## STJEPAN ŠULEK – THE ANTIPROGRESSIVE? (1873.-1934.)

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During the last fifteen years of the past century, several of the most significant Croatian composers left the stage one after another: Milo Cipra in 1985, Stjepan Šulek in 1986, Ivan Brkanović in 1987, Boris Papandopulo in 1991, Bruno Bjelinski in 1992 and Natko Devčić in 1997. Although it might seem natural to expect that their departures within the so-called emergence of the new generation in music they belonged to would encourage changes in esthetic models, this did not happen for several reasons. Partly because these changes had occurred earlier and independent of the presence of these composers, partly because some of them, like Cipra and Devčić, lively participated in those changes themselves and, finally, because some of the esthetic models symbolized by the above-mentioned generation survived the age of change, having, successfully mutated and camouflaged, fitted into our esthetic polyvalent contemporary post-modernistic musical landscape, contributing from over there to the identifiably of its mentality, which some called tradition. This primarily refers to the regenerative power of Papandopulo's Neoclassicist musical idiom on one hand, and Sulek's rhetoric suggestive power of the Late Romantic on the other, which, owing to the school led by the latter, marked the body of work of a large number of his students, despite the fact that. in technical terms, they declared themselves as followers of musical realms entirely alien to the Teacher.

However, the area most affected by the departure of the above-mentioned generation, or at least of its major part, is the one of systems and categories of values. Changes in this area are multiple, remarkable and long-term. The professional authority of Papandopulo, Devčić, Cipra, and most of all of Šulek grew, of course, out of their charisma but also from the exceptionality of their positions in the history. They were, namely, both witnesses of, and participants in the crucial changes in the music of their age, and at the same time the representatives of this age, which still used to measure values against the rules of fully systematized music. In certain cases, this position could have been perceived as the point of conversion and the point of approximation, and in other cases - as the breakaway point. Stjepan Šulek definitely belongs to the latter. Moreover, decades and decades of insisting on the stereotype of Sulek being professionally untouchable (no matter how unquestionable), always as a kind of anticipated defense before potential questions about esthetics and style, only increased the gap between him and his (musical?) environment, turning him gradually into a martyr-outcast, and with that permanent "outside" and "against" negative energy several generations of musicians frustrated by avant-garde music was identified. Regardless of the extent to which Šulek himself contributed to such an image, actually he did, I am not sure that this was for the benefit of either his music or his (musical?) environment. The generally accepted and many times repeated definition of Šulek's position in the history of Croatian music reads approximately as follows: his predominantly instrumental opus reveals an artist of pronounced synthesizing capacities, who, using the Baroque musical material, the Romantic expression and the classicist perception of the musical form, succeeded in combining the European musical tradition of the 18th and 19th centuries, and at the same time, building on these foundations a suggestive individual style. Within the cultural realm he created, such a formulation could serve as a supporting argument to the musicological interpretation according to which the "neo-styles" increasingly flourish exactly in the absence of adequate conditions for emergence of original styles - which is true to a certain extent of the eseji o glazbi

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Croatian musical Baroque, and entirely of the almost non-existing Croatian musical Classicism, and to a large extent for the so-called Late Romanticism, a term even today mistakenly used to describe the outdated offshoots of the Early Romantic attempts. In such a context, Sulek's synthesis would have a catalyst function. One of its basic features is an overall resistivity towards various esthetic dictates Sulek had been facing during his career, particularly in relation to the folklore underlying the neo-nationalist committed realism. which was popular in the Croatian music after 1945, as well as to the avant-garde tendencies that appeared in Croatia in the 1960s. Thus, having distanced himself from the both, Sulek placed his great artistic skills in the service of composing, within which, despite certain constant elements in the language of expression, a development from the Neo Baroque and Neo-Classical monumentality to the Late Romantic discourse. The energy of the first is most obvious in the pieces created between 1942 and 1964, that is, in the first four symphonies, particularly in The Second Symphony (1944-1946) and The Fourth Symphony (1954), in the first three classical concertos (1944, 1952 and 1957), in most of the solo concertos, and in both operas, conceived after Shakespeare's pieces of work, Coriolanus (1953-57) and The Tempest (1969). The unfolding of Sulek's compact orchestral writing towards an increasingly glittering sound, resembling the one of Ravel or R. Strauss, as well of the rigid classical and Baroque formal patterns towards the rhapsodic ones, very often by means of forms governed by extra-musical program, can be traced back to The Fifth Symphony (1964), and in particular from The Third Piano Concerto (1970) on through Concerto Etudes SOS for the Piano (1971) and the orchestral Epitaph of the same year, or The Concerto for the Organ and Orchestra (1974). This extra-musical program, which also existed in Šulek's earlier compositions, such as *The Second* Symphony (called Eroica), or in The Fourth (under the motto Desperans Pacem, Spero), or in The Second Classical Concerto dedicated To the Freedom of Spirit and Thought, or in the cantata The Last Adam (1964) on the apocalyptic verse of S. S. Kranjčević, always committed to positive humanity, assumes in his later creations the power of a message and of warning. Unamunoean "tragic feeling of life" cultivated on Schopenhauer's metaphysical pessimism and Spengler's "dark anticipation of the philosophy of the age", underlie Sulek's world-view and musicability. This is corroborated by the composer's unanimous statements (*žthe world of today, this terrible tragedy of the human race, I feel as a physical pain'*, from the interview in the winter of 1972), as well as indicated by many titles and sub-titles of his compositions (Epitaph, To a Lost Illusion, or SOS Concert Etudes, constructed on a Šulek's leitmotif, a rhythmic formula derived from the Morse code, which, among others, also appears in The Concerto for the Organ and Orchestra, under the subtitle Memento). When observing Sulek's music, one cannot neglect this concept of ideas, although, at the same time, one should avoid interpreting every single element of its structure exclusively in the context of such a concept, however attractive any possible analogy may be. And yet, the truth is that Šulek, unlike Papandopulo, is not driven so much by the phrase, rhythm and timbre but rather by an idea, to which the phrase, rhythm and timbre are subjected in the dramatic clash of creation, birth of music. The Beethovenian coming-into-being (das Werden) rather than the Mozartean came-into-being (das Gewordene) bears the seed of all future declines and sets all the parameters of Sulek's musical construction into motion, for which, as for any other construction, the basic laws of form are understood as the energy of moving through space. As long as the balance within the movement conditioned by dualistic principle (inherent to the classical sonata) can be discerned as an attainable goal, there is a concord between the expressed and the expressing in Sulek's musical construction. However, when the expressed, the meaning (I would rather avoid the word message, encumbered with pre-conceived notions) attempts to silence the expressing, referring to the wellknown warning of Nietzsche that "it is in the nature of human perception to understand a set of sounds as a symbol of something else, rather than as pure sound", then the form, as energy, loses balance, some of its parts hypertrophy at the expense of others, the vertical loses its defined function, the horizontal of the theme becomes converted into a chant, motifs multiply as signals and are intercepted without any obvious reason, the sound becomes the sphere of sheer game and pleasures of the flesh, music opens all the chasms and abysses of its being, "Monstrous" as Šulek's student Dubrayko Detoni would express it. Professional authority reveals its vulnerable side, Sulek the Master gives way to Sulek the player, capable even of stepping forward in the direction that, in the context of his world, could be interpreted as a modernistic adventure. And this is the Šulek I like most. The sound becomes the sphere of the pleasures of the flesh. The germs of this typical Late Romantic sensory hedonism can be found already in the early *Three Preludes for the Piano*,

