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# Ludmila Frajt: A Quiet Avant-gardist\*

*Ludmila Frajt: tyljoji avangardistė*

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## Abstract

In this article, I discuss the life and work of a notable Serbian female composer of Czech origin, Ludmila Frajt (1919–1999). I regard her as a *quiet avant-gardist* and a pioneer of *écriture féminine* in Serbian music. By discussing her personal and professional path and analyzing some of her landmark works, I demonstrate how she distinguished herself in an overwhelmingly male environment, and identify the main factors that contributed to her decades-long neglect, which has only recently been addressed.

**Keywords:** Ludmila Frajt, Czech musicians in Serbia, post-WWII music, avant-garde, femininity, rediscovery.

## Anotacija

Straipsnyje aptariamas čekų kilmės serbų kompozitorės Ludmilos Frajt (1919–1999) gyvenimas ir kūryba. Ją tyrėja laiko *tylia avangardiste* ir *écriture féminine* pradininke Serbijos muzikoje. Aptariant asmeninį ir profesinį kompozitorės kelią ir analizuojant kai kuriuos svarbiausius kūrinius, parodoma, kaip ji išsiskyrė vyriškoje aplinkoje, ir atskleidžiami pagrindiniai veiksniai, lėmę dešimtmečius trukusį jos nuvertinimą, į kurį dėmesys atkreiptas tik visai neseniai.

**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** Ludmila Frajt, čekų muzikai Serbijoje, muzika po Antrojo pasaulinio karo, avangardas, moteriškumas, atodanga.

## Introduction

Within this article I focus on the life and work of a remarkable Serbian composer of Czech origin, Ludmila Frajt (married name: Franović, Czech: Ludmila Frajtoová, 1919–1999), whom I regard as an embodiment of a *quiet avant-gardist* and a pioneer of *écriture féminine* in Serbian music. Whereas nowadays, in Serbia, female composers greatly outnumber their male counterparts, it was not always the case. Quite the opposite: until the 1950s, Serbia had only three academically trained female composers (I am excluding from this list several notable amateurs):

- Ljubica Marić, born in 1909, studied composition in Prague with Josef Suk (and conducting with Nicolai Malko); she was a member of the first Serbian generation of avant-garde composers, who became known as “the Prague group”;<sup>1</sup>
- Ludmila Frajt, born in 1919, studied composition at the Music Academy in Belgrade with Miloje Milojević (1884–1946) and Josip Slavenski (1896–1955);
- Nadežda Mosusova, born in 1928 (now ninety-six years old!), a descendant of Russian immigrants; she studied composition at the Music Academy in Belgrade with Predrag Milošević (1904–1988), but later worked predominantly as a musicologist.

As we can see, a full decade separated each of these three female pioneers. However, it was not just female composers who were scarce. Serbia is one of several European countries that experienced a very belated development of its cultural and musical life due to unfavorable political circumstances, primarily the centuries-long Ottoman occupation. Since its modern-era (re)birth in the mid-nineteenth century, Serbia has played “catch-up” with the rest of Europe, with varying degrees of success (I. Medić 2021). At the same time, the country has undergone multiple changes in its borders, names, (con)federal organizations, constitutions and dominant ideologies, not to mention numerous wars that inevitably had a detrimental effect on the development of Serbian musical life and its institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Born in Belgrade into a family of Czech immigrants, Ludmila Frajt emerged as one of the most original, but also most underappreciated Serbian avant-gardists of the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s, she studied and assimilated many compositional techniques of the European musical avant-garde—in particular, aleatory, the idea of “open work,” and various multimedia experiments. She was also the first Serbian composer to write several notable electro-acoustic works. But unlike the stereotypical figure of a *loud* avant-gardist—someone

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who rebels against the establishment, writes manifestos, calls for the destruction of the musical institutions of the past, and so on—Ludmila Frajt was a *quiet* avant-gardist, who neither drew attention to herself nor sought publicity. She was a modest and taciturn person, and being a woman in an overwhelmingly male profession contributed to her exclusion and neglect. To her male colleagues, she was an outsider, a harmless anomaly, who did not even merit a page or two in the otherwise comprehensive lexicon *Muzički stvaraoči u Srbiji* [Composers in Serbia] (Peričić et al 1969). Furthermore, she neither occupied a teaching post at the Belgrade Music Academy (from 1973 Faculty of Music of the University of Arts) nor had a prominent position at the Serbian Composers' Association; and she did not push for her works to be published and publicly performed. Thus, her avant-garde drive resulted in works that became her intimate confessions, rather than loud public statements; and, as a consequence, these ambitious and innovative works were all too often overlooked.

