

The song was our salvation

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Abstract

Already submissive to seductive technology, we have been living almost exclusively through a mediator – the computer, especially from spring 2020. For quite some time, our senses of hearing and touch have been dominated by vision. Digital technology has gradually replaced analogue technology. In longing for perfection, spontaneity has been misled. Goods which have no market value are regarded as a burden. The oldest Serbian tradition – poem/song [1] and singing – has been jeopardized by on one hand, market and media, and on the other, poor awareness of its importance. Poem/song and singing have been a living proof of Serbian existence, survival and lasting.

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus:
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.

From: W. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

Key words: poem, song, singing education

1. Solitude crowd alienation

Since spring 2020, we have been (ab)normally living life through a mediator – the computer. Outings to the theatre, exhibitions or concerts have been tucked in the frame of a monitor. Regardless of its size, it is but a frame which limits vision and abolishes directness and exchange of impact while the emotional charge is brought down to a minimum.

We complied to the seductiveness of technology which has been reducing immediate communication among people through time. We are not surprised any more when we see a loving couple sending each other SMS messages instead of talking to each other, or family members on vacation staring at their mobile phones instead of enjoying the reunion.

On one hand, an “outing” to a concert has, for some time, been gliding towards alienation. Audio-video appliances strengthen solitude by racing with each other which would bring the concert with more fidelity and perfection to the listeners home. The listener becomes a technology consumer happy to choose the virtual row and seat in one of the most prestigious world concert halls from his/her living room.

Live concert experience, on the other hand, moves to sports halls, being a profitable merchandise on the market for a broad circle of consumers. The audience follows the performer from gigantic monitors and the sound from loud speakers. Instead of imminent flow between the performer and audience, music goes through different mediators: from the microphone, through the audio mixer to the computer to be coded and encoded depending on the so-called format (same goes for the picture, the first mediator being the camera). Both sound and picture formats are used for storing as much data as possible to the least possible space.

Analogue technology, which recorded all that the imperfect human ear could hear in a given space, has been rejected. It has been replaced by digital technology. On one hand, it offers clear recording cleansed of undesirable noise (hall, instrument mechanisms, ...), and on the other hand, it broadens the frequency range, which would otherwise fade out within the distance squared. The fact that natural sound balance is also established by natural materials within the hall has also been disregarded [2].

Audio-visual information compressed to the mp3 or mp4 format confirms that morbid English saying where “with the dirty water they threw the child as well”. The experience of a natural three-dimensional music experience depends exclusively on taste and skill of the sound recorder and the position of microphones. New popular music, with prevailing artificially generated music instruments, the majority of young people listen through low quality head phones deeply tucked in their ears. Besides separating themselves from reality threatening their and other peoples lives, they jeopardize their own hearing. Sax warns us that the Corti organ, although well protected from accidental injuries (deeply placed in the head within a hard and solid bone) is totally vulnerable to noise [3].

2. Senses of hearing, touch and sight

We live in the world of visual information, in which the sense of hearing and touch are being suppressed from the earliest age. Although the child hears before birth, hearing being the only connection between life before and after birth, as soon as it develops seeing abilities, all toys direct attention towards recognizing shapes and colors. The child is lead to depend on vision which informs about objects in front: obstacles, walls, *etc.* Added by the present (ab)normal actual circumstances, where the visual field is reduced to the computer monitor, a new danger approaches, “quarantine myopia” [4], proven by the research results in Holland and China.

To what extent eyes are an uncertain source of information is well known to Serbian experience, traditionally conveyed orally, citing Starac Vujadin: “I did not mention the mendacious eyes, which guided me to evil, watching from the highest mountain, watching down the roads, where the Turks and tradesman pass” [5].

As opposed to sight, we hear the world all around, everything that approaches from all sides and beyond the walls. In short, seeing warns, hearing liberates. Let alone the sense of touch, which has almost totally been neglected although it is well known that children are born with the ability to, as it were, “hear” with their fingers because there is an analogue understanding between ear and hand [6].

