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**Interview with Nada Kolundžija:
Creativity and talent as a magic bean**

Pianist Nada Kolundžija recently released a book with three compact discs "BREATHING IN/ BREATHING OUT A Little Anthology of Piano Music (1914–2014)", Vertical Jazz 2017. Ana Kotevska talked with Nada Kolundžija about the Anthology, art music and the universal spirit of art that she captured in this work.

In terms of collection and selection of the most beautiful or most successful artifacts, anthologies are usually not compiled by artists themselves, but by external experts. However, Nada Kolundžija has published her own, albeit "Little Anthology", which contains three compact discs with more than three hours of music and a 200-page book, as a form of personal introspection and reflection on the traveled artistic path and creative dialogues that she has had with composers over the four decades of her artistic work.

Let's breathe in, breathe out, and begin. How would you describe the process of working on this anthology?

My concerts always start with one composition that I want to play, and the entire program is formed around it. The anthology was preceded by three programs that I performed in 2014 at the Belgrade Cultural Center called "My Little Concert Anthology". When I was done, autumn came and I felt, which rarely happens to me, that I didn't want to leave that repertoire. Previously, as soon as I played something once or twice, I moved on. But these three programs were rich in various ways, so I realised that I didn't want to abandon them, but to record them on sound carriers to be heard by as many people as possible. On the other hand, I thought this edition would have informative value for various categories of listeners, that it might interest them, arouse the curiosity of listening to contemporary music more, exploring more. For, these last hundred years have summarized many directions in which modern music had branched out. And not only that! The piano is here presented in its richness of sound as a solo instrument, both classical and prepared, in combination with a toy piano, with recorded music stencils, with live electronics, and with recorded electronics... And I added music boxes, which preceded the appearance of the hearing aids for listening to music.

Does that mean that, while you were preparing and playing the concerts, you did not think that this great publishing venture would appear as the final result?

Absolutely not. Then I simply spent months exploring new things that, judging by the reactions of my friends and audience, were interesting not only to me, as a refreshment and information. First, all these works are of high musical quality, second - they all have additional characteristics; some are meditative, some are mystical, some are humorous, they create different atmospheres...

... And different styles. In your youth, you were among the first advocates of Erik Satie in our country, and the first disc of the Anthology contains Satie's composition from 1914; then we associated you with Cage, then with minimalism, Philip Glass, etc. Now we can also listen to the mystical messages of Gurdjieff-Hartman in his work from 1927, three quasi-naive compositions by Arvo Perth from the 1970's, but also completely new works by Miša Savić and Katarina Miljković from 2014. This is your personal view of a hundred years of piano music, without Schoenberg and Webern, for example ...

And without Stockhausen and Kagel...

Is there any common denominator among the 25 authors that you have included in the Anthology? Why them? Do you hear a spiritual kinship among them, do they have a special approach to music, such as the search for authentic inner sound?

For me, this is not forced, but a completely natural choice made out of love and curiosity. As soon as I got rid of school programs, I immediately started playing Cage, Stockhausen, Messiaen, Xenakis, those most difficult, complicated scores. And now I've sailed into some much calmer, gentler waters. I do not know where this will lead, but this last selection does not contain the names of composers that I have played for many years, except for Cage, who is always the one for me...

... The beginning and end of the Anthology?

Yes, and I didn't even want to record it again. I took the old recordings of two sonatas from my LP records and assigned them special places in this collection. I know why they are there and what it means to me. Everything else is a result of personal affinities.

Do you have role models among pianists?

At one point, it was Herbert Henk, whom I had heard at the Zagreb Music Biennale the day before my performance; he revealed me a new way of playing that I wanted to apply immediately. And that is where I broke, between what I had wanted previously and what I wanted from then on. Also, David Tudor. There are more of them in the younger generations, Bruce Brubaker, Helena Bagalo... not to mention composers. Nowadays, there are powerful production and marketing names, of course, abroad, which are tied to record companies, making the right combination of programs and encouraging performers to play more by offering them good financial conditions. This whole industry gave me a lot of trouble while preparing an Anthology, such as paying royalties to Philip Glass or Dušan Bogdanović, who wrote "The Little Prayer" for me, but gave the rights to the publisher, etc.

