

# I PUT MY FAITH INTO THAT ONE PERCENT OF A CHANCE FOR US TO BECOME BETTER AND MORE RESPONSIBLE HUMANS

He is not your typical artist – said once about Aleksandar Simić, Serbian composer who wrote his best compositions for global acquirers, such as the UN, Vatican, Russian Federation, USA Government or NASA, another non-typical journalist, Branko Rosić. It seems unlikely for my colleague Rosić to sugarcoat things like this. For, “He’s utterly crazy!” – That is the first thing you think when you meet Simić if you have even remotely rigid mindset. It should be entirely clear to you that the “crazy” refers to the category which holds Beethoven, Munch, Isaac Newton, Jack London, Virginia Woolf or Edgar Allan Poe. Does that make him a genius? No, no, no... How can a composer be a genius in Serbia? In this country, not even Milutin Milanković could achieve that status. So then he cannot be. Even if he were.

Whether you’re getting to know him through his music – choir, spiritual, chamber, symphonic, through conversation in which he arranges information, data, and new thoughts as if they were a deck of cards in solitaire, or through his biography from which you’re finding out there is not a place he hasn’t lived in or people he hasn’t worked for, started or finished jobs in the most unexpected moments, you’re starting to realize he’s the walking personification of transformation in its most desirable form – the creative one. The best proof for it is the composition “Under One Roof”, which he wrote in 2011 by commission from the United Nations.

Speaking in layman’s terms, while performing this piece the symphonic orchestra takes you on an exciting music travel around the globe. Simić’s notes spring through dozens of different idioms, from Csárdás to Waltz, from traditional Japanese to Turkish music, carrying in itself musical notes from all the nations and instruments, zurlas, tamburas,

didgeridoos, Chinese erhus, Irish flutes, taiko drums... And what happens after those 18 minutes and 22 seconds? Drenched into the souls of so many nations for just a couple of seconds, you become emotionally denationalized. You grow from a potential chauvinist into a cosmopolitan pacifist. If the transformation is even possible.

**Perhaps the fact that you have obviously (namely “pleasantly to the ear”) “left your soul” in „Under One Roof“ makes this question redundant, but we must ask anyway. What do you think, Mr. Simić, is it and how is it possible to switch “them” over altogether or individually “to this side”? Is there any possibility to finally stop with all the horrors of the world that had “visited” us, and history in general?**

- In theory yes. On the other hand, the empiric side tells us chances are quite slim for us as a species to pull our heads from our asses. It hasn’t been said just once that we would most probably be united by a “common challenge”, like an alien invasion, but we’ve learned so far that the moment we kill all the Martians, we would turn against each other again. Common challenges have long been here, even though they might now have light bulb heads and green blood. Those are climate changes, habitat and biosystem devastation, terrorism, wars, catastrophic poverty and total collapse of values. The common denominator, or, should I say, more common than any of the problems we are dealing with, is, unfortunately, what we call human nature – and in its essence lies this strongly expressed tendency towards self-destruction. To finally give you an answer – statistically speaking, chances for it all to go to hell are enormous, probably

99%. Still, we must, even at the cost of being called naïve, believe that one percent is worth investing every molecule of our power, hope, and love into fighting for this planet’s survival.

**Through musical contribution, but also in other ways, you’ve worked on projects dedicated to creation and development of interreligious dialogue. Is there any chance for the transformation of the current antagonistic state, after centuries of proving us wrong? Can you believe in that, even after the unsuccessful attempt to initiate a joint prayer between Muslims, Catholics, Orthodox and Jews in Sarajevo?**

- The attempt to organize that prayer happened first in 1992, and it represents the very beginning of my involvement in something that can be called interreligious dialogue. The point of that whole thing was to show that people in Bosnia want to live together, and not kill each other and that the most important goal of all religious communities should be keeping the peace. The failure of the initiative is just one part of total insanity in which all ideas of civilization have experienced a complete debacle. This madness is still going strong, 20 years after the civil war between Serbs and Croats is officially over. People still think they can defend Catholicism – or Orthodoxy, that is the feeling of being Serbian or Croat, with intolerance and confrontation. At the same time, people are having an entirely abstract idea of loving thy neighbor or “non-neighbor”, turning the other cheek and forgiving, which are, let us not forget, foundations of Christianity, from which both denominations were born. That is one of the most visible and most used examples of the superficial use of religion by those





who truly are non-believers, and of the too frequent confusion of religion and nationality are. There isn't enough space in your magazine to have a serious talk about the complex and omnipresent implications of the "Huntington gap" within one answer to a question, but I can agree with you that this world needs one big and essential spiritual transformation.

