

UNDOING THE REAL of MUSIC in works by Jasna Veličković

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Three works by Jasna Veličković, written within three years – *Strelka* (2004), *Fiasko* (2005) and *Sputnik* (2006) – draw attention first and foremost by unusual instrumentation. However, in spite of the ‘metallic’, ‘jingling’ sound of *Strelka*, the anxious tension of *Sputnik* and the nonchalant melodiousness of *Fiasko*, these works lead up to an unexpected and exciting effect: compositional systems, carefully and minutely built for and in each work in turn, are also carefully and minutely deconstructed by the end of each piece. It is shown that the broad application of a system and its global operation is impossible. The point is in a fiasco of a utopia – proving that a successfully designed and functional system contains the engine of its own destruction. My attention as a theorist was drawn to the heterogeneity of sound results, but also to a conceptual affiliation of the works which motivated me to explicate them theoretically.

A fiasco of a utopia is decidedly presented in the sound result, as well as in the contextual background of *Fiasko*. On the occasion of the four hundred thirtieth anniversary of the University of Leiden, a suggestion was made that the person and achievements of the Dutch artist Humbert de Superville (1770–1849) should be the framework for a musical-theatrical project performed in the edifice of a former wool factory in the Scheltema complex in Leiden. The project coordinator was a theatrical artist Paul Koek. Superville first started to receive an education in painting. However, he soon realized that a theory to support, explain and problematize his practical work was necessary. He wrote the *Essay on Unconditional Signs in Art*, a utopian text where he developed a cognitive theory of visual signs. According to Superville’s theory, there are three types of universal signs which can be attached to the three colours – red, black and white. A set of meanings was ascribed to each colour, hence red signifies passion, zeal, ecstasy, exhilaration, anger, gesture, motion, work, anxiety, noise, volatility, vicissitude, change, shift and replacement; black signifies pride, the egoism of power, rejection, objection, deepness of thought, generosity, nobility, solemnity, sublimity, magnificence, pride, arrogance; white signifies harmony, humility and dignity. Superville also connected the symbology with the three types of lines – horizontal straight line, ascending slanted line and descending slanted line. Using architecture to demonstrate his system, Superville linked the colour white with the Ancient style and its neutrality, Oriental architecture with the sense of happiness and ascending lines, and Gothic with the sense of sorrow and the black colour. This theoretician obsessively developed his system, applying it even to clothing and interior decoration, thus driving his utopian quest to the extreme and distancing it from reality. Ironically, the universal theory developed by Superville did not meet with universal acceptance, and his works drew attention long after his death, mainly with respect to Piet Mondriaan’s poetics.

The need for universality, which Superville strived for almost grotesquely, determined Jasna Veličković’s choice of the ensemble. She decided to put six second-hand, old, detuned pianos in the core. Much as Superville’s universal theory, the sound of six detuned pianos is ‘condemned’ to pluralism – a potential one is shown as many. Ideal piano sound remains in the imaginary realm, while the demonstrated practice ‘denies’ it. Six heterogeneous and detuned pianos show only the potential which, through the unification of the ununifiable and misaligned, becomes an impossibility. Local totalitarianism of a single unique piano sound infuses into a sound pluralism of the disintegrated piano timbre. One is shown as many. The dualism described creates a dynamic sound result, whose ‘impure’ tuning dislocates the acoustic compass of the work from the expected piano sound reality.

If the impossibility of Superville's universalism is shown through piano sound, three different characters, three female singers dressed in red, white and black represent the transposition of Superville's theory to the work's expressive means. The fact that the choice of the singers was guided by their racial diversity – one was Caucasian (and dressed in white), another African (and dressed in black), and the third one Asian (and dressed in red) – brings a theatre-like component, within the context of the work, to the questions of art's political correctness in the age of globalism. Within a former wool factory, the singers, as well as the pianos, were set up vertically. On the ground level there were two pianos, on the first level one, and on the second level three. On the ground floor there was the 'black' singer, on the first floor the 'red' one, while the 'white' singer, supported by a rope, during the performance moved vertically within the shaft of the former factory elevator, joining either of the other two singers. Ideologically, the 'white' singer was omnipresent. The music material assigned to each vocal part complies with Superville's symbology. The 'red' singer, who occasionally uses the flexatone, sings in wide interval leaps, mostly sixths, the 'white' singer has a uniform part consisting of minor seconds and uses 'props' only symbolically, silently – a glass that does not produce sound – while the 'black' singer has a descending melodic motion dominated by major seconds, and sometimes uses a 'lion's roar'. Also, in Veličković's own words, the idea was that the six pianos in the instrumentation should realize certain lines implied by Superville's theory. While shaping the music material, Veličković consulted the opuses of Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque music theoreticians that had been developing the relationships between colours and music intervals, and discovered many contradictions. The music of *Fiasko* remains within the scope of modality and sometimes quotational platitudes reminiscent of some of the famous Western musical works that can be heard – e.g. the popular fragment of *La donna è mobile* from Verdi's *Rigoletto*, as well as the major sixth leap, in the 'red' singer's part, which is in the core of *Libiamo* from Verdi's *Traviata*.

Fiasko is sung in Esperanto. The project of a constructed language meant to be universal, a project which failed to reach a universal scope, much as Superville's theory proved as an inspirational choice. Also, constructing a new language as a new and universal linguistic reality resonates with Veličković's propensity for re-examining musical reality. Superville's theory is recapitulative: he induced the rules from the existing examples. On this occasion, Veličković directed Superville's theory toward his future and our present day. That was another reason for using Esperanto. She translated the words associated with Supervillean red, black and white and assigned them to the vocal parts. The text sung in a language that is supposed to be generally understandable, yet is not, shows the deconstruction of the institute of a sung dramatic text, often hardly comprehensible as it is in the music theatre. It is also a reminder of sorts of the quest for musicality in language. Another rule set is that the vocal parts are differentiated with respect to the possibility of using citations – the 'black' singer's part abounds in quotational platitudes, in the 'red' singer's part paraphrases of some 'already heard' motifs occur, while the 'white' singer's part remains exclusively in the domain of its own reduced musical reality of stepwise motion.

The theatre-ness evident in this work, and emphasized by the very choice of the space where it was performed, is also one of the constants in Veličković's opus. Advocacy for the performance-like exit from the traditional music media is a characteristic of a few of her works. In *Fiasko* the very projection of the sound space is theatre-like and almost untransferable to a sound carrier. Singers and players in this work have a designator function. The designated is elusive and volatile. All the participants in the composition are but their own nominal functionalities. The ensemble is broken down in space and therefore by contradicting the very notion of joint music-making, the text sung is incomprehensible, the vocal soloists are costumed, but there is no context to narratively support their outfits – they are the symbols of Superville's theory. The piano sound is undone by spontaneous detuning of the

instruments, and the very ensemble consisting of a multitude of pianos is in discord with the historical-ideological background of pianism. The archaic sound of the other keyboard instruments used – the spinet and the portative organ (portative organ plays a well-liked song by an anonymous Renaissance author, while the spinet performs quotational platitudes from the ‘red’ singer’s part) – acts as a counterbalance of sorts, by introducing historical sound objects to the space of molecularized piano sound. *Fiasko* presents a carefully built system, which is at the same time destroyed by showing its disfunctionality. The minuteness of Veličković’s calculation of the usability of musical means within the system of this work is comparable with the minuteness of the twelve-tone technique.