

Ivana Medić

## ***Zora D. and Isidora Ž.* between East and West<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

Born in 1967, Isidora Žebeljan is one of the most distinguished Serbian contemporary composers. She studied with Vlastimir Trajković at the Belgrade Faculty of Music and since 2002 she has taught composition at the same institution. She has won several prestigious national awards, and in 2006, aged only 38, she was elected to the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Although Žebeljan has written vocal, orchestral and chamber music, she is best known for her operas. As of 2015, she has written five operas, all of which have been performed, some of them multiple times: *Zora D.* (premiered in Amsterdam, 2003), *Eine Marathon Familie* (Bregenz, 2008), *Simon, der Erwählte* (Gelsenkirchen, 2009), *Due teste e una ragazza* (Siena, 2012) and *Nahod Simon* (Gelsenkirchen, 2015). Aside from her operatic output, Isidora Žebeljan has written music for more than 40 theatre productions, orchestrated Goran Bregović's music for films *Dom za vešanje* [The time of the Gypsies], *Arizona Dream* and *Underground* (all three directed by Emir Kusturica), *Queen Margot* (Patrice Chéreau) and *The Serpent's Kiss* (Philippe Rousselot) and scored the film *Kako su me ukrali Nemci* [How I was stolen by the Germans], directed by Miloš Radivojević.

Although Žebeljan's operas have been commissioned by international festivals and opera houses, with their librettos inspired by stories and legends reaching as far as India, Žebeljan has always strived to infuse them with the sounds of her native land. A classically trained composer, who once singled out Sergei Prokofiev as her main musical influence, Žebeljan has nevertheless stated:

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was written as part of the project *Serbian musical identities within local and global frameworks: traditions, changes, challenges* (No. 177004) funded by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development.

The basis of my musical language is a merger of a yearning for the beautiful, angelic, divine melodies on the one hand, and the ritual, demonic, exhausting, crazy energy of the pagan dance and Gypsy melancholy, which my forefathers have absorbed through the centuries of constant migrations across Armenian mountains, Romanian and Serbian swamps, puddles and podzols (Željan 2011).

Željan has also spoken of her fondness for the archaic layers of Serbian traditional singing, which she had heard and absorbed as a girl in the village of Perlez in the Central Banat, where her father's family originated from:

I would be awakened by the ear-bursting singing of the choir, whose only members were these Perlez villagers, the scorched old men. Their coarse throats and voice chords would emanate a song so frighteningly powerful, as if it was being sung at the Golgotha itself [...] My operas *Zora D*, *The Marathon Family*, *Simon, the Chosen One*, are reflections of these musical memories (Ibid).<sup>2</sup>

Although Željan has acknowledged such influences, the extent of their actual impact on her, essentially Western compositional methodology, has not been properly investigated. Thus, my aim is to try to locate these influences and determine whether they modify or overrun her Western training. In doing so I will focus on her breakthrough opera, *Zora D*.

In an attempt to situate *Zora D* between or beyond the East–West divide, the first and the most obvious Western feature is the very use of the operatic genre. I should note that Serbian operatic tradition is only a century old, and not a single Serbian opera has entered the standard repertoire. In fact, a majority of Serbian operas have only been performed a handful of times and then shelved, or not performed at all. Moreover, none of the three Serbian cities that currently have operatic ensembles – Belgrade, Novi Sad and Niš – actually has a dedicated opera house; instead, their opera productions are hosted by national drama theatres. Due to economic constraints, there is not much hope that this unfavourable situation will change in the foreseeable future.

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<sup>2</sup> This is, probably, the composer's liberal interpretation of her childhood memories, since there are no records of the existence of such choirs in Perlez. I am grateful to Danica Petrović for this information.