Just as her compositional output was marginalized in her lifetime by her colleagues and peers, until relatively recently Ludmila Frajt was also a somewhat obscure figure in Serbian musicology. After many decades of neglect, in recent years, there has been a surge in interest in her life and work, spearheaded by the important research on the entire Frajt family conducted by musicologist Hristina Medić (b. 1943), one of the descendants of the Frajts (and my mother-in-law), who inherited scattered remnants of the once successful family business, including printed sheet music scores, catalogs, manuscripts, various documents, handwritten notes, diaries, correspondence, contracts, and other personal artifacts. Hristina Medić has written extensively about Ludmila's father, uncle, and brother, Jovan (Ján), Vojteh (Vojtěch) and Stevan Frajt, respectively (H. Medić 2014, 2016), edited several collections of popular music arrangements originally printed by Jovan Frajt's publishing house, as well as a CD compilation of Ludmila Frajt's selected works (H. Medić 2015), and she is now working on a landmark monograph about the Frajts, using the family heirloom as her primary sources (H. Medić s.a.). She kindly provided me with some of these precious remnants of a once-thriving family business when I wrote the first two core articles about Ludmila Frajt (I. Medić 2005, 2006). Since then, several other researchers have devoted studies to Ludmila Frajt's film music (Ćirić 2012), her compositional style (I. Medić 2014; Varsaković 2018), her experimentation with sound (Leković 2022), and some of her landmark works such as *Ekloga* (Adžić 2012) and *Nocturne* (Nikolić 2024). Several of these studies were commissioned by Hristina Medić herself and published in the journal *Muzički talas*, which she has edited since 1994. In 2014, a doctoral dissertation was defended at the University of Novi Sad in the field of gender studies,

dedicated to the discourse on Serbian female composers, including Ludmila Frajt (Kostadinović 2014). As of 2024, Laura Emmery, an American music theorist who conducted research in Serbia as a Fulbright scholar, is preparing a monograph on Serbian musical avant-garde (Emmery, under review). This will be the first comprehensive English-language study of many Serbian composers who are yet to be discovered in the West; and in this book Ludmila Frajt will be given a place that she has long deserved.

### The Frajt family and their place in Serbian music

After the liberation of some parts of present-day Serbia from the centuries-long Ottoman rule in the 1830s, the Czechs were the first music professionals brought into the country and tasked with elevating the musical life of Serbia to a professional artistic level. The Czechs left their mark both in the largest cities of Belgrade and Novi Sad, and in numerous smaller towns of central Serbia and the northern province of Vojvodina. Their activities helped develop an awareness of the need for professionalism and building musical institutions as necessary pillars of musical life and its further development. This was not easy, because, upon the liberation of its southern territories from the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century, the Serbian populace was largely uneducated: more than 80% of the country's inhabitants were illiterate. There were few schools and teachers, and those who wished to obtain a university degree were forced to study abroad, which only a few could afford. Systemic music education was practically nonexistent, and the notion of a systematically and thoughtfully developed cultural policy was only to materialize in the distant future. In contrast to the illiterate majority, there was Serbian intelligentsia, educated abroad—scarce in number, but determined to overcome all obstacles that separated Serbia from the rest of Europe, despite numerous political crises and turmoil, revolutions, wars, and other setbacks.

The Czech family of musicians, the Frajts, who lived and worked in Belgrade since 1903, originated from Plzeň (Pilsen). According to Hristina Medić's unpublished findings (H. Medić s.a.), upon their arrival in Belgrade, the bassoon player Václav Frajt (1848–1918) was the oldest family member. He played bassoon in the orchestra of the Temporary National Theatre in Prague, led by Bedřich Smetana. Václav moved back to Plzeň where he and his wife Magdalena had nine children between 1879 and 1894. Wishing to improve family finances, Václav relocated his family to Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, where he and his eldest son Ján (1882–1938) found employment at the Imperial Music Chapel. In 1903 they relocated again, to Belgrade, which was already home to a large Czech diaspora. The Frajts were hired by the Orchestra of the National Theatre in Belgrade, led by

composer and conductor Stanislav Binički (1872–1942). Ján Frajt “Serbified” his name to Jovan: this was a common practice among Czechs in Serbia, in particular those who found employment as conductors of church choirs. Many converted to the Serbian Orthodox faith and took Serbian first names, although they retained Czech surnames. Jovan did not work in the church, but still took a new name and even obtained the nickname “Joca” (a diminutive of Jovan); his children had both Serbian and Czech first names. Jovan Frajt soon became the principal violinist of Binički’s orchestra. He also worked as an organist, conductor, composer, entrepreneur and, eventually, a successful businessman, owner of the music publishing house Edition Frajt and importer of musical instruments and sheet music scores. When he died in 1938, his son Stevan, also a violinist, took over the family business.

Jovan’s daughter and Stevan’s sister Ludmila, nicknamed “Lida” was born in Belgrade on 31 December 1919. Stevan and Ludmila Frajt, as well as their cousins Stanislav and Vlastimir Škarka, were members of the first generation who obtained diplomas from the Belgrade Music Academy. Yet, they all studied with Czech teachers. Ludmila began her piano studies in the class of a remarkable pianist and professor Emil Hájek (1886–1974), a student of Antonín Dvořák, who moved to Belgrade in 1928 after accepting the position of a piano teacher and director of the Music School “Stanković”. After the Music Academy was founded in 1937, Hájek became one of the first professors and served as a long-standing (and very authoritative) Head of the piano department.

