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INTERVIEW WITH MIRELA IVCEVIC



Mirela Ivcevic (c) Igor Ripak

October 8, 2019 / [contemporary music](https://www.musicexport.at/category/contemporary-music/) (<https://www.musicexport.at/category/contemporary-music/>), [news](https://www.musicexport.at/category/news/) (<https://www.musicexport.at/category/news/>), [portraits/interviews](https://www.musicexport.at/category/portraitsinterviews/) (<https://www.musicexport.at/category/portraitsinterviews/>)

MIRELA IVCEVIC is regarded as one of the most promising composers of her generation. Her works are performed at international festivals and interpreted by renowned ensembles such as [KLANGFORUM WIEN](https://www.musicexport.at/artist/klangforum-wien/) (<https://www.musicexport.at/artist/klangforum-wien/>) and ENSEMBLE NIKEL. Mirela Ivcevic has been awarded the “Erste Bank Kompositions Preis 2019”. The work will be performed by Klangforum Wien and its world premiere will take place as part of Wien Modern on November 13, 2019.

IVCEVIC breaks with taboos in her oeuvre and searches for the subversive potential that dwells in sounds. In return, she recontextualises fragments of reality and advocates aesthetic pluralism. Her “Sonic Fictions” are composed of fragments and artefacts of the private, social and political realms. In a conversation with Shilla Strelka, the composer explains what has shaped her, why the integration of extra-musical elements seems necessary, and why it is always a matter of exploring relationships.

“NEW MUSIC IS NOT A GENRE [...], IT’S A WAY OF THINKING” – AN INTERVIEW WITH MIRELA IVCEVIC

You were born in Croatia, studied composition in Zagreb with Zeljko Brkanovic, then moved to Vienna to study media composition and applied music with Klaus-Peter Sattler and finally, in the course of a postgraduate study, also with Beat Furrer. How important is contemporary music in Croatia? Are there any differences between the academies?

Mirela Ivicevic: In contrast to Austria, composition studies in Croatia focus primarily on technical ability. Little space is given to the philosophy of music and the concepts behind it. The most exciting and courageous aspect of contemporary music in Croatia is rather due to the independent spirit of research of individual composers. Much happens here outside the academies, at the intersections of the various art disciplines, in the post-academic and underground scene.



Planet 8 (c) Archiv Ivicevic

In your artist's statement one reads that you understand your music as "Sonic Fiction". You create an alternative reality out of fragments of reality. Do you see utopian, i.e. also political potential in fiction, and why does it seem productive to you to bring this concept into play?

Mirela Ivicevic: I very often work with already known and recognisable sound material and play with similarities and differences that arise when you change contexts. I create new relationships in order to question old ones, to perceive and understand them differently. Seen in this light, it's like a film, you create a dream, a deception. But deception has the potential to express something true.

This means that reassembling and collaging is one of your most important composition principles?

Mirela Ivicevic: Composition means reassembling something, especially nowadays. There are only a few unknown sounds left. All the more important is what you do with the existing sounds. Collage is often my weapon of choice, because I am personally most interested in how very different materials can coexist without losing anything of their nature, of their essence, without having to substantially soften or hide them.

"THE QUESTION OF HOW SOMETHING IS READ AND UNDERSTOOD IS INEVITABLE IN THE PROCESS OF CREATION."

You once mentioned in an interview that you never compose with sounds alone, but always with

contexts of sounds. I found that an important consideration. What does that mean for you in the realisation?

Mirela Ivicovic: There are basically two ways: Either you try to create a sound that is as reference-free as possible, or you have to assume that almost every sound is already charged with musical or non-musical meanings. In the second case one should explore these meanings as closely as possible, be aware of them, and integrate them into the composition process. Almost all composers, including myself, dream of taking the first path. That's why many of us love Helmut Lachenmann so much – his music can do it. It catapults you to another planet. It is a challenge to try something like this, because even if it is difficult, you create something much bigger, timeless. I became familiar with the second way in the course of my work in the theatre, with my occupation with text and image. The question of how something is read and understood is inevitable in the process of creation. It is also in a way a Donquichotterie, because one can never be sure of the answer. But to be sure of something is overrated anyway. I like to take this path because with a little luck I can bring about extremely intense reactions here – to the newly created, but also to the recontextualised material itself. It can challenge your perspective, which I find very important.

“I WAS ALWAYS AWARE OF HOW STRONG THE POWER OF MUSIC IS [...]”