So you were practically the producer of the Little Anthology as well.

Well, yes. I had no one else, it was a huge task in addition to practicing and recording. I had significant financial support from SOKOJ, I was assisted by the Organization for the Interpreters' Rights, as well as the City Assembly and the Belgrade Cultural Center, who provided me with recording spaces and pianos for free. In the end, I had to invest one third of the funds myself. The project costs - I looked again so I could say, I just don't want to remember - 670,000 dinars. Awful lot! And I also managed to get something through Indiegogo, a donation site I had set up myself.

Plus, I didn't want to make concessions, I went with it like a kamikaze. When I saw this design by my friend Dusica Knežević I said "Let's go!" and we went to the best printing house (Publikum) so that the presentation would be of premium quality. And I'm very pleased that I didn't compromise.

A small anthology is equally well suited to listening, reading and watching. Behind it is your universal spirit. Did it ever occur to you to compose? Or to improvise?

I'm afraid to compose because I have so much information in me that I doubt I could do something I could sign with my name. I can't dismiss all the experiences, they are too much. Improvisation - yes. I'm interested and I even have a small plan, it seems like I could go straight into improvisation.

In any case, you often encourage composers to write new works.

Whenever I have the opportunity, especially for the International Review of Composers, within which I performed several full-length programs, I always call friends, the composers,

who are close to me. And then new works emerge... Many works were written on my own initiative, and I have a small number of works with a dedication to me.

Your repertoire mostly consists of short compositions. In the Anthology, the longest work, by Vuk Kulenović, lasts 14 minutes, but the most common durations are from 3 to 5 minutes. However, these works are not miniatures, in the sense in which Romanticism gave them that name. It seems to me that the way you play, with the intense enjoyment, Arvo Pärt's three compositions, you created a monumental whole that transcends its duration.

Arvo Pärt is responsible for that. The short composition "Für Anna Maria" is endlessly charming and pure as if a child were writing it. Or "Für Alina"! When someone is such a great artist, he can open up the whole world to you with just a few tones. I think that "Für Alina" is one of the pinnacles of the piano literature. Quite wonderful, you have lined notes with no ligatures, no bars, and you can play in a million ways. I listened to Pärt's explanations, but I played it differently.

Or *Canons* by Conlon Noncarrow, with polyrhythmia, four parallel voices, terribly difficult.

I understand why his scores were not performed. I liked his compositions and I said - let me try it. But the metric division 7: 5! There were stops, I was telling myself that it couldn't be done, and yet the thing was moving, very slowly and with great concentration. But there was not a trace of music in it. At one point, it suddenly appeared. This is what hard work means, it gives us the opportunity to overcome ourselves. The reward is huge!

Some of "your" composers' answers to the question about their relationship with the piano are indicative. "I have been trying to approach the piano without the baggage of several hundred years," says Dušan Bogdanović, Katarina Miljković composes "for a performer, not for an instrument," and Ivana Stefanović claims that "the piano is a funny and sweet installation in which there is something childish and naive." How would you answer that question?

We are friends. The piano is like my voice and our communication is such that it awakens in me what neither humans nor nature can. It is a two-way communication. Of course, those moments of real communication, deep and interchangeable, occur only after much, much work. Sometimes this is no longer a reality. The performer is separated from all the functions

of his or her body and the needs of everyday life. The performer is only left with sound, their body and their hands.

Are you also friends with the toy piano?

Oh yes (laughs). It's refreshing.

And maybe it's a demystification of the grand piano ...