The fact that, as a composer, Ludmila Frajt would be a late bloomer was an outcome of her personal and professional circumstances. According to Hristina Medić’s findings, Ludmila experienced a great deal of heartbreak in her youth. She lost her sister Vlasta when she was only thirteen years old, and just a few months after she enrolled to study composition with professor Miloje Milojević, her father Jovan also died. As an ardent young communist, she was captured and tortured by the police of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Her student days were interrupted by the outbreak of World War II, and she volunteered to serve as a nurse. She married Milivoje Franović in 1942, however, she contracted tuberculosis and miscarried their child; and later lost her husband when he was killed at the Syrman Front towards the end of the war. Her professor Miloje Milojević was wounded in the bombing of Belgrade by the Allies in 1944 and subsequently died, so she graduated in the class of a Croatian composer from Međimurje and a former student and collaborator of Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, Josip Slavenski<sup>3</sup> (1896–1955), who had lived in Belgrade since 1924. Josip Slavenski befriended young Ludmila through her father, and as a testimony of their friendship, he served as best man at her wedding to Milivoje Franović. After her

husband’s tragic death, Ludmila did not marry again and remained childless.

She took a long time to recover from all these tragedies, and although she graduated in composition in 1946, it took her more than twenty years to truly find her calling as a composer. The fact that she began her studies before World War II is important because, after the war, the entire artistic climate changed dramatically. As soon as the war ended and the communists established their government in the newly-reassembled Yugoslavia, all composers were subjected to the doctrine of socialist realism, imported directly from the USSR. Since Yugoslavia had already disassociated itself from the USSR and its satellites by 1948, socialist realism in Serbian music was neither long-lasting nor too oppressive and it gradually evolved into moderated modernism, which dominated Serbian music for the next three decades (I. Medić 2007). In spite of being a member of the Communist Party, after the war Ludmila Frajt did not write socialist realist works that glorified President Tito, the Party, the rebuilding of the country after the war, mass songs, cantatas based on war events, and similar incidental works of dubious artistic quality. Such works were written mainly by (male) composers who eagerly joined the new communist elite and quickly took over all important positions at the Music Academy, the Association of Serbian Composers, the National Theater, the Belgrade Philharmonic Orchestra and other landmark institutions. Although Ludmila Frajt herself participated in the war, she was not pressurized to write such trivial works—mainly because, as a woman in a male-dominated profession, she was generally overlooked by fellow composers, music theorists, aestheticians, music critics, and others who dictated the favored and “permitted” styles after the ideological turnover in the country. Since Ludmila Frajt began her studies in the years before World War II, she was fortunate not to be subjected to a rigid academic canon during her studies, allowing her to retain some of her modernist sensibilities. Her compositional expression, shaped under the influence of her professors Milojević and Slavenski, initially manifested as a peculiar combination of French, impressionistic sound refinement inherited from Miloje Milojević, and folkloric, “pagan” expressionism transmitted by Josip Slavenski. Although she was of Czech extraction, Frajt was keenly interested in the folklore tradition and rituals of the Serbs.

Upon graduation, Ludmila Frajt became Head of the music department of the state-owned film studio Avala Film. She wrote music for thirteen documentary films and one feature film, thus becoming the first female film music composer in Serbia and Yugoslavia. Furthermore, in 1961, she wrote the first textbook on how to write film music, showing great knowledge of all aspects of filmmaking.<sup>4</sup> In 1952, she became Deputy Editor-in-Chief of the music program of Radio Belgrade, and in 1958 she was appointed

Secretary of the Music Commission of Yugoslav Radio and Television, where she worked tirelessly on promoting young composers and performers. Unfortunately, she had to retire early in 1972, aged only fifty-two, due to poor health—aside from tuberculosis, which she had contracted in her youth, she also suffered from hereditary Type 1 diabetes, which only worsened over time. But while her careers as an executive at Yugoslav Radio and Television and a composer of applied music for film, radio and television were thus cut short, her retirement signaled the beginning of her new career, as a freelance avant-garde composer.

### The quiet avant-gardist

Whereas Ludmila Frajt's demanding career left little time to devote to composing music that felt truly her own, her early retirement allowed her to pursue her long-suppressed interests. Thus she began to write music more intensively, with each of her new works representing a departure from the previous ones. The interest of some (but not all) Serbian composers in the latest avant-garde tendencies was greatly spearheaded by the founding of the first festival of contemporary music in Serbia, the Music Biennale Zagreb in 1961. For many Serbian composers, who had been culturally isolated during the 1940s and 1950s, the first edition of the festival, an eight-day event lasting from 15 to 24 May 1961, and featuring works by Luigi Dallapiccola, Béla Bartók, Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, Paul Hindemith, Herbert Eimert, György Ligeti, Pierre Boulez, Olivier Messiaen, John Cage, Witold Lutosławski, Pierre Schaeffer, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Mauricio Kagel, with the latter four in attendance, was "the first and most significant exposure to contemporary musical trends" (Emmery 2022: 474).