Mirela Ivicovic: Case White (2018)



Queerness, otherness, self-determination, personal freedom – how political is your art? You incorporate biographical elements into your compositions. For example, in the pieces “Case Black” and “Case White”, which refer to an offensive of the Axis powers in Bosnia that failed in 1943 and in which many Yugoslav partisans, including your grandfather, died. You address the fascism prevailing at that time and relate it to the fascist tendencies of our time. What can music do in politically shattered times? What do you see as its task?

Mirela Ivicovic: My works are often quite political, at least as far as my main medium, sound, allows. I was always aware of how strong the power of music is and how much power it has. There is no war, including the one I experienced myself, no dictatorship in which music wasn't involved. I almost feel obliged to counteract this by taking this “superpower” into my own hands. Especially if you already have regular access to the public, I find it important to use it for good purposes.

You have already worked with renowned ensembles, including Klangforum Wien, Ensemble Nikel, Ensemble Reconsil, and above all the Black Page Orchestra, which you co-founded. You wrote the piece “Case Black” for the Black Page Orchestra and “Case White” was commissioned by Klangforum Wien. What is it like to work with the Klangforum?

Mirela Ivicovic: Very pleasant and inspiring! They have a huge pool of timbres and playing techniques! You feel

like you are in front of a toy chest that has been unlocked just for you. After a rehearsal with them I am always overjoyed!

Mirela Ivičević - CASE BLACK



And what are the strengths of the *Black Page Orchestra* in your eyes?

Mirela Ivicevic: The *Black Page Orchestra* (<https://www.musicexport.at/artist/black-page-orchestra/>) is a very heterogeneous group of musicians from all over the world with different backgrounds. Some of them specialise more in new music, some come from jazz, some have made careers outside of BPO in classical or even pop music. And then they meet as BPO to perform the most radical electroacoustic and intermedial compositions. This fact and the energy they radiate during the realisation are simply overwhelming! I am very happy to be connected with them.

“MY OWN ESCAPE INTO FREEDOM OF REFERENCE.”

Another focus of your compositional work is the exploration of language. Decomposing it, turning it upside down, and reconstructing it plays a role in many of your pieces. What possibilities does this open up? Examples would be the “Dominosa” series and also your composition “Scarlet.Song”.

Mirela Ivicevic: As already mentioned, one can no longer speak of a reference-free place in language, as long as one speaks it and understands the words. There are countless ways to shift narratives and meanings. This is extremely exciting for me! On the other hand, it can also be used as an abstract material in a composition, e.g. by simply adopting its rhythmic structure.

Mirela Ivičević SCARLET SONG



You have no fear of contact with noise. On the contrary, you like to promote the sound of chaos. What interests you about these sound qualities?

Mirela Ivicevic: There are many reasons for this. On the one hand, it functions for me as a metaphor for the dissolution of unnecessary boundaries – in music and in life in general. I often compare noise with the sea: Many people are afraid to swim out into the sea until the bottom looks so dark that you can't really see anything. But for me that was the best thing even as a child! It was the best time for me to concentrate on myself, on the movement of swimming. I could perceive my existence as a whole. I was also lucky – or cursed – to have perfect pitch. I can't actually listen to tempered music without my brain automatically recognising at least the most prominent pitches. When the frequency density is so high, it's not so easy anymore, which means I can hear differently and relax. It is liberating. My own escape route to freedom of reference.

“EVERY SOUND [CAN] BE A MEANS TO DESTABILISE”

How can the subversive potential of sounds actually be determined?

Mirela Ivicevic: You can't determine it 100 percent, you can only guess. Basically, every sound can be a means of destabilising and breaking from the existing order and hierarchies – or not, depending on the shape of the latter. In any case, one should know well the circumstances in which they sound. It is something that is difficult to tame, but it is still worth daring to subvert.



[Mirela Ivičević](#)

Dominosa Octarine, excerpt: Chaos



Cookie-Richtlinie

I wonder how much courage is required in contemporary composition. But also what roles rebellion and breaking taboos play for you. One of your pieces is called “FEAR.LESS.SONGS”. Can this be read in this context?

Mirela Ivicevic: “FEAR.LESS.SONGS” was commissioned by the *Trio Korngold*, a brilliant, highly virtuoso ensemble for classical music. I wanted to create a piece for the ensemble that would “detabootise” newer compositional approaches and playing techniques that are still taboo in the classical music world and liberate them from a kind of trauma, without having to make major compositional compromises. One could also say that it is a didactic piece, and I find it very important. First experiences are so formative!