We should not be surprised by peace, composure and trust in the behavior of blind people in comparison to the nervousness and suspicion of the deaf. Zuckerkandl says that in reality, the blind person does not react as a prisoner spied upon by someone, being on guard. That is how a deaf person behaves, because his most important sense connecting him with the outside world has failed [7].

3. The song was our salvation

Disregarding hearing led to the situation where song singing is unthinkable without visual effects which divert attention from its actual impacts. According to Nestorović, singing reduces stress and improves immunity, especially in group singing [8]. For centuries, singing has had indispensable role in Serbian survival, from epic singing accompanied by *gusle* [9] and church

chanting to promoting national awareness through choirs belonging to the church singing societies in the XIX century [10]. This tradition continued in the XX century through the cultural and artistic societies. The longest Serbian tradition of musicianship has been song singing, particularly choir singing for the last two centuries.

The present market economy hasn't got "an ear" for goods which lack nominal value, which can't be sold or purchased. Many choirs, particularly those connected to the cultural and artistic societies, have been submerged by privatization, depriving them of space for rehearsals and practice. The number of choir encounters, festivals and competitions have been drastically cut down. Students, future parents who are supposed to sing to their children, sing less and less.

Future parents do not sing because it takes too much effort to find an organized choir, since the number of choirs has been reduced. In pop music which they might sing-along during the XX century was developing emphasizing rhythm, with more or less interesting arrangements, reducing the melody. Before, we had a wide range of melodies. One could hear the whole harmonic structure (read: context), so they could be sung with no accompaniment. Today, with few exceptions, the whole beauty and thrill is in the arrangement and accompaniment, but not in the melody itself, which, if sung unaccompanied, seems scarce and uninteresting, as of limited range and monotonous. To sing-along this kind of tunes does not contribute to vocal apparatus development, on the contrary, it encourages inertia even in speech.

In long-lived societies, children traditionally grow up surrounded by songs and singing, thus becoming members of the community. Songs arouse collective experience. Many nations have a whole repertoire of songs for children for acquiring first facts of life, etiquette, habits, foreign languages, and general upbringing.

The mother and the family provide a natural surrounding for children to start speaking and singing. Bjerkvol emphasizes that the spontaneous infant song is child's musical mother-tong both literary and broadly speaking [11]. Mother's singing should, as a rule, take part in child's life before birth. It has been proved that music a child listens to before birth later in life, in times of stress, has the effect of a mild sedative [12]. After birth, imitating mother's singing, the infant continues its arrival to music.

Broadcasting music one-way from mechanical loudspeakers leaves a poor impression in comparison to the vicinity and warmth of another human being [13]. Songs and singing represent the first and immediate natural mode of musicianship, which leads towards arrival to music. Only from the contents of Sheppard's book [14] it is evident that active music-making effects the brain and better linguistic abilities; music encourages movement and develops the ability of physical coordination and its control, helps in remembering and retaining knowledge, and in understanding mathematics and science generally; it teaches highly elaborated social skills, and helps in team work; learning to play an instrument improves mental functions.

Conscious learning a new song is possible when supported by experience of previously unconsciously remembered melodies. Each new knowledge is everlasting when backed by appropriate inner resonance in experience. Otherwise, it comes down to an empty fact which does not stay in memory. Neumann noticed that "a characteristic of the differentiation process in childhood is loss and withdrawal from some facts of perfection and wholeness which child psychology inherits in the measure defined by pleura/uoboros" [15]. The mutual characteristic of a man-genius, creative artist and layman – the magic and attractiveness of existence – has to be sacrificed. The aim of every education, not only in our culture, is to expel the child from its

congenital genius and, through differentiation and renunciation from wholeness, brings it down to Old Adam, towards collective uselessness [15].