As I previously observed, following the Zagreb Biennale many Yugoslav composers went through creative crises, struggling to cope with the sudden influx of new styles: some abandoned composition altogether, while others tried to somewhat "modernize" their musical handwriting, to greater or lesser success (Medić 2022). In contrast, Ludmila Frajt was deeply inspired to study and assimilate the latest compositional techniques of the European musical avant-garde—in particular, aleatory, the idea of "open work", micropolyphony, and various multimedia experiments, including electro-acoustic music. Already equipped with knowledge of studio-recording techniques from her extensive experience at the studios of Avala Film, Radio Belgrade, and Yugoslav Radio Television, Frajt further expanded her understanding of the latest avant-garde tendencies by attending summer courses in Darmstadt in the early 1960s and working at the Experimental Studio of Czech Radio. Slobodan Varsaković has argued that Frajt's undisputed

avant-garde trait was "the enrichment and extension of the existing musical-sound fund with new sounds that had hitherto not been used as musical material" (Varsaković 2018: 14). Being of Czech extraction, Ludmila Frajt shaped her avant-garde handwriting predominantly on Central European models, such as Hungarian György Ligeti and the Polish composers Witold Lutosławski, Krzysztof Penderecki and other exponents of the so-called "Polish School". On the other hand, she was not particularly interested in serialism or American experimentalism, although she was certainly aware of all these tendencies as the music editor-in-chief at Yugoslav Radio Television, where she was in charge of the international exchange of radio programs, among other things. While such interest in Central European avant-garde was generally characteristic of Serbian composers born in the 1930s, who entered the professional arena in the early 1960s, just as the Biennale was founded, Ludmila Frajt could not establish a generational kinship with them, because she was some fifteen years older; actually, she was the only member of her generation who tried and managed to "keep up" with the young ones.

Ludmila Frajt's most remarkable works from the 1960s and 1970s included:

- 1966–67 *Asteroids*, electro-acoustic music
- 1969 *Farewell Songs* for mixed chorus (lyrics from folk poetry)
- 1970 *Songs of the Night*, cantata for female chorus and chamber orchestra (lyrics: composer's own)
- 1971 *Lullaby* for soprano and children's toys
- 1972 *Silver Sounds* for string quartet and silver spoons
- 1973 *Threnody* for female chorus
- 1975 *Eclogue* for wind quintet, strings and percussion
- 1975 *Nocturne*, electro-acoustic music
- 1979 *Figures in Motion*, electro-acoustic music
- 1981 *Bells* for mixed chorus and tape

The reasons why I argue that Ludmila Frajt was a *quiet*, almost invisible avant-gardist, are twofold. Firstly, since she was not a member of any generational or otherwise connected composers' groups, she began to expand her musical horizons and explore the new sound worlds of the European avant-garde purely out of her personal and professional curiosity. Secondly, she combined her avant-garde pursuits with a well-established interest in folklore rituals and antiquity. Her tendency to employ unusual, quasi-archaic instruments and naturalistic sound effects is also notable; thus, some of her works are scored for unusual, archaic, non-tempered instruments such as folk fifes, silver spoons and children's toys. Parallel to her avant-garde interests, she poured her unfulfilled love for children into her work and devoted a great deal of time to writing children's songs, in spite of the fact that, according to the musical canon and criteria of that time, this particular genre was considered "less worthy" in



the moderate-modernist hierarchy, which favored heroic symphonism and other lofty genres.

In stark contrast to the loudly triumphant works of “official” moderated modernism and the equally loud avant-garde pieces written by her male Yugoslav contemporaries, the most recognizable features of Ludmila Frajt works were chamberness, lyricism, subtlety and refinement, evident both in the choice of genres and performing ensembles, as well as in the compositional process. In addition, her fascination with the female voice (be it a solo voice or a choir) was quite obvious, as well as her inclination to compose “female” vocal genres derived from folklore, such as threnody or lullaby. Whereas many female composers (both in Serbia and abroad), until the last decades of the twentieth century aimed to compose within the framework of the “universal,” i.e., male canon, out of fear that their works would be dismissed as “female art” and therefore less valuable, Ludmila Frajt freely and openly expressed her femininity within her works, which makes it possible to argue that she was a pioneer of *écriture féminine* in Serbian music. Due to her tragic personal circumstances, Ludmila Frajt never had the opportunity to sing a lullaby to her child; instead, she wrote the eponymous work, scored for a female voice and children’s toys. With this, Frajt anticipated the poetics of many contemporary female artists, who, in their compositions, performances and other artworks, problematize their status in the male-dominated world and openly ask questions related to (re)defining gender identities. Isolated from other compositional groups both by her gender and her professional circumstances and choices, Ludmila Frajt became a unique Serbian avant-gardist precisely because she wrote “quiet” music in a range of “female” genres. Due to her introverted personality and lack of interest in self-promotion, Frajt flew under the radar and did not pose any threat to her male colleagues, which allowed her to freely develop her interests and avoid being reprimanded for straying from the expected path (i.e., from heroic moderated modernism).

