

Melita Milin

**THE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN
JOSIP SLAVENSKI UND LUDWIG STRECKER**

The letter-exchange between Josip Slavenski and Ludwig Strecker, one of the directors and owners of the renowned publishing house “Schott’s Söhne” in Mainz throws light not only on one specific case of the efforts of a composer coming from the European periphery to achieve international recognition, but also on the relations between composers and their publishers in the period between two world wars. This correspondence also reflects the effects that major political events – the most important at the time in Europe being the rise of national-socialism – had on the sphere of culture and music in particular.

The correspondence between Josip Slavenski and Ludwig Strecker cannot be viewed separately from the correspondence, less frequent, between Slavenski and Ludwig’s brother Willy, who was the other director of the firm. In this correspondence are also included the letters exchanged between Slavenski and the editor of “Schott’s Söhne” Lothar Windsperger, and between Slavenski and a clerk of the house.

Josip Slavenski (b. 11 May 1896 in Čakovec, Croatia – d. 30. November 1955 in Belgrade, Serbia) was a Croatian composer who had spent half his life - 30 years of his mature life in Belgrade (1924-1955). He liked to remind people that he was the son of a baker and that he himself had learnt and practiced that craft in his youth. His real name was Štolcer, but already as a young man he chose another surname - Slavenski, inspired maybe by the name of Stravinski, whom he must have admired. He obviously wished to emphasize his belonging to the Slavs, and not to any of its nations in particular, as he believed that Slavs possessed high creative potentials in music. He changed his name officially in 1930. His signatures have sometimes the letter «Š» between his name and surname, as an homage to his origins.

Slavenski studied first at the Conservatory in Budapest from 1913 to 1916, where one of his teachers was Zoltan Kodalyi. After a four-year break he continued

his studies at the Conservatory in Prague, from 1920 to 1923, where Vitezslav Novak and Josef Suk were among his teachers. The years he spent in Prague were very fruitful : Among his works composed there were the exquisite choral work *a cappella* “Voda zvirá” (“Water Springs Out”) and the Ist String Quartet, crucial for his development and career. When he returned to Yugoslavia, he taught first at the Zagreb Music Academy (1923-24), but soon moved to Belgrade. There is not an unambiguous answer to the question of why he made that decision. Most probably he wished to try his chances in the capital of the country, which was wide open to the new in its different aspects. He stayed in Belgrade to the end of his life, composing there his most mature works. He travelled several times to the ISCM and other festivals of modern music, and to be present at the performance of his works abroad, but the only longer stay out of the country were the eight months spent in Paris (1925-26). There he went with Branko Ve. Poljanski, an artist involved in the avantgarde “Zenithist” movement, to which Slavenski himself was close. There are indications that he attended some courses at the Parisian “Schola cantorum” and that he came into contact with “Les Six”. Starting from 1924 he taught at different musical institutions in Belgrade : School of Music (1924-37), Secondary School of Music (1937-45) and Music Academy (1945-55). He was an active member of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM).

Slavenski was a prolific composer. His oeuvre contains works of almost all genres, with the notable exception of opera and ballet. Among his most accomplished works should be listed: “Balkanophony”, a symphonic suite (1927), Concerto for violin and orchestra (1927), “Chaos” for symphonic orchestra and organ (1936), “Music for orchestra” (1936), “Four Balkan Dances” for orchestra (1938), “Symphony of the Orient” for soloists, choir and orchestra (1934), four string quartets (1923, 1928, 1936, 1938), The “Slavic Sonata” for violin and piano (1924), “Sonata religiosa” for violin and organ (1925), “Yugoslav Suite” for piano (1921), “Water Rises Out”, and a number of other choral works *a cappella*. A special place belongs to his works for unconventional instruments: his “Music in Natural Tone System” (1937) was composed for “enharmonium” an instrument constructed in 1876 by Bosanquet that has an octave divided into 53 intervals (1. movement) and for timpani and four “trautonii”- electric instruments similar to “Ondes Martenot” (2. movement).

Josip Slavenski was only 28 when he made his name known on the international scene of contemporary music after the success of his I String Quartet at

the Donaueschingen Days of modern music in 1924, but he had difficulties in maintaining his reputation later.

He counts as one of the most important and original composers in Yugoslavia. Ever since his earliest creative years he was fascinated with the archaic qualities of folk music that was still a living tradition in some parts of the country, such as Medjumurje -the region bordering Hungary, where he was born. Slavenski could be compared with Bela Bartok as regards his ability to create a unique modern expression based on folk music. He was a master both of profound lyrical introspection and heightened, sometimes ecstatic, wild dramatic expression. His music is able to evoke suggestive archaic climates by an imaginative use of modal and pentatonic scales. Metric irregularities found in his works were no doubt rooted in folk practice. The harmonic dimension of his works was their most distinguished feature. His polyphonic thinking often resulted in polytonality, sometimes even atonality, producing sharply dissonant chords with percussive effects. The form of his works was mostly rhapsodic, and the instrumentation original, based on his studying acoustical laws.

Slavenski's main correspondent from the "Schott's Söhne" publishing house was Ludwig Strecker, *doctor iuris* (b. 13. January 1883 in Mainz – d. 1978), while his brother Willy Strecker (b. 4. July 1884 in Mainz – d. 1. March 1958 in Wiesbaden) exchanged letters with Slavenski less often. Their father, Ludwig Strecker senior, who owned the firm, made both brothers partners of the publishing house in 1929. Even before World War I Willy Strecker had shown interest in and ability for music publishing: he assisted Max Eschig in the foundation of his publishing house in Paris and he took over the London firm of Augener (both were expropriated during the war). The Strecker brothers were dedicated to the promotion of contemporary music, due mostly to their relationship with Paul Hindemith. They published all the works of Hindemith, but also those of many other successful composers of their time: Igor Stravinski, Arnold Schönberg (last works), Carl Orff, Wolfgang Fortner, etc.