**Still, each religion, in one way or another, treats questions about transformation through reincarnation, life, glorifying the afterlife... Your composition "In memoriam" was written, as you say it so yourself, "as a way to remember the fallen, the resurrected, the glorified and the nameless". In which of those transformations do you believe? Just don't say in all of them.**

- I wish this situation here – these few decades of love, survival, hope, creation, stumbling, suffering, and happiness – isn't all there is. From a man who believes in God, you expect him to believe in what we call the "afterlife"; that is to the survival of the spirit even after the physical disappearance. Still, what we call the life of a mortal man is so mystical, magical and priceless in its essence that it seems

sort of blasphemous to expect and assume that after this one we are getting another life – and an eternal one, of course. I would certainly love; once I'm gone, to join my parents, grandparents, friends, pets, and to welcome my children and grandchildren one day, the same way I was welcomed. To know that "everything is ok now", we're finally all together, and we don't have to fear the possibility of losing each other. But, even if that's not the case – this is already a priceless gift. Is it an "entrance exam" or a "diploma", we'll have to wait and see.

**Let's stay on this track for just a bit longer – from Yesenin, Zhukov to Pope John Paul II, your compositions are mostly dedicated to those that are no longer with us. Are there notes in your creative being for the living, that is, is there admiration in your heart for some of your contemporaries?**

- Pope John Paul II was very much alive when I wrote a mass on the occasion of 25 years of his pontificate or when we worked together on the "Roman a particular" on his verses written in Polish. General Zhukov's daughter was alive when I gave her a composition dedicated to her father in 1995, as was my dear Olja Ivanjicki who

called me several years later to do a cycle of paintings and solo poems to remember the great Yesenin 100 years after his birth and 70 years after his death, by making an homage to his life and poetry. Death and life are inseparable. I keep an oil painting in my piano room depicting "krajputaš" [a tombstone placed roadside - tr.], and in it, there is my late teacher Veselin holding a book and saying: "We were born to die, and we die to live". Some of my "contemporaries" are alive, and some are dead for 500 years, which doesn't make them less contemporary. I admire anyone whose work and life are worth admiring.

**Are you among those who support the accelerated development of technology that has transformed what we've considered life so far and given us a possibility to "resurrect" in many ways – appear where we've never been before, generate memories we haven't experienced, communicate without being physically present?**

- This question isn't just rhetorical, but distinctly dystopic too, so I must only agree with the statement that we've managed to turn technology against us in many instances. What goes for fire, applies to Nobel's dynamite, Tim Berners-Lee's



internet or Mendel's genetical engineering – each technology is potentially a great servant and a terrible master. Alienation is one of the most blatant side effects of technological progress.

Judging by your commentary that accompanies the composition "Childhood memories for piano by four hands", the transformation you don't wish for, and you don't recommend is the one from childhood into all that is implied, namely taken away – adulthood. Are we now talking to a 40-year old or a boy?

- When I was young, I realized that I would be 27 in 2000 and wondered how the world would look like in that distant future. I was, of course, convinced that I would certainly be if not old by that time, then indeed grown up and serious. And here we are – 16 years have passed since that groundbreaking year of 2000, and I'm still not feeling worthy of having the title of a "grown up man". I guess it's normal for creative people to suffer from Puer aeternus syndrome. If not for that, there wouldn't be any of the beautiful novels by Mark Twain, Exupéry, or J. M. Barrie,

author of "Peter Pan".

**We'll allow ourselves to ask you something that isn't so "highly intellectual" (to give our brains a little rest from the tempo you so naturally impose). Can you explain to us where and how love transforms, in your case, from "La Valsa" to "Tango for Her", or it always takes two to tango?**

- Love certainly takes two. You cannot sit on your hand for that long for it to replace another human being. People are often so pathetic and falsely poetic when talking about love, and it is depicted in the simplest things, as all the other mystical categories are – in sharing a bed together, watching TV shows together, dealing with problems, dreaming, eating, notes. Sharing is one of those manifestations, I believe, that is most legitimate, and it is the consequence of what we call love.

