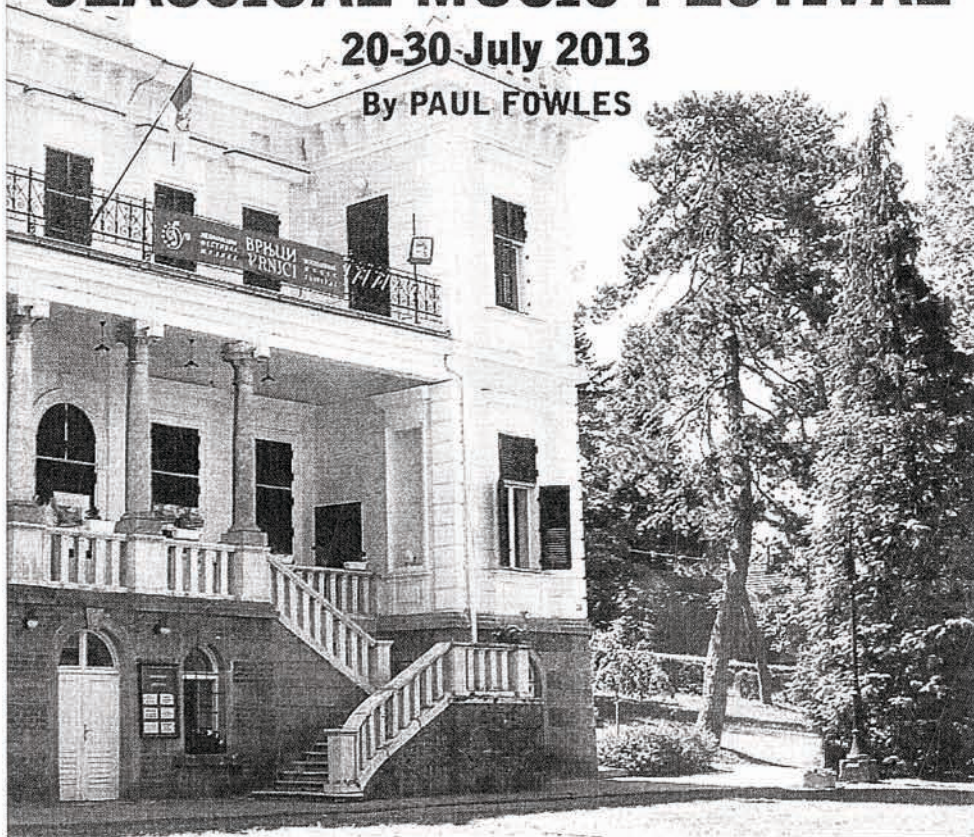


8TH VRNJCI INTERNATIONAL CLASSICAL MUSIC FESTIVAL

20-30 July 2013

By PAUL FOWLES



Belimarkovic Castle.

A festival with funding problems is such a commonplace scenario that it would feel like breaking news to report on one where balancing the budget isn't an ever-present worry. This year's proceedings at the Belimarkovic Castle suffered the closest financial shave I've ever witnessed. It was less than a week to curtain-up when artistic director Uros Dojcinovic emailed me to confirm that a reduced government grant had been secured and that I could expect to hear some music after my flight to Belgrade.

By now, the agenda differed considerably from that shown in the CG listings, the travel arrangements of such key attrac-

tions as the *Vivaldi Trio* and the *Odessa Guitar Quartet* having been timed out. But the chamber trio *Travelling Musicians* proved a worthy substitution on the opening night and offered what is possibly a unique mix of sounds, unless someone can advise me of another threesome that fields a horn and recorders with theorbo/baroque guitar. Equally innovative were the arrangements, both the Earl of Essex and the King of Denmark experiencing their galliards accompanied by a five-course guitar of the type imported to England by Francesco Corbetta more than three decades after Dowland's demise. Over drinks afterwards, guitarist Andrej Jovanic revealed his concerns about presenting this minor anachronism within the earshot of an Englishman, and seemed genuinely relieved when I assured him the percussive chordal backdrop was ideal for the task and could scarcely have been more ably handled.