I will now briefly analyze several of her works that illustrate her approach to music creation. *Tužbalica* [translated as *Threnody*, or *Lament*, or *Dirge*] was written for a female choir a cappella in 1973—at a time when Frajt intensively studied indigenous folk customs and musical folklore and explored the possibilities of their artistic transposition into a modern musical form. The *Threnody* is an evocation of an ancient folk ritual, mourning the dead, and at the same time, a sublimation of the author’s memories of the experience of hearing peasant women mourning and lamenting. The work is scored for thirteen soloist voices (seven sopranos and six altos) and a four-part female choir. The text comprises exclamations, wails and individual sentences taken from Frajt’s handwritten records of original folk laments. In order to create a sound as close as possible to the original

peasant wailing, Frajt used the melodic embryos of minor and major seconds, characteristic of the oldest layers of folk singing, as the basic thematic material. This motif gradually ascends in all vocal sections into the high registers, and in the vertical, it creates a dense vibrating cluster sound of great expressiveness. The structure of the composition is a large arch: from the quiet, barely audible humming of voices, the plaintive singing of the word “Joooj!” [Ouch!] stands out. Then, words of lamentation slowly pour in. The polyphony becomes increasingly dense and complex until a strong dramatic climax in which only the parlando of female voices and a cry of pain remain, and then the intensity of the tension slowly subsides and sinks into a hum. The dirge, thus, represents the sublimation of a poignant folk rite, wailing for the dead, reinterpreted through musical means. Knowing the details from the composer’s biography, the traumas and losses that she endured, it is not unreasonable to presume that, aged fifty-three, emotionally mature, Ludmila Frajt finally allowed herself to confront her grief and mourn the loss of her child, husband, sister, father and mentor, as well as many other family members and comrades who perished during the war.

Another characteristic piece is the *Ekloga* [Eclouge]<sup>5</sup> for chamber orchestra, composed of a wind quintet, strings and percussion, dedicated to her professor of composition, Josip Slavenski (I. Medić 2016). The title itself suggests a pastoral character; in terms of form, *Eclouge* is a diptych of a slow song and a fast dance—such pairing was very characteristic of Josip Slavenski’s own folklore-inspired works, thus the form of Frajt’s work can be heard as homage to Slavenski. The “song” part begins with a melody in alt flute, supported by rustic percussive instruments (*klepetuše*) and a cluster of strings. Other woodwind instruments join in and create a heterophonic interplay united by a common note D, which is exchanged among the instruments. The second part begins with a “hit” of gran cassa; the strings simulate the folklore bowed instruments (*gusle*), whereas the winds continue their dissonant heterophonic interplay. The coda is brief and it reinstates the pastoral atmosphere from the beginning of the piece.

Dražko Adžić has thus described Frajt’s affinity for folklore:

The focus of the composer’s output is on the interest in certain elements of South Slavic rural folk tradition which establish an organic correlation with contemporary musical tendencies of the twentieth century. The specificity of the composer’s relationship towards the archaic material is that she forsook the trend of citing/sampling specific folk songs or motifs and mechanically ‘inserting’ them into a texturally and harmonically modern context. (Adžić 2012: 10)

Ludmila Frajt thus simulates folk tunes, but does not try to adapt, beautify or develop them; instead, she affirms

them in their pure, bare beauty—even when they contain untempered tones and irregular, amorphous rhythms. While Ludmila Frajt's compositional technique in *Eclogue* might remind one of the “pagan expressionism” of Stravinsky, Bartók or Slavenksi, the actual sound is very different. Frajt's compositional handwriting is both rustic and refined, radical and subtle, and thus very different from the robust “pagan” works of her male counterparts. In his detailed analysis of *Eclogue*, Adžić observes that the main thematic material is assigned to the wind quintet, which simulates the ensembles consisting of several folk fifes [*frule*], characteristic of eastern Serbia, while the introduction of gran cassa simulates the folk instrument *goč* (Adžić 2012: 11). Writing about archaic elements in *Eclogue*, Adžić singles out simulations of dissonant old-layer vocal heterophony, lack of functional harmony, fluid rhythm characterized by polymetric and frequently shifting pulse, narrow range of “raw” melodic lines, the use of horn as a “signaling” instrument, etc. (Adžić 2012: 11–12).

Frajt's composition *Uspavanka* [Lullaby] for soprano and children's toys (1971) perfectly embodies her “feminine” compositional handwriting, but also goes beyond standard music act in the direction of *performance*, an art form typical of this stage of the avant-garde (I. Medić 2005: 214). This work is analyzed by Biljana Leković, who observed its

witty and original sound combination which evokes an everyday situation of putting a baby to sleep and the genre of a lullaby (...). As the very process of falling asleep contains a specific routine followed by a gradual ‘calming’, this composition is based on a series of situations that lead to a gradual silencing (in a fluctuating tempo that progresses from slow to fast, and then slows down again), whereas the voice is the main carrier of the ‘plot’ while the toys help create the atmosphere. (...). The change of vocal situations is ‘accompanied’ by (five) sound toys from the nursery, which are manipulated by the singer, who follows the instructions from the score about the placement, duration and usage of toys. As the composer asserts, these instructions are approximate, and the result depends on the performer's skill and her choice of instruments. (Leković 2022: 41–42)

