece that belong in the category of program music. Performer's understanding of the program creates individual interpretation. What is expected is already incorporated in the music itself, the pre-planned character, voice and content. It is what creates a clear picture of what needs to be presented.

As a composer, I don't want to impose the program as an absolute determinant. I feel the program should serve only as guidance, not the final outcome. Having an absolute determination of any kind feels like a prison, and that is precisely what I want to avoid."
(Jasmina Mitrušić Đerić, Novi Sad, 2012)

Precise performance of Spider Variations presents quite a challenge. Not only does this piece require a skilled pianist in technical ways but one ready to set their own imagination in motion. Spider was written in 2012 by a composer of a progressive mind, very familiar with the new tendencies in music of 20th and 21st century. I found myself looking at an atonal work of free form that, by its structure, sharp dissonance and the very concept, speaks of how concerned, and to what extent, the composer is with the modern expression. What hides beneath is a specific sentiment, to some extent romantic, following up on admiration of nature, natural colors and timbre and the deep and sincere emotional investment. However, it is a piece with a storyline of basic instincts and predator and prey relationship.

3.2 Presentation of themes

“It is a mistake if contemporary music is performed rigid, without interest in the inner expression of a piece. There is a tendency of considering this music as insufficiently live in expression that is partly governed by high
involvement of dissonance. It is in a way repulsive to both the performer and the audience. A performer that holds virtue of taking interest in what the composer had experienced while writing music will always look for the expression instead of simply presuming its absence. Dissonant music can but does not necessarily have to be deprived of expression. In this case, case of Spider Variations, it is not.”

(Jasmina Mitrušić-Đerić, Novi Sad, 2012)

My first concern was with proper opening of the piece. I understood that all three themes needed a vivid presentation. Of all three, I chose to first start working on the Fly. The sound frame in which it was conceived and written suggested the clearest and most exact way of execution. There was not much room for decision-making. The faster I played, the clearer was the fly’s buzzing.

Presenting it properly depended on continuous, insisting and, in a way, monotonous sound. Early on I realized that the use of pedal had to be extremely light, just enough to maintain the lines that were notated in groups of three, six, seven, eight, ten or eleven bars. Dynamics wise I tried staying in the borders of p (sign used for soft sound), trying out the micro dynamics on separate groups and stretching the sound from as possible ppp (extremely soft) to mp. Since making a diminuendo within the range of p dynamics, from mp to pp or p to ppp, while holding the sustaining pedal is very demanding, I used to vibrate or change the pedal before the very ending of those groups or tried to achieve diminuendo with only finger technique. Fermatas used in the theme of the Fly differ from the ones used in other movements, as they literally present the sound itself, which we notice when we hear the buzzing of flies. That is how I listened and incorporated them, as opposed to the role of those used in themes of Spider and Net, and their variations.

The creative stimulation I needed to set up a visual posture for the theme of spider was in imagining different movements of a spider. Its first appearance stages the first scene. The spider, with its thin long legs, walks
quickly, holding still for short moments. I presented decisive movements and opening steps in mf dynamics and their wavering in p and pp dynamics. The second scene shows the elements of spider’s creeping, later developed in the variation “Prowl around…” There are also mentioned the chords which are later used and built up to flare the “Feast”. The third scene (marked as C in the analysis) combines elements of the first and second scenes (A and B) and is the ground for the first variation, “Nirvana”, to appear after the themes are displayed. The key was to hold on to a slightly reduced sound, even when showing the chords, and saving the big sound for the dramatic events in the final movements. What I invested in the most was clear phrasing and sharp differences when exposing different material. The complete input of slurs applies only to phrasing and in no way concerns the legato playing.

The theme of net is different than the other two themes in both character and tempo and it shows, in my opinion, to the utmost weather or not the performer understands the logic of this music. It holds specific information crucial for the development of the piece and every time it shows up later on, it brings us back to the mystical and almost sentimental feature of it. The inner pulsation tailors the perception of the piece and draws our intention to its poetics.

Introducing it in the opening six measures, I was guided by impression of sway, wrapping up lines of three or two eight notes into planned phrases of two bars. Such divers grouping reflects design of a spider’s net, lightweight and uneven. In words of the composer, the tempo of this theme is “sliding”. It allows and even pushes a performer to play every phrase free, as if each one of them was lining an imaginary net. After the introduction, comes a polyphonic variation of the previous material. I immediately understood this material as modernistic two voice inventions, which, including the chords and evolvement of dynamic outline produce the central development, thus forming a texture that, in my opinion, is the core of the whole piece. Chords underline the calm atmosphere and their dissonance resembles the net we see in the nature and uneasy feeling it creates if we
touch it.