In spite of this, in recent years there has been a surge of new Serbian operas and, except for Miloš Petrović's (unperformed) opera *Mihailo iz Peći* [Mihailo from Peć (2002)], Rastislav Kambasković's *Hasanaginica* [Hasanaga's wife (2009)], Ivan Jevtić's *Mandragola* (2009), and Svetislav Božić's *Melanholični snovi grofa Save Vladislavića* [The melancholy dreams of Count Sava Vladislavić (2015)], all of them have been written by female composers, members of the generation born in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Aside from Isidora Žebeljan's five operas, the list comprises the works by Jasna Veličković (*Dream Opera*, 2001), Aleksandra Anja Đorđević (*Narcis i Eho* [Narcissus and Echo], 2002), Branka Popović (*Petrograd* [St Petersburg], 2012) and Tatjana Milošević-Mijanović (*Ko je ubio princezu Mond* [Who killed Princess Mond], 2012), as well as Dragana Jovanović's operatic 'work-in-progress' (*Žvezdani grad* [Star City], 2013– ongoing). All of these 'female' operas have been performed, some of them multiple times, both in Serbia and abroad. Moreover, several Serbian female composers who live abroad have also written operas, some of which have been performed in Serbia – for example *Svadba* [Wedding (2010)] by a Montreal resident Ana Sokolović and *Mileva* (2011) by a New York-based composer Aleksandra Vrebalov.<sup>3</sup> All these works confirm that the opera has become a predominantly 'female' genre in the twenty-first-century Serbia; this is a phenomenon that merits a separate analysis.

On the other hand, the fact that none of these operas, except for Jovanović's unfinished work-in-progress (Medić 2014d) and Žebeljan's latest opera *Nahod Simon* (Mihalek 2015) are of monumental proportions has more to do with limited budgets than with the composers' lack of ambition. Namely, smaller operas are more likely to get staged, usually as part of the annual BEMUS festival, which has, however, also experienced considerable hardship recently (see Medić i Janković-Beguš 2015).

### **Zora D. and the ghosts of the past**

The opera *Zora D.* by Isidora Žebeljan unfolds in seven scenes; the libretto (based on a TV script by Dušan Ristić) was written by the composer herself, together with her husband Borislav Čičovački and sister Milica

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<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, Jasna Veličković also left Serbia for the Netherlands; however, at the time when her *Dream Opera* was performed, she was still in Serbia. I have discussed the status of Serbian émigré composers in: Medić 2014b.

Žebeljan. The opera was supported by the Genesis Foundation from London and the original production was directed by David Pountney and Nicola Raab. After the 2003 Amsterdam premiere, the opera was performed in Vienna (2003, 12 performances), Belgrade (2004 and 2007), Sombor (2007), Zagreb (2007) and Rijeka (2007), and the score was published by Ricordi-Universal. The opera is scored for a chamber orchestra and four singers:

Mina / Zora D. / Woman with a silver scarf (Ghost of Zora D.) – Soprano  
 Jovan / Stranger / Prof. Kostić / Shop owner (Ghost of Jovan) – Baritone  
 Young Vida – Lyrical mezzo-soprano  
 Old Vida – Dramatic mezzo-soprano<sup>4</sup>

In his book *Music in the Balkans*, Jim Samson describes Isidora Žebeljan as ‘a genuinely gifted composer, with a recognisable voice’ (Samson 2013: 583–584) and calls the Pountney production ‘an imaginative interaction between the emotionally charged worlds of a present-day young woman and a 1930s poet named Zora Dulijan’ (Ibid). The plot of *Zora D.* has been summed up by the authors in the sleeve notes for the CD release (ed. Janković 2011):

The opera *Zora D.* gives a highly atmospheric insight into the emotional legacy of the tragedy which took place more than sixty years ago. A brilliant young poet Zora Dulijan suddenly disappeared without explanation, leaving behind one and only song – a creepy description of the location where she was last seen alive. Today, another young woman called Mina, whose self-identification with the mysterious poet seems quite extraordinary, finds this poem and embarks on a quest for the truth. Or perhaps she is found by the poem, which uses Mina as a medium to silence the spirits of the past. The piece constantly intersects modern day Belgrade with the same city in the 1930s – an era of feverish artistic creativity – while the complex interactions of Mina and Old Vida today, and of Young Vida, Zora and Jovan in the past, are interlaced on the stage.