**Another observation – none of your compositions, if we look at the titles and your commentaries that usually accompany them, aren't dedicated to a particular woman. Why? Is it because**

**everything today quickly becomes „Remembering the Tango“?**

- Each of my honey-mustard sandwiches with chicken and avocado, each eggplant moussaka, each pear and chocolate tart is dedicated to a "particular" woman. And I think that is quite enough.

**To conclude, another inspirational composition title: „Allegro Appassionato“. You clearly are an enthusiast. Do you feel like, and forgive me for using this expression, a fool, in this roughened society that has long proclaimed this characteristic as childish?**

- It's interesting you chose, out of all compositions, the only one that doesn't have a program title, not even a program base, but I understand what triggered you. Passion is an essential ingredient and the key catalyst to the (al)chemical reaction called life. It's important to love and "feel the passion". If the current definition of being smart includes being numb, then I have nothing against being called, as you say it, a fool.



• **Aleksandar Simić** was born in Belgrade in 1973. He grew up in a family where his father, director, and grandfather, lawyer, cultivated a cosmopolitan spirit and stood up for values such as fighting for human rights.

• He spent most of his life at different addresses, from Singapore to USA's West Coast. And as the addresses changed, so did the areas of his interest – from art to biology, from literature to physics.

• He started to read and write when was only two and a half years old. He expressed, from the earliest age, his talent for science, while he showed no particular interest in music. A couple of weeks before his fifteenth birthday he got a Casio calculator as a gift, which "hid" under the numeric keypad keys a "keyboard" of one and a half octave. Fifteen minutes later he had already come up with a 15-tune repertoire.

• He got a piano for his fifteenth birthday.

Just one year later he played the late works of Beethoven sonatas and, as he says it himself, he used to "swallow" musical scores and all books dealing with classical music, from romanticized biographies of great composers to those studying counterpoint, harmony, and forms.

• At the age of sixteen, he was, as he was told, too old to enroll the music school. He continued to learn by himself. Only five years later, when he was in the third year of Medical School, at the urging of friends and owning up to a bet, he decided to take differential and entrance exams at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. He got one hundred points on each of the nearly twenty exams and ended up being the first on the list. That is how he "officially" became a composer. He started to write, perform and produce his music professionally, and his opus number and reputation slowly grew.

• Besides music, an important part of Simić's life are his social and humanitarian engagements. For years he has been the spokesperson and activist for the humanitarian fund "Svetlost" ("The Light"), that has launched campaigns such as the Women's Shelter or the National campaign to help the sight impaired in Serbia. In December of 2009, he started a project "Note iz srca" ("Notes from the Heart"), as a campaign to offer free cultural events dedicated to the elderly, economically disadvantaged and physically challenged.

• His contribution to the interreligious dialogue is also of great importance on an international level, through series of initiatives for more than fifteen years – from Rome via Constantinople to Israel, USA, and the

Balkans. He's an active member of the "Pave the Way" foundation from New York and the "East-West Bridge" organization based in Belgrade.

• From 2007 he's been collaborating with the "Simon Wiesenthal" Center and the Office of the War Crimes Prosecutor in the Republic of Serbia within the framework "Poslednja šansa" ("Last chance") meant to provide conditions to bring to justice the last survived war criminals from World War II.

• His music has been performed at the celebration of significant jubilees such as 300 years of the city of Saint Petersburg, 200 years of Serbian statehood, 60 years of the Holocaust or the 4th anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center, as well as some important meetings, such as the Ecumenical Councils of the Orthodox ecumenism.

• He has written music for over 20 plays and has worked for the first time as a movie composer on the set of the movie "Optimisti" ("The Optimists") by Goran Paskaljević. He wrote the piece "The Heart of the Universe" – the official anthem of the 25th Universiade held in Belgrade in 2009.

• In 2005 he founded the author ensemble "The Seraphim". During 2006 their shows were in the repertoire at the Grand Scene of the National Theatre in Belgrade. Since then he has made different versions of the same ensemble in many other cities, such as New York, London, Turin, Lisbon, Saint Petersburg and Delhi, and held hundreds of concerts with them.

• He is the founder and the president of the Association for the promotion and popularization of classical music.