3.3 What the audience hears

“Every movement of a spider is different, and the human eye can spot it only while watching a recorded clip, played in slow motion. The minimal differences written in the score are response to spider’s way of moving. Every one of these shifts in the notated text brings about dynamization of the music flow and its enrichment. The shifts are not distinctive on a conscious level, but are effective on a deeper, unconscious level. The perception of music is something I give a lot of thought to. The audience can relate to a program and they are immediately encouraged to listen to music for which they have already created an inner visual image. The conscious level allows the audience to listen and relax while listening in advance. If there were no repetition, one would always listen to a new material and in doing so, get tired, dose off and stop listening. But when listening to a familiar material, one is always fresh and those minutely changes are only heard on a subconscious level. Nonetheless, they are heard. That is why the form of variations is so interesting, it refreshes the memory and brings back the attention.”
(Jasmina Mitrušić Derić, Novi Sad, 2012)

It is interesting for a performer too to consider what the audience hears. Before the premiere I organized public rehearsals where I asked my friends and colleagues from school to sit and listen to various versions I created. It offered an inside look and I benefited from it. To take as an example variation Nirvana, I was prepared to play it in different tempos and tried several on different occasions, but, as I guessed, the slower I played the greater sensation of hypnosis was on the audience. It created an altered perception, noticed by one friend to be on border of psychedelic. I was particularly keen on checking if the motif from the theme of Net will be spotted every time, and tried to always present it in the same tempo, with the same articulation. It was, but no one really noticed the fine changes in
the text. I guess it is not possible to register these changes, especially if listening to the piece for the first time and without scores. Never the less, I am fascinated by the fact how we register music, and how, subconsciously, if listening carefully, we take notice of all that composer wants us to hear, even the altered information presented in those minute changes in music such as Spider Variations.

3.4 Premiere of Spider Variations

When we go to a concert and listen to a pianist perform an established program, we never listen to the piece, we listen to the performance. We know the piece and we have heard countless recordings and live performances of it. What we do is focus on understanding the performance and comparing it to the ones we already know. We dedicate our attention to different layers of performance and spontaneously admire or criticize it, all of it made possible by the piece - as it is a familiar item to us or even a favorite.

When attending a concert when a premiere takes place, the focus is split between the piece and the performer. If the performer aspires to do well and present the piece as an intriguing music which we would want to hear again, the piece needs to be truly performed, not just played. Music must be as transparent as possible and some performance decisions must be reexamined as one cannot premiere a piece and insist on a radical approach. In my opinion, every piece deserves a fair chance of being at least that one time performed exactly as intended by composer.

Premiering a piece is a very unique experience and it is a sensitive business. Most times the premieres are recorded and those recordings are later used as benchmarks. The first performance is also very influential and in a way determines the further life of the piece.

On 24th of May this year, I did the first public performance of Spider Variations. Taking into consideration how important it is and what a privilege to premiere a piece, I would rate this performance as one of the
most exciting I have experienced in live performance. After the concert I was overwhelmed by success of the piece. I felt extremely proud and very much involved in the process of music making, for it was not just about me presenting my performance but helping bring about an extraordinary new piece of music. A very original one, direct, audience friendly and exciting on so many levels, that I was not surprised it had good critics immediately after its first performance.

I was very satisfied with how fruitful all the preparation preceding the performance was on stage. As for the memorization process, I relied on it in full and it proved to be rock solid. Generally, such memorization process is highly demanding but it is very well worth it. I felt confident on stage and much more convincing both as a professional musician as well as an invited interpreter of Jasmina Mitrušić Đerić’s music as opposed to a situation in which I would have played the piece from the scores, often practiced when contemporary music in question. For this reason precisely, I feel strongly about performing from memory all music, including music written in 20th and 21st century. This is a hot topic, yet to be debated, but I am personally all for memorized score, when performing solo. If all music is traditionally performed by heart, there should be no difference with new music, unless instructed by composer. So much has been said on the quality of a performance when done by hearth, and all the same arguments apply to every performance, no matter the choice of program.

Being confident on stage made me feel as I can freely explore the acoustics and I enjoyed all the little indeterminacies before me. When looking for the perfect sonority in a concert hall, adjusting the pedaling plays crucial part. I was lucky to have an opportunity to perform Spider Variations on a wonderful Steinway. The acoustic of the hall allowed a dose of reverb and so I used pedal to color, not prolong the sound. No matter how many times a piece is played in rehearsals, every public performance, especially on a giving piano, makes it fresh all over again. And this is how I felt. I enjoyed very much the slow movements, trying to show a range of timbre and contrasting piano dynamics in different material. In fast
movements and under a slight excitement, I felt the overall rhythm more as a constant pulsation that was interrupted by pauses or fermatas allowing this pulsation to breath, as in nature, and not program it artificially.

I believe that what played a central part in my programming this piece as a regular on my repertoire, even after the master examination, is how universal and timeless it is.

Despite all the cruelty and raw sound it displays, when depicting nature, there is a constant strain of emotion in that romantic way. To play this piece restrained from emotional involvement is to do it injustice. I believe that when we say a piece is of romantic expression, it means that it holds a certain emotion. In that sense all music is romantic and all needs emotional involvement when performed, and it is so with music written in the 20th and 21st century.
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