The message of the memory – Lovro von Matačić (1899 – 1985)

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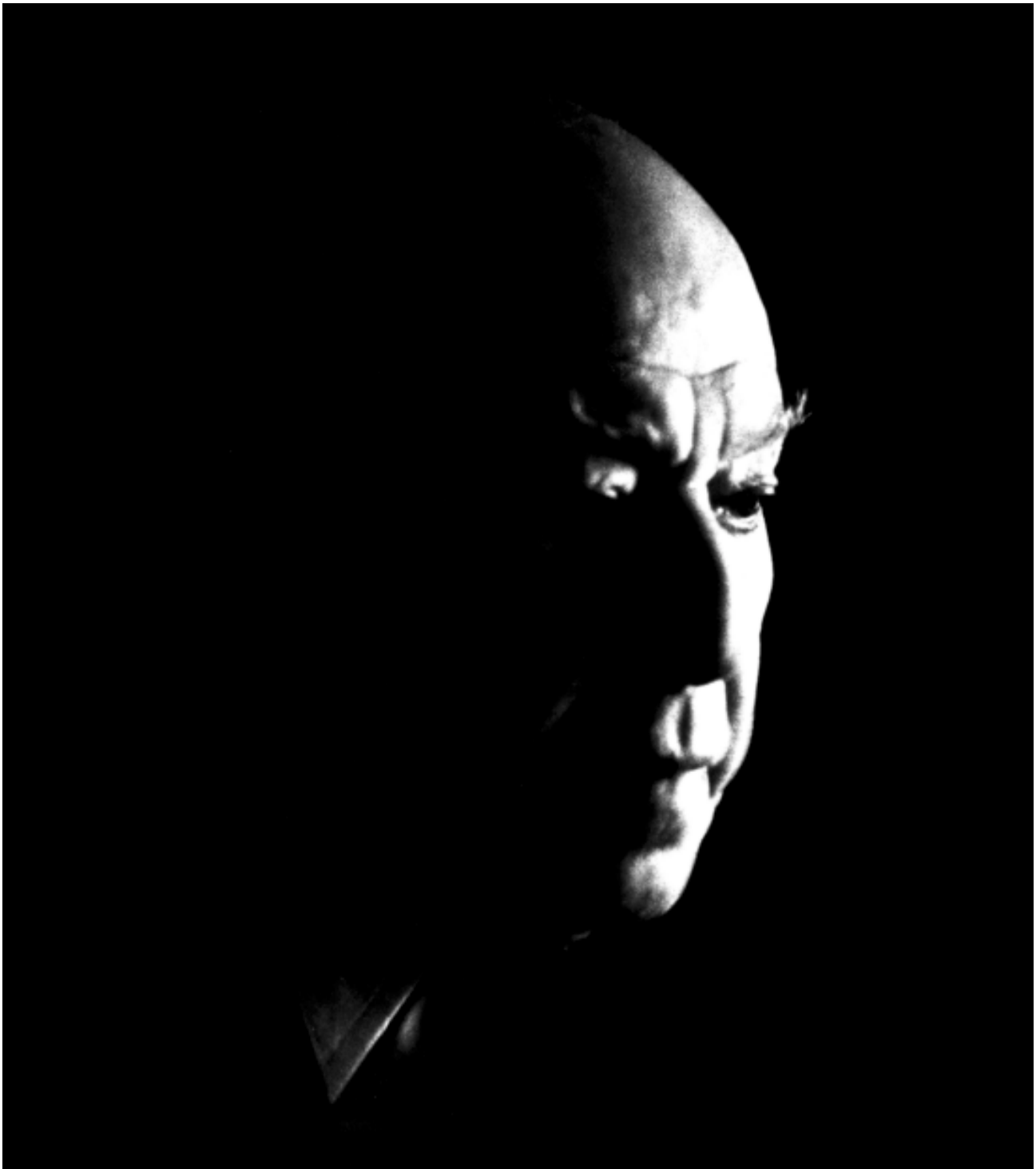

With age, memories become growingly alike to their cherisher, but increasingly different to what has been remembered and thus essentially useless for establishing a relation to past reality. Every attempt to recover *lifelikeness* of past events with the assistance of our reminiscence for the purpose of our own moment of observation represents at the same time an effort to return to sources as well as an attempt to define our own moment and its requirements towards the past, provided, of course, that there are such desires.

Are there any of them here and now regarding Lovro von Mata~i}? Are they present beyond anniversaries and representative occasions (even the contributions in this magazine are written on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of Maestro's death), are they inherent part of everyday strive of our (musical) culture? Are they present in the educational, interpretational, literary practice as permanent references to a recognised, either adopted or argued through an intense creative dialogue as a spiritual constant or a paradigm? Or, to deprive these evidently rhetorical questions of their pathetic charge, what could be so fascinating today about the personality and the artistic figure of conductor and composer Lovro von Mata~i}, one of the greatest musicians ever formed within the Croatian cultural realm? I find it appropriate to limit myself on this occasion on two simple replies: this is the power of enduring on the verge of things and the energy of self-realisation through music.