Yet another original composition is Frajt's string quartet *Srebrni zvuci* [Silver Sounds], written in 1972, for which the quartet members, aside from playing their instruments, also need to produce sounds on silver spoons. Specifically, each player has two differently-sized silver spoons hanging from their music stands, which they strike with metal sticks. This single-movement piece was created using the aleatoric technique; the duration of individual sequences is approximately indicated in seconds and, in some places, is left to the free interpretation of the performer. The first, slow section, begins with a gentle, ringing sound produced by the striking of metal against silver spoons that hang in

pairs on the performers' music stands. The four instruments join that silvery sound one after the other, alternately with flickering, barely audible, high flageolets and a thundering chordal sound in the low register. In the faster middle section, the strings play with big interval leaps and expressive tremolos of dissonant chords in the viola and cello. They reach the climax of the composition by hitting the strings with the wooden parts of the bow. The silvery sound of the spoon returns at the beginning of the final, slow section, which differs from the first, with an expressive cello part and a subtle interweaving of voices that gradually drown again and disappear in a quivering silvery sound. As observed by Leković, just like in the *Lullaby*,

everyday objects, i.e. several spoons, become sources of readymade sounds. Although this sound is not constantly present (...), it can be perceived as a suggestive element that creates the entire sound ‘image’ of this composition, with the same ‘power’ as string instruments. (...) Flageolets, tremolo, pizzicato, the wooden part of the bow hitting the strings, or the fingers hitting the body of the instrument, are just some of the extended techniques that carry the potential to ‘upgrade’ the standard sound. (Leković 2012: 42)

In addition to being the first woman in Serbia to graduate in composition and the first female composer of film music, Ludmila Frajt was also among the first Serbian composers, male or female, to write electroacoustic music, with works such as *Asteroids*, *Nocturne*, and *Figures in Motion*, which can be regarded as major contributions to Serbian contemporary music (Novak 2012; Nikolić 2024). The fact that Frajt was employed by Radio Belgrade and Yugoslav Radio Television enabled her to work in the studio and experiment with the latest technologies of the time. The artistic environment at Radio Belgrade was far more open to experimentation compared to the Music Academy, which was notably more conservative and restrictive. While the Academy was a bastion of moderated modernism and academicism, the Radio served as a laboratory for adventurous composers. Radio Belgrade (and especially its Third Program) “played a crucial role in the modernisation of Serbian art music and the development of critical and theoretical thought about contemporary music during the 1960s and 1970s, both in the narrower (Yugoslav) and wider (European and global) contexts” (Medić 2021: 483). The activities of its music editors contributed to the presentation, promotion, and expansion of the avant-garde music in Serbia during the 1960s and 1970s and included

a new conception of radio broadcasts and the introduction of innovative, previously unheard types of music; activities of composers employed at Radio Belgrade in the domains of radiophonic art and electronic, concrete, and computer music; works commissioned, performed, and recorded by the Choir and Symphonic Orchestra of Radio Belgrade and other radio

ensembles; organisation and live broadcast of concerts, public debates, and round tables; affirmation of new tendencies in musicology, historiography, music theory, and music criticism; the impact of the journal *Treći program* [Third Program]; and finally, the foundation of the Electronic Studio, and the education of composers in the use and creative implementation of electronic equipment. (I. Medić 2021: 483–484)

Although Vladan Radovanović (1932–2023), a younger male contemporary of Frajt, “loudly” asserted in many writings that he wrote the first electro-acoustic work in Serbian music in 1966, at the Electronic Studio of the Warsaw Radio—a claim that Ludmila Frajt did not dispute—the truth is that they worked on their pieces simultaneously, and the exact chronology of their completion remains uncertain. This shows Frajt’s reluctance to assert herself in the “male” arena, although she had every right to do so. Furthermore, when she set out to write her first electroacoustic piece in 1966, the lack of suitable equipment in Belgrade led her to Plzeň, Czechoslovakia, the city where her family originated. The main reason she chose Plzeň, rather than any of the major European avant-garde centers, was purely pragmatic—she still had extended family there and could stay with them, as Radio Belgrade was not willing to pay for her accommodation! She completed the piece *Asteroids* in the Experimental Studio of Czech Radio in Plzeň. The fact that she did not hold any grudges against her more ambitious younger colleague is confirmed by the fact that she completed her next electro-acoustic work *Nocturne* at the Electronic Studio of Radio Belgrade, founded in 1972 and led by Radovanović himself.