Each one of us is born with the experience of ancestors stored in collective memory from the beginning of the world to the present day. Education and upbringing have not been using the principle of evoking that experience for a long time now. On the contrary, they erase it, so that it does not interfere with rational understanding of the world. Education and upbringing based on rousing collective remembrance requires profound attention to every child and a holistic approach to phenomena which are being taught. This kind of education and upbringing requires patience and dedication, not speed and shallowness. It is only seemingly slow, because it does not offer instant results. At the beginning, it relays on myths and tradition, evokes imagination, and links past with the present, to ensure future. With time, it gains speed so much that it not only reaches but overtakes the rational learning, and, contrary to the rational one, stays in the memory permanently.

Natural song learning through singing is truly based upon this principle. Not only melodies but a variety of most diversified melodic patterns are being remembered, let alone verse. The song learning is the last witness of free learning. It does not fall under the science hierarchy, and cannot be and should not be rationally explained to children. Understanding the meaning of verse, in a melody which follows the verse's contour, with melodic rhythm matching rhythm of verse, is quite enough for the children to grasp it. If everything is in balance, the song would be, as it were, sung by itself. Certainly so, when folk songs are concerned, being polished through time, but also top-quality composed songs.

Music has its very strict rules, which science norms cannot completely grasp. They are revealed by those who desire and can approach its substance, directly and naturally – by singing. Each new melody contains a handful of already well-known melodic patterns, which only change their order and context. Like in poetry, where the same word or sentence is articulated differently in various poems depending on the form, context, style, genre, *etc.* Someone would consider this too complicated, almost impossible, but it isn't. So long it is sung, sorted and grouped in memory, like books, films, food I have written about the principles of sorting and grouping as the tools for creating personal “musical vocabulary” in the text about music appreciation [16].

Today, unfortunately children do not sing. Their vocal range is limited for speech, let alone singing. At the entrance exam for music schools, where musical children are accepted, talent for music is not tested by singing. Instead, abilities for hearing and memorizing different short rhythmic models and individual tones are being tested. Even so, if a child has to repeat a pattern played in the instrument, the result is much poorer than if it is sung by the examiner. When this is the situation in music schools, we can only imagine the difficulties in general education schools while choosing children for choir singing.

Aware of the importance of song and singing, as a founder and organizer of the Pedagogical Forum (today: Pedagogical Forum of Performing Arts [17]), I committed three consecutive meetings to this important topic [18]. The Pedagogical Forum has also earned international recognition – *An Introduction to Serbian Performing Arts Education (Critical Insights)*, a collection of abstracts, was published by SEMPRE and iMerc [19], London, in 2017 in both English and Serbian.

4. Conclusion

We have to sing to children in the first place. They should listen to singing without anybody's visualization. Children should imagine the site, event or characters involved in the content of the song. To enable it, children's songs, particularly folk songs and best quality composed songs, should be available to the parents. For quite some time, the supply of music for children has been scarce. The Belgrade Radio Sound Library has hundreds recordings of songs for children, particularly from the times when composing for children was highly appreciated. Those were the times of certain ideological limitations, but, nevertheless, they were full of subjects connected to elevating family life, parenthood, nature, friendship, attachment, patriotism, kindness, and curiosity. The interpretations of those songs were perfect, free from mannerism, and with live instruments as well as recordings from live concerts. Hundreds of recordings of the famous Belgrade children's choir *Kolibri*, with their founder and conductor Milica Manojlović, have evaporated from the media. Most possibly because they established the height standard of perfect natural child singing. Thereby, they show, caution and warn about the steep fall of quality in present child singing. There still are children choirs which follow the *Kolibri* footsteps. Their devoted singing fascinates with beauty and substance, but in order to be seen, they have to include stage movement, at least discretely. However, the quality of singing comes to them first, and not the jumping around the stage, so that the media find them insufficiently attractive to be promoted widely.