When asked why he selected Žebeljan’s opera among more than fifty entries that competed for the Genesis Opera Prize, Pountney responded:

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<sup>4</sup> In the aforementioned production by Pountney and Raab, these roles were sung by Aile Asszonyi, Martijn Sanders, Rachel Ann Morgan and Margriet van Reisen respectively.

When I was trawling through the entries [...] amidst an absolute welter of indistinguishable representatives of what one might call ‘academic modernism’, Isidora Žebeljan’s music struck me immediately as something original, fresh and, above all, emotionally expressive – a rare commodity, but an essential one for interesting theatrical story telling (Čičovački 2004: 231).

The emotional expressivity is indeed what the composer was striving for; in the self-penned theoretical text titled ‘On a possible way of writing opera today’, which was read when Žebeljan was awarded a Master’s degree at the Faculty of Music and later published with the programme notes for the Belgrade premiere of *Zora D.*, the composer elaborated on her artistic aims and creative methodology and stated that ‘the main goal of art, and music in particular, is a sensual experience, rather than an intellectual one’ (Žebeljan 2002). She regards opera as ‘a supremely artificial form’ (Ibid), while the essence of opera is ‘representation’ (Ibid). When it comes to the relationship between music and drama, or music and text, she argues that all constitutive elements of an opera must be highly aestheticised and poeticised; however, she gives a clear primacy to music, because she believes in the ‘self-sufficient value and autonomy of a purely musical gesture’ (Ibid). Thus, in her view, the opera should unfold as a series of musico-poetic states, somewhere between a number opera and Wagnerian musical drama.

Žebeljan’s music for *Zora D.* is predominantly tonal, very expressive and capable of evoking many emotional states – as one would expect from an experienced composer of theatrical and film music. In terms of melodic and harmonic invention, rhythms, orchestration and a spontaneous approach to artistic creation, she has identified Leoš Janáček, Sergei Prokofiev, Igor Stravinsky and Manuel de Falla as her role models, while she has bluntly (and, as we shall see, somewhat unfairly) dismissed the operas by Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg (Ibid). Žebeljan argues that atonal music cannot represent anything because of its tonal relativity; she believes that the fact that atonal music does not have a tonal centre leaves the listener ‘disoriented’ (Ibid).

In *Zora D.*, the great Western operatic tradition is referenced by the composer’s employment of trained operatic voices. A peculiar feature is that the opera which is set in Belgrade and whose musical language contains Serbian/Balkan overtones is sung in – German. Although the

score published by Ricordi does contain the lyrics both in German and Serbian, the opera is yet to be performed in the composer's native language.

The libretto that deals with tragic love, betrayal, jealousy and murder, has been dubbed by Zorica Premate as 'an imitation of a romantic operatic melodrama... the melodrama itself being the supreme operatic genre' (Premate 2006/7: 36). The libretto makes use of the verses written by Jovan Dučić (1871–1943), Miloš Crnjanski (1893–1977) and Milena Pavlović-Barilli (1909–1945) – the artists (poets and painters) who lived and worked at the time evoked in the opera, i.e. the 1930s, when Serbian artists had many strong international connections and some of them were prominent exponents of European modernism. The employment of the verses written by Dučić, Crnjanski and Pavlović-Barilli contributes to the melodramatic atmosphere of the work, but also situates the imaginary poet Zora D. within a certain cultural milieu. The only poem 'written' by the imaginary poet Zora D. that was 'preserved', *Poplars*, was actually written by Jovan Dučić; this poem is well-known to Serbian audiences, hence the reference is quite obvious. Coincidentally or not, Zora's secret lover from the opera is called Jovan; hence the entire opera can be read as Žebeljan's 'love letter' to the great Serbian modernist poet. Without wishing to read too much into this, one should also observe the similarity between the names of the composer and her protagonist:

(ISI) DORA ŽEBELJAN  
ZORA DULIJAN

This may suggest that the composer self-identifies with the imaginary poet, who burned her poems after reading. Perhaps, in this way, the composer protests against the fact that a vast majority of Serbian operas and other musical works have only been performed once (or never), and that hardly anyone would notice – or care – if they were burned.