Musil's dying Kakania where *"to exist negatively free, in an absence of reason for self existence"* was indeed the setting of the first two decades of Mata~i}'s life. Yet, it was, metaphorically, true of his entire life. Born on the border of the Central European commonwealth of peoples and educated in its centre, he enjoyed until the end of his career the reputation as 'one of the last representatives of the old guard of conductors, the one that has preserved the interpretative heritage of the past until the present day', which, given the entire territory on which Mata~i}'s career was developed – in France as well as Spain, in Argentina as well as Japan, England, Poland, Italy or the Netherlands, unmistakably implied the Austro-Hungarian spiritual and civilization tradition that formed also conductors such as Arthur Nikisch or Hans von Bülow but also the tradition concentrated to the point of incandescence by the 'Kakanian' *fin de siècle.*

Yet, are we really dealing here with *tradition* in the common sense of the that word? Apart from the specific and unrepeated type of national diversity Mata~i} lived all of his life calling it *Europeism*, this was also the age and the place of extreme versatility, in fact, heterogeneity of philosophies of life and, in particular, of aesthetics. The multiplicity of styles and schools, of philosophies and apprenticeship, of political and social convictions shattered the protective code of tradition transferring the conscientiousness of making a choice to the emotional and intellectual spheres of each individual. The independent, often rebellious individual treading an unconventional, often adventurous path of life and of professional growth is the prototype of man at the turn of the century, who links a melancholic resume of the past with wild enthusiasm for the forthcoming new. The period of the Modernism in literature and fine arts, although to a lesser extent in music, is a borderline period of diverse tastes, fashions and techniques and of closely neighbouring triviality and sublimity, seriousness and entertainment, tragical and comical. This period is Mata~i}'s spiritual cradle from which he derived power for apparent and yet so fruitful contradictions of his artistic nature: for self-confidence and modesty, unconventionality and proneness to etiquette, hedonism full of naive serenity and theatrical asceticism, operetta and mass, cabaret and opera of redemption, for Agatha Christie and Rilke; for a position within and beyond many borders, from which *everything is possible* and which we could recognise today as – postmodernism.

In addition to time boundaries, there is also regional one. Mata~i} comes from the periphery of the Central European commonwealth of peoples, which deserves to be called bluntly in the Krle'a-like manner – the

province. He experienced it most dramatically and even physically in the post-war chaos of the 1920s and 1950s, when his biography started to resemble the one of the Kosorov's or Nehajev's anti-heroes. To escape… not to sink… The twenty-year-old Mata~i} manages to escape with the power of his disbelief that the real surroundings is his own true destiny. The Kakanian Europeism had not yet been entirely forgotten, and its southeastern periphery still had a somewhat exotic, revitalizing appeal for the centre. About thirty years later, the same goal was more difficult to achieve: borders were multiplying, from the political and ideological ones to the generational ones. Energy invested in overcoming these boundaries is actually immense. Truly amazing. In many of the maestro's resumes, and at the time when this was not easy, Croatia was quoted as his country of birth ('*in Kroatien*'). To him, both then and later, and exactly thanks to the people of his own mould, this meant – the world. In seemingly 'borderless' layout of today's global world, the issue of province acquires a new, poignant meaning and a new reality. To overcome it, there is always only one way – the Mata~i}'s way.

The energy of self-realisation through music? What is so unique about that? We are dealing here with a superb musician, who cannot do otherwise… However, there are several charismatic points on the musical repertoire, when, each and every time I hear them, even when interpreted by the greatest, I never fail to think of Lovro Mata~i}. I will quote here just two of such instances, only superficially similar. The opening 19 bars of *Introitus* from Mozart's *Requiem* (*Adagio*) and the first 16 bars of the first movement of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*. In the first case, we have a growth of dynamics from piano to forte and backwards. In the latter, there is a rise from pianissimo towards fortissimo. An enormous expansion of sound in a small fragment, and yet, what is especially fascinating is the very opening where highest concentration of the sound pulsation is present at the lower limit of audibility. Karajan, with his eyes closed and his arms slightly held out. Or Solti, somewhat not interested in the preparation for the big thing yet to come, carefully conducting because the *pianissimo* is such that only from the movement of his arms the audience can discern that the piece has already started. Or the smiling Abbado, in a kind of a gentle covenant with the secret unfolding before him… Nowhere else such pulsation of fear, maybe the only one in the entire Mozart's mass for the dead, and nowhere else such a Beethovenian miracle of genesis, the circular movement of time instead of the classical dialectic progression prevailing until then ('*Here the silence is not being broken but rather gradually replaced by the sound*', as noticed by Leo Treitler) – as with Mata~i}. I can recall the rehearsals and numerous nervous, ungainly beating of the hand on the stand, again, not good, *pssst* – as he hissed his musical "Esperanto", always with the Viennese accent, until he could perceive the fear or the emerging genesis resembling at least in some measure what he could hear with his inner ear…, which was enough to make one feel a chill down one's spine… Not metaphysically, not because of the 'message', but actually, physically.

Mata~i}'s musicality was deeply ingrained in his constitution (or in less subtle terms – physically and erotically movable) and he was unmistakable on this level. It was the foundation underlying education, culture, mentality, taste, temper and all other things, which, of course, all can be discussed. However, this foundation gave him freedom but also provided a firm guidance. Free from the limits of particular styles and aesthetics, Mata~i} felt this inner musicality in Monteverdi and Gluck, as well as in Bruckner or Tchaikovsky but he did not feel it in Bach, for instance, and this is why, intimidated by his own respect, he did not dare to approach him. This musicality governed his idea of the soundscape, moulded the concept of the sound architecture, determined the positions and spans of peak loads, and managed the kinetics of the timeflow. Finally, this musicality was underlying Mata~i}'s perception of the entire world, especially of literature. He would know Wagner's awkward verses by heart, not because of their metaphorical verbal chaos but most of all due to the rhythm and melody of the verse, and then by a childish game full of theatrical symbolism because, to be fair, Mata~i} was indeed a man of the theatre…

The intensity of Mata~i}'s sound fantasy and intuition, actually, the intelligence of his ear set in motion the energy of the musicalisation as a positive approach to life, rejecting any redundant rational schemes, aesthetic relativity, let alone reflexive scepticism. This simple, serene and invigorating belief in what he was doing and the joy he felt about his achievements constituted the core of his interpretative magic, in which both his musicians and his audience unconditionally believed.

What about the others? Who cares…