The following evening, Uros Dojcinovic faced a textbook case of what Denis Norden famously termed, maybe with reference to the Richard Hickman painting or an earlier source, 'the innate hostility of inanimate objects'. During a routine pit stop to repair a false nail, Dojcinovic discovered his only tube of superglue had dried up. What happened next borders on the heroic. On seeing his colleague's predicament, Blaza, husband of the castle's curator Jelena Borovic-Dimic, sprinted into town, located a kiosk that was still open and brought back the required adhesive in time for Dojcinovic to return to the platform in little over quarter of an hour. A potential disaster averted, Dojcinovic soon regained his form, the works of Slavko Fumic (1912-45), by no means for the first time, emerging as the trump card. Stylistically, we're perhaps



Cezary Strokosz.



Marija Ninkovic and Uros Dojcinovic.

somewhere in the vicinity of Ernest Shand and his ilk: concise, conservative and overtly nostalgic, even within the context of its own era.

For the encore, Dojcinovic was joined by his former student Marija Ninkovic, who on the next evening was to appear as one half of the *Duo Rosetta*. Although I was present at the duo's rehearsal, I couldn't be around for the performance because Dojcinovic had invited me to introduce the programme at a concert he was giving alongside a pair of string players in the city of Pozarevac. Why me? Well, the music happened to be centred on an area of the repertoire with which I've had recent dealings, but this doesn't alter the fact that any Serbian capable of reading from a script could have done the job equally well and without the support of a translator. The answer, of course, was that my ethnicity brought into play a term that gladdens the heart of all promoters everywhere. The magic word is 'international'.

One of Dojcinovic's companions in Pozarevac accompanied us back to the castle, where she delivered what was the undisputed star performance of the week. Violinist Radmila Vardalic is a class act by anyone's standards, and also revealed herself to be a robust operatic soprano for the first two items in her recital with pianist Tatiana Perkovic. But the real hit was the hefty three-movement violin sonata by Gaspar Cassadó (1897-1966), whose charming guitar miniatures *Preambulo* and *Sardana* were performed and recorded by Segovia but have had little exposure of late.

Although the last-minute preparations were a major achievement for all concerned, it has to be conceded that Dojcinovic scored an own-goal by showing an interminable amateur movie of the late Milan Opacic talking about his musical instrument collection in faltering US English. By the time the credits rolled, there were fewer than ten people left in the room, which meant Dojcinovic spent the final half hour introducing his newly-published book *Gitaras Na Balkanu* to an empty house.

Much better attended was the talk on Wagner by musicologist Gordana Krajacic. I can't comment further because, unusually, there was no translator on site, but at least I had my moment of satisfaction when the speaker chose a clip from the glorious *Siegfried Idyll* as one of her sound samples.



Jelena Borovic-Dimic.

In the meantime, Polish guitarist and artist Cezary Strokosz emerged as the wild card. Surrounded by his various nautical and abstract creations displayed in glass vessels, Strokosz proved a somewhat hyperactive figure whose desire for fretboard velocity isn't always backed up by adequate technical resources. This led to chunks being omitted from *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* and, to an even greater extent, *Prelude No.1* by Villa-Lobos, the one secure item being an unexpectedly restrained setting of *Moon River*. In the first of two encores, Strokosz performed a Mozart vignette with his guitar held face downwards between the knees. This is an old Vladislav Blaha trick which, quite frankly, wasn't all that wonderful first time around. But the audience clearly thought it was fabulous, which I suppose justifies its inclusion.

A second round of dodgy multimedia was at one point reduced to showing blown-up Word documents promoting the wares of two publishers and one string manufacturer, but the indefatigable Dojcinovic saved the day by performing a set of contemporary miniatures celebrating the insect world by a Spanish guitarist/composer with the splendid name of Antonio Gomez Schneekloth. By happy coincidence, the hot and humid Serbian summer had incubated a bumper harvest of creepy-crawlies, those with wings forming an orderly queue to land in my drink. God bless them all...



Travelling Musicians (chamber ensemble).