Here's how it happened. It was via John Cage again. When I talk about any topic for longer, Cage is always somewhere nearby, and I am near him. When I first started listening to his oeuvre during my studies, I first heard his fantastic 1948 suite for the toy piano. He captured the spirit of that instrument in his special way. Miloš Raičković brought me that first piano, then the second one arrived, and I have a small wooden Russian piano that has black digits painted on, it is really just a precursor. Now I play on a Schoenhut, the leading toy piano brand.

An integral part of the Little Anthology is a book in Serbian and English, which gives your edition the potential to be “exported”. The book also has its editor, musicologist Ivana Prica, who envisioned dialogues with the composers, asked them a set of questions, and thus further enriched this two-way communication. Among the 25 composers, 18 submitted their replies.

I love dialogue with composers. Sometimes I regret when it's just words, because they're fleeting. This was the reason why what the composers had to say was written down. To be heard and read. Great contributions were also made by several landmark composers, whom I did not even expect to answer; alas, some were unable to respond because they were no longer alive.

In addition to the composers' writings, the book also contains five essays dedicated to your art and personality that contribute to the richness and polyphony of the Anthology. Do you also stand behind that choice?

Yes. These are the people with whom I share the same field of contemporary music, whose opinions matter to me, who can listen, who know a lot, who know me and my playing, who mean a lot to me and whom I love. So, what rises above all is the beauty of our closeness.

Your Anthology completely transcends our country, I don't think anyone has tried anything similar except Miloš Petrović, who is now deceased. We forget about the spiritual, financial and all other humiliating constraints that artists in Serbia face. However, the fact remains that you have been working on that project for almost three years in the aforementioned, increasingly worsening conditions. How do you experience today's cultural scene, especially the music scene? Are you angry about the neglect of artists and degradation of their integrity? Do you notice the malaises of our society and how do you deal with them?

Well - easily. Because I put have detached myself from the unfavourable environment, and yet I can't complain about not having the opportunity to play, because somehow it really kind of works out for me. And this year I didn't get the support from the Ministry of Culture and the City council that I asked for, but I really needed a break, so that suits me too. I'll rest a bit. I look with sadness upon our future musicians, there are lots of talented young people. And I don't know what they will do with their gifts, their knowledge, their commitment. I don't know how they will pursue their chosen profession, I don't see that they have the opportunities to play. Because, it has to start from something. I didn't get here by myself, but as a young girl I had the opportunity to gain experience. Not to mention that good concert halls and good pianos have to be paid for. I'd love to play this anthology all over Serbia, but there aren't good concert pianos in most cities. When it comes to the piano, our entire country is in a major handicap. At least that's what I can tell.

And of course, this flood of trashy television channels, Pink and others, they have hit rock bottom, it is terribly worrying, I have no words to explain how this could have happened. The complete collapse of civilization, culture, morality, to which a huge number of people are subjected. So we have parallel worlds, multiple social strata, so everyone swims in their own waters. We, in the minority, avoid the other parties. I can allow myself not to notice all of that, I can afford it, but someone can't, and someone doesn't want to. Some people simply don't care. Even so, when I look at Belgrade that I can talk about, there is an abundance of various concert performances. I have no idea how creativity wins, whether it uses a magic wand or something. Creativity and talent are the plants that outgrow everything else, like magic beans.

Did you just breathe in or breathe out?

Well, breathing in and breathing out are inseparable in life. If we use them collectively we can learn to see more. It is a moment of meditation that purifies us. And there is neither

before nor after but just now, our thoughts do not wander, we can understand everything with few words. Obviously I can't! The quality of life is different then. And we are better for it. Cage actually turned observation into art. For him, every moment was an artistic act, he used Zen as a great support and inspiration. That is why he never got into any conflicts, especially not with non-thinkers, but connected them with himself in the way he communicated his ideas and his philosophy of life. In fact - he is a philosopher of life. And in those years when there was no Pink TV, I was influenced by Cage.

In the Anthology, I realized one of my wishes. I used to call myself Mrs. Cage and wanted to make it "official" somehow. So, the job of a music producer that I did was signed with my pseudonym - Mrs. Cage.