Throughout this opera, Isidora Žebeljan employs some recognisable Western codes of musical representation, including: musical illustrations of the nature (the poplar trees, the water, the moon); tone painting (for example the words 'without the shadow' on p. 53 of the Ricordi score are sung without instrumental accompaniment); some very dissonant music to depict the dramatic scenes of betrayal, murder, feelings of guilt and

unrest, in line with the tradition of *verismo* and early expressionism. While the composer does not employ the technique of leitmotifs consistently, there are some hints at leitmotifs, leit-rhythms, or leit-intonations throughout the opera. According to Borislav Čičovački, there are only three recurring motifs in the opera, representing ‘the poplars’, ‘Zora’s mysterious disappearance’ and ‘Mina’ (Čičovački 2004: 237–241). Zorica Premate also identifies the motif of ‘Zora’s silver scarf’ (Premate 2006/7: 40–41). To these I would add another leitmotif associated with Vida (see below).

Although Isidora Žebeljan dismisses expressionist opera, Vida, the main antagonist in *Zora D.* can be regarded as a typical expressionist character.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the entire dramatic plot of *Zora D.* can be perceived as Vida’s hallucination (akin to Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*). Vida is haunted by the crime that she committed sixty years ago – she killed her best friend Zora in a fit of jealousy. Vida is a split personality,<sup>6</sup> even literally, because she is portrayed by two singers – the young Vida is a lyrical mezzo-soprano, while the old Vida is a dramatic mezzo-soprano. On the other hand, both Zora from the past and Mina, her present-day reincarnation, are portrayed by the same singer, thus emphasising the fact that Mina is Zora and vice versa.

The vocal part of the old Vida is particularly interesting, because it contains heavily distorted coloratura and melisma, *sprechgesang* and other effects that emphasise her disturbance. Vida returns from Lisbon to Belgrade after a long exile and arrives to her old flat, haunted by the ghosts of her past. She imagines that she can hear Jovan’s voice on the radio, reading Zora’s poem *Poplars*. Vida’s ‘leitmotif’ is actually a leit-rhythm of Stravinskian complexity, first found on p. 169;<sup>7</sup> it reappears several times to depict the old Vida, tormented by guilt. Vida finds a silver

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<sup>5</sup> In expressionist theatre, the imitation of life is replaced ‘by the ecstatic evocation of states of mind’ (Encyclopedia Britannica 2014); an expressionist character ‘pours out his or her woes in long monologues couched in a concentrated, elliptical, almost telegraphic language’, and his or her inner development is explored ‘through a series of loosely linked tableaux’ (Ibid). For a comprehensive analysis of expressionist characters and topoi see: Konstantinović 1967: 21–67.

<sup>6</sup> On ‘split personalities’ in expressionist theatre and film see Valgemae 1973: 193–197; Coates 1991: 74–75.

<sup>7</sup> All page numbers refer to the score of *Zora D.* published by Ricordi in 2003.

scarf that belonged to Zora (p. 196): we hear the leitmotif of the scarf, first heard in the second scene (p. 34). As noted by Premate, this motif is a self-quotation from Žebeljan's music for the theatre play *Mileva Einstein*, about another tragic female figure from the early twentieth century (Premate 2006/7: 41).<sup>8</sup> Then Vida sings a song in which she remembers Jovan, her long lost love: the song is written in a sentimental manner of *starogradska muzika* [old urban music]<sup>9</sup> that is very prominent in Zora's vocal part and employed with the purpose of depicting the 'good old Belgrade' of the 1930s. Vida's song is another self-quotation from *Mileva Einstein*; in fact, as noticed by Premate, all motifs that resemble the urban folk idiom have been taken from Žebeljan's incidental music (Ibid). On the other hand, Vida's leit-rhythm has been borrowed from Žebeljan's music for the theatre play *Prokleta avlija* [The damned yard] (Ibid.: 46). Just like Sergei Prokofiev, Dmitri Shostakovich, Alfred Schnittke and many other composers who wrote a lot of incidental music, Žebeljan does not 'waste' her musical themes, and she freely transfers melodies (and even entire scenes) from her incidental music to her 'serious' works.