Mirela Ivičević: FEAR.LESS.SONGS (2016)



At the same time there are compositions in which you address self-empowerment and female

sexuality. Do you think this is still a taboo area in the context of contemporary composition?

Mirela Ivicevic: I haven't experienced that in the context of contemporary composition; it would somehow be worse elsewhere. It's more that for many people in general both their own sexuality and that of others is somehow frightening. The power that lies within is too great a threat to the existing power structures. That makes it all the more important, I think, to liberate them.

“AESTHETIC PLURALISM IS PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FEATURES OF MY WORK.”

How important do you find it to open contemporary composition to other genres and disciplines? For example, when I listen to “THE F SONG”, there are jazz references and pop music echoes. The result sounds very heterogeneous. How important is aesthetic pluralism for your compositional work?

Mirela Ivicevic: Aesthetic pluralism is probably one of the most important characteristics of my work. New music is not a genre in and of itself, it is a way of thinking. I don't find the idea of limiting oneself to one genre, or something specific, as really fruitful for a thought process. In my case even less, because that's what interests me the most, that is, to create spaces in which differences can live together.

Mirela Ivičević: The F Song (dominosa VII)



You are active on Facebook and Instagram. As a composer, how do you deal with the pressure of self-marketing, which is increasingly handled via the fast-moving social media platforms? Do you feel compelled to serve these channels?

Mirela Ivicevic: I actually started it for fun. It still is. A PR expert would certainly say I should do it differently, but I don't care. I'm very impulsive and emotional. When I see something I like to share with others, no matter how trivial, I do it, when I don't feel like it, I don't do it.

In addition to your composition studies, you also studied cultural management. You were co-curator of the Croatian festival Dani Nove Glazbe and are involved in the organisation of the Black Page Orchestra. Is it beneficial or perhaps somewhat annoying to work as a composer on the side?

Mirela Ivicevic: Being a curator and a composer was actually fun for me, despite the difficulties you always encounter in the independent scene. Finding a balance between the two activities has its advantages: You change perspectives, get to know people differently. Curating is also a composition work, one that many underestimate.

How important is the exchange with colleagues in general?

Mirela Ivicovic: Composing is partly a very lonely process. Only during rehearsals do you get together with others more intensively. I like these moments the most. Festival visits also give you the opportunity to exchange ideas with other composers.

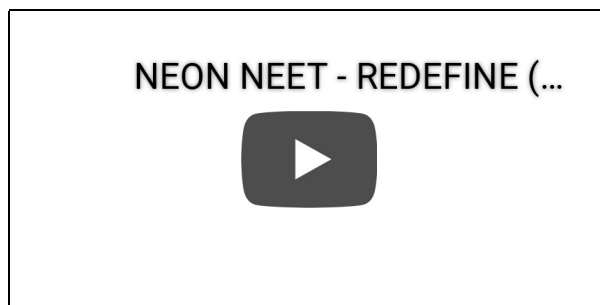
Thank you very much for the interview!

Shilla Strelka

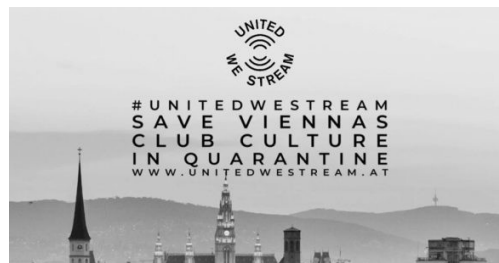
[Translated from the abbreviated [German original \(https://www.musicaustria.at/neue-musik-ist-kein-genre-es-ist-eine-denkart-mirela-ivicevic-im-mica-interview/\)](https://www.musicaustria.at/neue-musik-ist-kein-genre-es-ist-eine-denkart-mirela-ivicevic-im-mica-interview/) by Elisabeth Kelvin, 2019]


[MIRELA IVIČEVIĆ](#)

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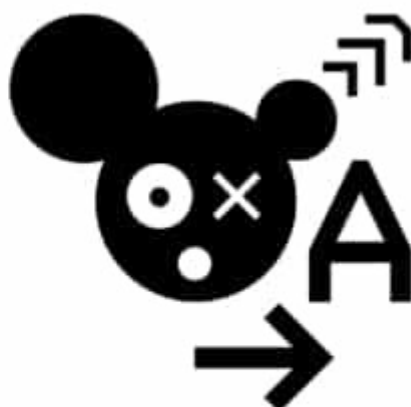


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