



MILICA PARANOSIC (LEFT), DANIJELA POPOVIC, AND ALEKSANDRA VOJCIC

Three Divas From Belgrade Sweep Us Into the Darkness of War

D' DARK EYES

BY KYLE GANN

CORNWALL ON THE HUDSON—Invited to participate in the Storm King Music Festival upstate, I discovered a New York trio I hadn't heard of before, named D'Divaz. The group's mere recipe was intriguing: three women, all originally from Belgrade, all trained at Juilliard, and all living in New York. Milica Paranosic is the group's composer (also director of the electronic studio at Juilliard), while the other two, Danijela Popovic and Aleksandra Vojcic, are pianists and sometime vocalists. The three develop their music collaboratively. They haven't been heard much in New York yet for a maddeningly simple reason: Their Downtown-style multimedia show requires two pianos, which none of the Downtown spaces that might produce such a show possess.

I'm fascinated by Europeans who convert to Downtown-style performance practice; there aren't many, and you've read in these pages about every one I've ever found. From their name (taking off on the Divas), their dramatic stage presence, and their rather outrageously sexy costumes, you might assume that D'Divaz are something of a parody, and their act at the Storm King School's Walter Reade Jr. Theater began a little bit that way. Over the course of 90 minutes, though, it grew darker, grittier, and more political, very weighty indeed. Paranosic hovered backstage running the electronics while Popovic and Vojcic played pianos, the former especially, with an abrupt, rapid-fire piano technique.

Their music, electronic and keyboard alike, reminds me of Eastern European forms of post-minimalism I've heard. In the '80s Eastern Europeans picked up postminimalism with a vengeance, and turned it into something very different from the American variety. American postminimalism is mostly melodic and rather clean in its musical logic; Euro-postminimalism is more casual about throwing noises and melodies together in one piece, in a less linear, stream-of-consciousness style. To that extent, one could relate D'Divaz to other composers from those parts, such as Laszlo Sary, Zoltan Jeney, and especially Victoria Jordanova, another Yugoslavian with a New York presence. Postminimalism may, in fact, be the wrong term: The style may come more from a Slavic melodic heritage simply untouched by serialism.

Where D'Divaz differed was in their loosely

organized, sometimes improvisatory approach. They opened with a silent film of the three rehearsing, which Paranosic accompanied with an electronic score that was bouncy, tonal, and not specifically repetitive. Popovic and Vojcic then came out to play *Panasonic*, with Paranosic providing a third, virtual piano. Sitting on opposite ends of the same piano bench, they growled out out-of-sync repetitive riffs with a sad ambience; gradually they switched pianos, transitionally each playing different keyboards with each hand. Vojcic next played a macabre waltz against the whistles, boings, and synthesized piano of Paranosic's electronics.

From here the concert turned toward more identifiably ethnic sources. *Go/Saran* featured melodies in exotic modes over open-fifth drones, with depth added by an electronic background and a bit of theater provided by guest artist Joshua Fried (well-known to New York new-music fans) swinging around and playing a large hand drum. After this crescendoed to a miniature *Le Sacre* of repeated motives, the trio donned veils, lit candles, and sang a traditional wedding song from Kosovo over a filter-swept drone. This segued to a final work, *Crne oci/Go/Kolo*, for which they gathered to play inside a piano. As Paranosic and Vojcic drummed the strings with mallets, a film strung together images of war, presumably NATO's bombardment of Yugoslavia: bombs dropping, warplanes crashing, a dirty child looking abandoned, an old woman peering out from a bomb shelter. "Dark eyes, may you never see paradise," ran the words that additively reappeared. "You have caused me too much grief."

Whatever experiences these women had in their homeland to inspire this dark work I didn't ascertain, nor was that necessary to get the point; the dramatic despair and sadness had the aura of having been earned. Gradually sweeping us from an almost jocular mode into this catastrophe, the evening ended not in climax, but still with the propulsive energy of a traditional kolo dance, dying into the film's final question: "Why?" Being European, D'Divaz bring a weightiness to Downtown music that we rarely see, but being women and to some extent improvisers, they do so without the usual Euro-pretensions. Some of our Downtown spaces need to rent second pianos and give them a chance to be heard, for they have a lot to say and they say it well. **M**

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