Our task is to draw attention to what shambles a child song and singing:

1. a worthless verse, whose rhythm does not match that of the melody;
2. the Serbian language fitted in melodies whose rhythmical patterns suit the English language, thus disregarding the Serbian accents;
3. a melodic contour that does not match that of the verse;
4. the songs of different character sung in the same way;
5. the image of made-up girls, tastelessly dressed, denying the beauty of childhood and the joy of growing up.

I do hope the audience would get sick and tired of bad taste from the media, glitter and forced joyfulness, which divert attention from the deficiency of songs and singing. Let us hope that this text will be read by influential people who love Serbia and wish Serbian children to be brought up as healthy members of the society.

Notes and literature

[1] In Serbian, song is a term which means both poem and song.

[2] In opera houses, crystal chandeliers are not there to prove (lack of) good taste but to overwhelm high frequencies and plush seats to absorb low frequencies. Nowadays, it is entirely up to the sound recorder will the listener receive three-dimensional sound that music occupies or hear music compressed to one dimension.

[3] O. Saks, *Muzikofilija*, Clio, Beograd, 2007, str. 127 (in Serbian).

[4] <https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/drustvo/korona-nam-donela-jos-jedan-zdravstveni-problem-karantinska-kratkovidost-najvise-pogada-decu-koji-su-2021-01-26>.

[5] Starac Vujadin, <https://www.prelepapoezija.com/stari-vujadin/>.

[6] J-R. Bjerkvol, *Nadahnuće biće*, Plato, Beograd, 2005, str. 225 (in Serbian).

[7] V. Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1975, p. 3.

[8] B. Nestorović, *Između dva sveta*, Gnosis Lux, Beograd, 2020, str. 277 (in Serbian).

- [9] <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/singing-to-the-accompaniment-of-the-gusle-01377>.
- [10] Three oldest societies are: the Pančevo Serbian Church Choir Society, founded in 1838, the Serbian Choir Society “Unity”, from Kotor (now in Montenegro), founded in 1839, and the First Belgrade Choir Society, founded in 1853.
- [11] J-R. Bjorkvol, *Nadahnuto biće*, Plato, Beograd, 2005, str. 106 (in Serbian).
- [12] This fact has become so broadly known that it is enough to type key words on the Internet to get a number of texts on the subject, for example, <https://www.healthline.com/health/pregnancy/music-for-baby-in-womb#Can-you-hear-me,-baby?->.
- [13] J-R. Bjorkvol, *Nadahnuto biće*, Plato, Beograd, 2005, стр. 105 (in Serbian).
- [14] P. Sheppard, *Music Makes Your Child Smarter*, Artmis Music, London, 2005.
- [15] E. Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, Bollingen Series XLII, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1969, p. 400.
- [16] В. Миланковић, *Поимање музике*, у: *Музички идентитети*, М. Петровић, уредник, Зборник радова 20. Педагошког форума сценских уметности, Факултет музичких уметности, Београд 2018, стр. 9 (in Serbian), http://www.fmu.bg.ac.rs/dokumentacija/elektronske_publicacije/Zbornik%20PFSU%20za%202017_20-10-2018%20ZA%20SAJT.pdf.
- [17] For more information on the Pedagogical Forum of Performing Arts, see <https://www.facebook.com/PedagogicalForumOfPerformingArtsBelgrade/>.
- [18] *Песма као основно средство комуникације*, В. Миланковић, уредник, Зборник радова 2. Педагошког форума, Факултет музичке уметности, Београд, 2000 (in Serbian); *Певање као основно средство тумачења музике*, В. Миланковић, уредник, Зборник радова 3. Педагошког форума, Факултет музичке уметности, Београд, 2001 (in Serbian); *Утицај жанра песме на процес тумачења музичког садржаја*, В. Миланковић, уредник, Зборник радова 4. Педагошког форума, Факултет музичке уметности, Београд, 2002 (in Serbian).
- [19] https://www.amazon.co.uk/Introduction-Serbian-Performing-Arts-Education/dp/1905351321#reader_1905351321.