Another interesting example of musical storytelling is found at p. 217, in the scene in which the young Vida reads the poem that Zora wrote for her. Although we never hear the actual poem, the instrumental accompaniment consists of a simulation of a salon piece for the piano, thus indicating that the poem had a sentimental character; the music 'fills the gap' and enables us to imagine what the poem might have sounded like (Example 1):

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<sup>8</sup> Mileva Marić Einstein (1875–1947) was a Serbian physicist and the first wife of Albert Einstein. While the issue of whether Marić contributed to Einstein's early work has been the subject of debate, she never received any credit for assisting him. The aforementioned opera *Mileva* by Aleksandra Vrebalov is also inspired by her life.

<sup>9</sup> According to Marija Dumnić, *starogradska muzika* [old urban music] is a hybrid genre that contains the elements of folk, popular and art music. As a type of folk music, it belongs to the urban tradition (which has often been neglected by the ethnomusicologists because of their tendency to focus on rural/village practices). The artistic component is emphasised by the fact that many prominent Serbian poets and composers from the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries wrote lyrics for these songs 'in folklore spirit'. On the other hand, the way this music was performed, distributed and consumed situates it firmly in the realm of popular music (see Dumnić 2012: 3).

Example 1. *Zora D.*, p. 217, rehearsal No. 117 — *Sentimental piano*

Mlada Vida uzima list papira sa pesmom od Zore i čita je u sebi.  
 Dok ona čita, Zora vadi upaljač iz torbice i pali cigaretu.  
*Junge Vida nimmt das Zoras Gedicht, legt es in ihre Hand und liest es.  
 Zora nimmt aus ihrer Tasche ein Feuerzeug und zündet sich eine Zigarette an.*

*Zora D.* by Isidora Žebeljan. © 2003 CASA RICORDI – BMG RICORDI MUSIC PUBLISHING S.p.A. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

The leitmotifs of old Vida and the scarf reappear whenever the object is seen, either in the past or the present-day events, and Vida's vocal part becomes even more distorted when she retells the events of that fateful night when she killed her friend (p. 326 and onwards).

On the other hand, Žebeljan uses many musical symbols that help her achieve a decidedly 'national' atmosphere. However, in spite of her alleged fondness of the archaic layers of folklore, she does not use folklore material to achieve the national 'flavour'. The very beginning of the opera is based on one of the so-called Gypsy modes (Phrygian mode with an augmented second between the second and third notes). The melody sung by a Woman with a Silver Scarf (i.e. the Ghost of *Zora D.*) is also in an oriental mode with augmented seconds, accompanied by strings, which instantly evokes the *starogradska muzika* i.e. the urban folk music of the early twentieth century (Example 2):

Example 2. *Zora D.*, p. 2, rehearsal No. 1 — *Woman with a Silver Scarf*

Žena sa sr. šalom  
 Frau mit dem silb. Schal  
 Pe - va - ti kad ni - ko ne slu - ša, bez stru - na i gla -  
 Sing dein Lied, auch wenn es nie-mand hört, Kein Gei-gen - ton, kein Laut er -

*Zora D.* by Isidora Žebeljan. © 2003 CASA RICORDI - BMG RICORDI MUSIC PUBLISHING S.p.A. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

Scene 1 begins with an instrumental prelude, which is based on an ostinato in harp and percussion; a frequent employment of ostinatos is the main constructive principle throughout the entire opera. The combination of a harp (imitating the *tamburitza* – a small long-necked lute), woodblocks and strings, simulates the small tavern ensembles typical of Skadarlija, the famous bohemian quarter in Belgrade city centre.

At rehearsal 16 the vocal part is again melismatic and in an oriental mode. Another typical marker of Serbian music is a half-cadence with an applied dominant V/V before the dominant chord, which is very typical of the urban vocal and instrumental idioms. Žebeljan also employs irregular rhythms and complex rhythmic changes, which may or may not be related to folklore. For example, in the beginning of the Scene 2 (which takes place in the library) the rhythmic pulse constantly shifts from 6 to 3 to 4 to 5 quavers. The first appearance of the Stranger (i.e. the ghost of Jovan) is also melismatic, with a melody of a narrow ambitus (Example 3):

Example 3. *Zora D.*, p. 39, rehearsal No. 31 — *The Stranger*

The image shows a musical score for rehearsal No. 31. It consists of two staves: a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The vocal line is for the character 'Stranac / Der Fremde' and has the lyrics 'Sam, Ein'. The piano accompaniment starts with a tempo marking 'a tempo' and a dynamic marking 'p'. It features a melismatic line with a 'rall.' (rallentando) section. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

*Zora D.* by Isidora Žebeljan. © 2003 CASA RICORDI - BMG RICORDI MUSIC PUBLISHING S.p.A. All Rights Reserved. Reprinted by Permission.