or in the surreal, almost Ligetian polyphone interweavement of the second movement Corale of the Second Classical Concerto, and it exploded in Sulek's piano pieces of a late period, especially in the brilliant garlands of the Concert Etudes. The characteristic come Campanelli appears in the last of them, both as a sound and as a symbol, and disrupts the formal pattern both on the textural level and on the level of meaning, "Šulek's bells" sounded for the first time in the third movement of *The Third Piano Concerto*, then in the first and the last miniatures of his piano cycle Malo pa ništa (1971) - under the titles The Bells and The Bells Again. respectively - and in the closing groupings of the exposition and the reprise of the first movement of *The* Seventh Symphony (1979), overhang by the meaning of a sentence from a personal letter: "to sing when it is time to sing, to die when it is time to die", as Šulek warns and asks in his Author's Note. The multi-layered historical codes, which generate the specific type of Šulek's stylistic polyphony, the composing of music about music and from music, the polysemy of the associative circles that destroys the organism of composition, the ambivalence between the technique conditioned by the material and the expression intended to be produced by it. All of those instances of stepping forward into the realms of (only apparently?) new to Sulek have never emerged so obviously as in the cycle comprising five string quartets under the title My Childhood, written during the last two years of the composer's life. Linking the beginning with the end. this cycle of quartets is everything else but what we would expect from a composer of *ženormous awe to the* string quartet as the purest musical form, deprived of any decoration and external effect, reduced to music itself' - as Stanko Horvat wrote, a student of Šulek - given his vocation and position, it would be perhaps more appropriate to consider him as the Teacher's follower. Namely, Šulek's guartets have many elements beyond the music itself and it is exactly their (unconscious?) collusion with the time in which they were created. Let us take a look at just one of them: for instance, the three-movement (or maybe two-movement?. single-part, or even five-part?) Fifth Quartet, in whose first movement, Moderato, the bridges between the themes are longer and more elaborate than the development and this more similar to a false reprise than to itself, while the three-part Mahlerian Larghetto in nine-eight measure is closer to the introduction of the closing Vivace than to an independent movement. Finally, there is the Vivace, composed of several heterogeneous stages that, non-transformed, keep coming in a sequence evoking simple tripartite composition with double center, comprised of an innocuous Quasi Andantino and a miraculously instrumented Tranquillo, whereby out of the buffer bridge, Allegro giusto, wedged as an alien material between the wrists of the tripartite structure, the closing part of the composition would grow. At its beginning we tend to think about the development but only to realize soon that we are in the middle of the conclusion, a kind of a résumé, not only of this movement, not only of this composition, not only of this cycle but of the entire body of Maestro Šulek opus. As if in a phantasmagoric flash back, fragments of the introduction of the first movement fly around as, as well as its second theme, a reflection of a new, dance phrase, which lures but is never accomplished, the dramatic recitative, Adagio, atmospheres borrowed from Schubert and, finally, in the coda, the echo of the Larghetto and the closing, now really the last reminiscence of the energy of the ascending semiguaver passages from the very beginning of the first movement. The entire vortex of meanings. associations, memories, allusions and illusions does not even seek to suggest an organic integrality, because it cannot. Indeed, images emerge and disappear with the Borghese-like unexpectedness and mysteriousness; there is nothing of the so much praised Šulek's logic of form and firmness of architecture. The disintegration of the form is accompanied by simplifications, both on the harmonic and on the melodic levels, and by exaltations on the level of expression. Sulek takes his leave with a smile, not being ashamed of sentimentality accompanying every parting, which, in his younger days, he used to hide under the zeal of his latent rebellion. which is now also gone.