When creating her electro-acoustic pieces, Frajt employed essentially the same compositional means as in her previously analyzed works, including simulations of folklore heterophony, *bordun* (drone), and archaic rituals. In her detailed analysis of the *Nocturne*, Neda Nikolić observes that “the main and real subject in the composition is the *bordun* in the background, which is omnipresent regardless of the multitude of other layers that will appear over it” (Nikolić 2024: 48). By adding constantly new layers, Frajt creates “the ‘whistle of the wind’ at night in combination with the simulation of ‘rustling’, which achieves a kind of dialogue and complicates the textured image, contributing to the creation of mystery in the sound” (Nikolić 2024: 49). This work was described much more “vividly” by a prominent music critic and broadcaster Pavle Stefanović, who heard it performed at the Thirteenth Review of Yugoslav Composers in Opatija in 1976 and wrote a humorous, but affirmative review:

All of a sudden, on the last night of the Review, Lida Frajt brought her electronically recorded *Nocturne*. She does not write program music, but rather invites me, the listener, to a faraway Asian jungle. On a scorching night, the monkeys,

always scared, laugh from the high trees, the terrified birds chirp, the insects buzz around, the beasts roar, and the imaginary night fairies swish their legendary wings. The night of dreams and silence is filled with noise. Suddenly, thanks to dear Lida, here I am in the mystery of the night, in the eternal poetry of our alive human world, which will sometime cease to exist and die out. Suddenly, therefore, there is tenderness and comfort, an authentic human gentleness created using the means of the notoriously ‘inhumane’ electronic music! (Stefanović 1976: 41).

We can observe several remarkable facets of this brief review: first, the critic addresses the composer by her nickname, even calling her “dear Lida”. Even if they were friends, it seems unlikely that he would have addressed a male composer in such an informal manner in a music critique of a festival! Secondly, despite his generally negative assessment of electronic music as “inhumane”, Stefanović singled out Frajt’s work precisely for its “tenderness” and “humanity”—emphasizing the “feminine” qualities of the piece and, by association, the composer herself.

## Conclusion

Twenty-five years after the composer’s death, discourse around the music of Ludmila Frajt is more dynamic than it ever was during her lifetime. This is largely thanks to the efforts of Hristina Medić, who has worked diligently to promote Frajt and encourage other musicologists to (re)discover her landmark works. However, it is not just the efforts of musicologists that have contributed to the reaffirmation of Frajt’s music. Over time, the works of some “loud” avant-gardists, eager to assert themselves in the competitive Yugoslav musical scene have deservedly faded into obscurity. These works are now heard as mere epigones of the European avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, lacking the necessary creative spark. In contrast, the long-neglected works by Frajt have withstood the test of time and emerged as original compositions truly worthy of being heard again.

The reasons for Frajt’s general neglect during her lifetime—primarily her gender, but also her generational isolation, unconventional interests in electro-acoustic music and other contemporary technological innovations, her unapologetic engagement with “female” and “infantile” genres and performers, and lack of interest in self-promotion—are precisely the qualities that have endeared her to contemporary researchers. In the turbulent post-World War II decades, rather than writing boastful and doctrinal socialist realist or moderately modernist works, Ludmila Frajt carved out her own unique path by studying both the most advanced avant-garde techniques of the time and the oldest layers of Serbian folklore. Although she was of Czech origin, she was born and raised in Serbia, then a part



of Yugoslavia, which she considered her homeland and sought to discover its autochthonous spiritual being. Thus, a significant portion of Frajt's output, whether scored for traditional or electro-acoustic instruments, was influenced by her interest in folklore music, dance, rituals, and other archaic remnants, distilled through her unique "feminine" sensibility. While she was aware of her "otherness" in the male-dominated profession, she did not live and work in a discursive environment that would have enabled her to theorize, conceptualize, or promote her "femaleness". Thus, her idiosyncratic writing resulted from a combination of her personal circumstances and spontaneous creative impulses, coupled with a genuine avant-garde curiosity and a keen awareness of the latest tendencies of the time.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> For a recent comprehensive study of the Prague group, see Bralović 2023.
- <sup>2</sup> For a recent, very informative English-language overview of Serbia's turbulent history, see: Djokić 2023.
- <sup>3</sup> His birth name was Josip Štolcer, but he legally changed it to Slavenski (meaning "Slavic"), to emphasize his pan-Slavistic and pro-Yugoslav convictions.
- <sup>4</sup> The original typescript of this textbook was discovered by Hristina Medić in Ludmila Frajt's legacy and published for the first time in 2012, in the journal *Muzički talas* (Frajt 2012).
- <sup>5</sup> According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the original meaning of the word *eclogue* is a short pastoral poem, usually in dialogue, on the subject of rural life and the society of shepherds, depicting rural life as free from the complexity and corruption of more civilized life. The term originates from late Middle English, via Latin from Greek *eklogē* "selection", from *eklegein* "pick out". The eclogue first appeared in the *Idylls* of the Greek poet Theocritus (c. 310–250 BC), generally recognized as the inventor of pastoral poetry. The Roman poet Virgil (70–19 BC) adopted the form for his 10 *Eclogues*, or *Bucolics* (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica: s.a.).