Ostinatos in various rhythmic combinations can also be found in the scenes in which Mina (i.e. Zora reincarnated in the present day) browses books at the library (p. 72), then, when she receives a book from the ghost of Jovan (p. 78), the instrumental intermezzo when Mina walks through the town (p. 98), when Professor Kostić describes Zora Dulijan, the poet who disappeared (p. 112 and further), when Kostić notices a similarity between Zora and Mina (p. 163), when Zora burns the song that she has written for Vida (p. 221), the second instrumental interlude at p. 236, etc. While Žebeljan manifests an outspoken dislike for Schoenberg's operas, the role of ostinatos in *Zora D.* is akin to what Schoenberg had done in his musical drama *Die glückliche Hand* (1910–1913) (see Medić 2005: 112–113).

The orchestration is one of the most striking features of *Žora D. Žebeljan* often simulates ‘national’ (Serbian, Balkan) instruments such as *klepalo* – the wooden percussion instrument that is used in Orthodox churches (p. 67), *goč* – the big drum (p. 107), the flute imitating the *frula* – a small folklore woodwind (p. 121), etc. All these features – simulations of *starogradska muzika*, the employment of irregular rhythms, gypsy modes, melismatic vocal parts, instrumental ostinatos, with the instrumentation that imitates either folk instruments or old tavern ensembles – successfully evoke the spirit of Belgrade of the 1920s and 1930s, the city that was undergoing speedy urbanisation and modernisation, while still preserving many remnants of its oriental past.

An operatic work such as this one has provoked different reactions. Jelena Novak believes that

although the plot of the one-act chamber opera *Žora D.* is set in Belgrade of the 1930s, the subjects of Isidora Žebeljan’s work are not the dominant ideologies in Serbia at the time. The context of the Serbian musical and theatrical scene with which this opera ‘networked’ concerns Serbian post-socialist society in transition, at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty first century, in which culture was to a great extent subordinated to the favoured phantasm of tradition. That phantasm is most explicitly projected to those institutions of society that support it the strongest – the church and the army’ (Novak 2005: 50).

Such a heavy-handed statement is paired with Novak’s remark that ‘political shifts towards the ideals of traditional and national values led to an establishment of artistic production that may, in terms of many of its features, be regarded in analogy with the thriving of romanticism and ideals that were defended by it in the nineteenth century’ (Ibid). Novak also argues that ‘Folklore has always been an analogue of the ancient, traditional in music and the use of folklorisms and their signifiers is certainly proof of the desire to reinvigorate, in this case, the music tradition of the Balkans’ (Ibid.: 53). However, it is very difficult to regard Žebeljan’s employment of ‘national’ musical codes as a mere reflection of her ‘traditionalism’ or ‘Romantic fascination’, since the instances of her actual employment of folklore material are quite rare, as admitted by Novak herself (Ibid). As we have seen, in *Žora D.* Žebeljan does not simulate, reconstruct or revive Balkan folklore, but a tradition of

*starogradska muzika*, i.e. the music of the nascent urban populace of Belgrade between two world wars. Therefore, I would argue that the composer, having had experience with orchestrating Goran Bregović's music for foreign films, has clearly understood that her unique selling point at the Western musical market would be precisely her ability to create music that would have a distinctive Balkan flavour, to an extent that it would be acceptable to Western ears and yet sound sufficiently different and original. As can be deduced from Pountney's already cited confession, these orientally-tinged melodies in vivid orchestration and an unrestrained expression of different emotional states were precisely the features that attracted him to Žebeljan's opera.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Novak is right in understanding the opera as 'a collage of meta-folkloric elements which, compared to Western contemporary music, nowadays hold a somewhat exotic position' (Novak 2005: 53–54).<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to Novak, Zorica Premate inscribes into Žebeljan's opera some postmodern features and wonders about its true meaning:

Is *Zora D.* a melancholic interpretation of the national romantic opera understood as a symbol of the culture of the urban, bourgeois populace, the culture that barely exists today, or a parodic pantomime achieved by means of a romantic opera, in order to show that the cultural power of the citizens has been long lost? (Premate 2006/7: 40).

A correct answer would probably be that it is – both; however, the nostalgic/melancholic yearning prevails, while the moments of outright parody are quite rare. Premate finds them in instances where melismatic decorations linger on for too long and turn into their own parody (pp. 39, 131, 139, 156, 209, 210, 229, 258, 269, 292, 316, 336...), or when a melodramatic moment turns kooky, for example when the pawn shop

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<sup>10</sup> Žebeljan is not the only Serbian composer who has utilised musical stereotypes associated with the Balkans and the Orient in order to boost her unique selling proposition in the West: see Medić 2014b, 2014c.

<sup>11</sup> Novak cites Dahlhaus's observation that 'Any folklore music of local or regional origin [...] that was transferred to the urban bourgeois milieu where fantasies about national style are born will not, when removed from evocative theatrical or literary contexts [...] essentially be less exotic than an orientalism, which relates to it, but is known more widely because it has been adjusted to key schemes and instrumental colours of European artistic music' (Dahlhaus 1980).

owner lists what he has on offer in a buffo manner (pp. 252–258, 267–269, 276–277) (Ibid.). Premate dubs this ‘the aesthetics of uncertain quotation marks’ (Ibid.: 45), since the boundaries between quotations and self-quotations, the author’s true voice and a mimicry of something else are constantly blurred. On the other hand, the scenes in which Vida’s singing part turns from melancholic into ugly or distorted, as well as the hallucinatory scenes in which the past and the present collide, are anything but parodic.

With this opera, Žebeljan has established herself as a major voice in Serbian contemporary music and achieved considerable international success, which is all the more interesting because, unlike many of her colleagues who have emigrated westward, she remains Belgrade-based. As observed by Jim Samson: ‘Belgrade may not be the centre of new music, but it provides Žebeljan with a clearly focused identity as a Serbian composer [...] and a base for a highly skilled Europe-wide networking that has made her one of the most widely performed Serbian composers today’ (2013: 565). As Samson correctly observes:

For this generation, the main cultural centres are no longer quite the passport to fame they once were [...] In the end, a clear local identity, such as that carefully cultivated by Žebeljan, may prove more valuable than an allegiance to cosmopolitan modernism (2013: 568).

Isidora Žebeljan understands this very well, and she has been able to put to good use her knowledge of various musical idioms of her native land, which can serve both as a point of immediate identification for domestic audiences and as markers of her ‘originality’ and ‘Otherness’ in the West.

It is particularly intriguing that Žebeljan’s own statements on her artistic influences and preferences do not entirely match what is found in the scores. Firstly, as we have seen, although Žebeljan dismisses expressionism, her opera shows some similarities with Schoenberg’s early (pre-dodecaphonic) dramatic works, as well as expressionist drama and film. Moreover, while Žebeljan allegedly prefers the oldest layers of Serbian folklore, in *Zora D.* she merges Western early twentieth-century opera (*verismo* and the early Viennese school) with the idioms of Serbian urban popular folk music from the same period, which has survived to this day and is, therefore, easily recognisable. These urban folk inflections,

reinforced by imaginative orchestration, provide melodic, harmonic, rhythmic and timbral enrichment to Žebeljan's musical language, without influencing her basically Western compositional procedure on a deeper level.

By merging her expressive and highly evocative melodic gift with, as Samson puts it, 'the carefully calculated quota of guarded modernism, the modern folklorisms and blatant historical associations' (Samson 2013: 568), Isidora Žebeljan has found her own unique voice that has captivated diverse audiences worldwide.

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