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## Santrauka

Šio straipsnio centre – čekų kilmės kompozitorės Ludmilos Frajt (ištekėjusi Franović; ček. Ludmila Frajtová, 1919–1999), kurią laikau *ramios avangardistės* išikūnijimu ir *écriture féminine* pradininke Serbijos muzikoje, gyvenimas ir kūryba. Gimusi garsioje čekų muzikų šeimoje, Frajt buvo tik antroji akademinį išsilavinimą įgijusi kompozitorė Serbijoje (ir pirmoji, baigusi studijas Serbijoje, o ne užsienyje). Jos kompozicinė raiška, susiformavusi veikiant profesoriams Miloje Milojevičui (1884–1946) ir Josipui Slavenskiui (1896–1955), iš pradžių derino prancūzišką impresionistinį garso rafinuotumą, perimtą iš Milojevičiaus, ir folklorinį, „pagonišką“ ekspresionizmą, būdingą Slavenskiui. Nors buvo čekų kilmės, Frajt labai domėjosi serbų folkloro tradicijomis ir ritualais. Tai, kad buvo moteris, dirbanti vyriškoje profesijoje, ir nesiekė viešumo ar viešo pripažinimo, lėmė, kad jos darbai dažnai buvo nepakankamai vertinami, net ignoruojami. Kolegoms vyrams ji buvo pašalietė, net nenusipelnanti vieno ar dviejų puslapių išsamiaame leksikone „Kompozitoriai Serbijoje“ (Peričić et al., *Muzički stvaraoči u Srbiji*, 1969). Po ilgų dešimtmečių ignoravimo pastaraisiais metais susidomėjimas jos gyvenimu ir kūryba išaugo, o tam įtakos turėjo muzikologės Hristinos Medić (g. 1943 m.) atlikti svarbūs visos Frajt šeimos tyrimai.

Kaip kompozitorė, Frajt kūryboje atsiskleidė vėlai dėl daugybės traumuojančių asmeninio gyvenimo įvykių, įtemptos karjeros kino studijoje, vėliau – Jugoslavijos radijuje ir televizijoje, taip pat dėl sveikatos problemų, privertusių ją anksti išeiti į pensiją. Visiškai atsiduoti komponavimui ji galėjo tik būdama penkiasdešimties, tačiau net ir sulaukusi vidutinio amžiaus, išsaugojo jaunatvišką smalsumą. Studijavo ir įsisavino naujausias Europos muzikinio avangardo

kompozicines technikas: aleatoriką, „atviro kūrinio“ idėją, mikropolifoniją, įvairius multimedijos eksperimentus, įskaitant elektroakustinę muziką. Jau turėdama studijinio įrašymo technikos žinių, nes daug patirties įgijo „Avala Film“, Belgrado radijo ir Jugoslavijos radijo televizijos studijose, Frajt papildomai susipažino su naujausiomis avangardo tendencijomis dalyvaudama vasaros kursuose Darmštate ir dirbdama Čekijos radijo eksperimentinėje studijoje. Įspūdingi septintojo ir aštuntojo dešimtmečių Frajt darbai: *Asteroidai*, elektroakustinė muzika; *Atsisveikinimo dainos* mišriam chorui liaudies poezijos tekstais; *Nakties dainos*, kantata moterų chorui ir kameriniam orkestrui kompozitorės tekstais; *Lopšinė* sopranui ir vaikų žaislams; *Sidabriniai garsai* styginių kvartetui ir sidabriniams šaukšteliams; *Trenodija* moterų chorui; *Eclogue* pučiamųjų kvintetui, styginiams ir mušamiesiems; *Noktiurnas*, elektroakustinė muzika; *Figūros judesyje*, elektroakustinė muzika; *Varpai*, mišriam chorui ir magnetofono juostai.

Ryškus kontrastas patetiškiems „oficialaus“ nuosaukaus modernizmo kūriniams ir ne mažiau garsiai skambantiems avangardiniams kūriniams, kuriuos rašė jos bendraamžiai vyrai jugoslavai, buvo labiausiai atpažįstami Frajt *tyliojo avangardo* bruožai, tokie kaip kameriškumas, lyrizmas, subtilumas ir rafinuotumas, pasireiškiantis tiek pasirenkant žanrus ir atlikėjų ansamblius, tiek komponavimo procese. Be to, gana akivaizdus buvo jos susižavėjimas moterišku balsu (nesvarbu, ar tai būtų solinis balsas, ar choras), taip pat polinkis kurti „moteriškus“ vokalius žanrus, kilusius iš folkloro, pavyzdžiui, rauda ar lopšinė. Iki XX a. paskutinių dešimtmečių daugelis kompozitorių moterų (ir Serbijoje, ir užsienyje) stengėsi kurti pagal „universalųjį“, t. y. vyriškąjį, kanoną, bijodamos, kad jų kūriniai bus atmesti kaip „moteriškas menas“ ir todėl laikomi ne tokiais vertingais, o Frajt savo darbais laisvai ir atvirai reiškė moteriškumą, todėl galima teigti, kad ji buvo *écriture féminine* pradininkė Serbijos muzikoje. Priežastys, lėmusios visuotinį Frajt ignoravimą jai esant gyvai, – pirmiausia jos lytis, taip pat santūri vieša asmenybė, kartų izoliacija, netradicinis domėjimasis elektroakustine muzika ir kitomis šiuolaikinėmis technologinėmis naujovėmis, nesigėdijimas imtis „moteriškų“ žanrų ir rinktis moteris atlikėjas, nesidomėjimas savireklama – yra būtent tos savybės, dėl kurių ji patraukia šiuolaikinius tyrėjus.

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