The excellent impression Slavenski's Ist String Quartet made in Donaueschingen in 1924 motivated the Schreckers to make contact with the composer. They signed a contract on 8. March 1926 in Paris. The correspondence between Slavenski and the "Schott's Söhne" house is mostly related to the publishing and performing of his works, but it also gives us insight into the personal relationship

between Slavenski and the two brothers during the span of 14 years, 1925-1939, with a short restart after World War II (1951-1952). The first letter we possess was written on 24. September 1925, and the last on 30. December 1952. The correspondents had several opportunities to meet personally, usually at festivals of modern music. Slavenski met Ludwig Strecker for the first time in February 1926. which led to their signing a contract a little later, on 8. March. All those meetings were arranged through the firm "Max Eschig" (see the commentary of the letter no. 5). The last time Slavenski and Ludwig Strecker met was in 1952 at the Festival of the ISCM in Salzburg. (see letter no. 108). In 1956, a year after Slavenski's death, his widow Milana Slavenski visited Ludwig Strecker in Mainz, and obtained from him, as a special token of respect for the deceased, permission to publish his works in Yugoslavia (see Milana Slavenski's article cited in the Bibliography).

Until her death on 7. June 1980, Milana Slavenski took care of all the scores, documents and personal objects that had belonged to her husband. By the end of her life she gave some objects, such as Slavenski's telescope and his instrument "trautonium", as gifts to Čakovec, Slavenski's town of birth. Her heirs decided to donate Slavenski's score to the Faculty of Music in Belgrade, while his correspondence, documents, piano, books and furniture of his room were given to the Union of Yugoslav composers. In December 1983 the Archives were included in the Music Information Centre of Serbia, on the V floor of a building in the centre of Belgrade (Legat Josipa Slavenskog, Trg Nikole Pašića 1). The Slavenski Archives are in fact a small museum that exhibits not only his correspondence and other documents, but also preserves his room and personal belongingst. The whole correspondence was put in order and classified by Slobodanka Govedarica, a collaborator in the Archives, at the end of the 1980's, but the work was left unfinished for various reasons. Wishing to search the archives of the "Schott's Söhne" house in order to find some more letters that might have been preserved, I wrote to them, but the answer was negative, as they were still organizing their archives. I do hope that it will soon be possible to work there and find interesting documents.

In the rich correspondence between Slavenski and musicians from Yugoslavia and abroad (Alois Haba, Josef Suk, Zoltan Kodaly, Nikolai Malko, etc.), the correspondence with Ludwig Strecker and his brother Willy holds a special place, and not just because of its volume, but also because of its importance for the better understanding of some circumstances in his life and work. Out of 108 written

documents (110 if we count two cases classified under a. and b. – see letters no. 73 and 85), there are 88 letters, 17 cards and 3 Christmas cards. The majority of letters were signed officially: “B. Schott’s Söhne“ (45), to which group should be included the 3 earliest letters, signed by Lothar Windsperger, editor of the firm. There are 34 letters by Ludwig Strecker, 10 by Willy Strecker, and 16 by Josip Slavenski. It should be remarked here that there certainly were, especially in the first years of the correspondence, letters written by Ludwig or Willy Strecker, but signed officialy: B. Schott’s Söhne (for example, letter no. 19).

Of course, the statistics related to the senders of those letters applies to the preserved letters, as a number of them are certainly missing. The latter applies especially to Slavenski’s letters, which are usually carbon copies of sent letters, and sometimes just sketches. One letter by Ludwig Strecker seems to be lost, but is quoted from an article by Milana Slavenski (letter no. 77).

In the presented correspondence 50 letters out of the total number of 108 are quoted, and all are described and commented on.

With only two exceptions, all the letters that Slavenski received were sent from Mainz (the others from Berlin), whereas the great majority of his letters were written in Belgrade, with several from Prague and Berlin.

With few exceptions, all the letters were typewritten and signed. The only text difficult to decipher was a handwritten note in the margins of a letter, because it was written with a pencil and went too pale over the years, and moreover the paper is damaged (letter no. 81).

The letters of the correspondence Slavenski-Strecker are presented here unedited, which means that Slavenski’s letters that reveal his imperfect knowledge of German, are left as they are.

Although the Archives of Josip Slavenski possess predominantly one side of this correspondence - the letters received by him, it is not difficult to reconstruct the events and themes that were discussed in them. Strictly professional at the beginning, the correspondence became friendly over the years. In response to a letter from Slavenski that was obviously full of complaints – probably ranging from financial problems to some plots against him - Strecker wrote that he hoped that “sunny days for him would come eventually” (letter no. 37). Most frequently discussed, though, were the questions of fees and authors’ rights, as well as the reasons for the refusal by the “Schott’s Söhne” house to publish some works of Slavenski. Especially interesting

were the reproaches Ludwig Strecker made to Slavenski as regards the length of the works and performing ensembles for which the works were written: for instance, “Religionophony”(known today as “The Symphony of the Orient”) was found to be too long, which was true because it lasts 45-50 minutes; moreover, the movements all differ in scoring – the first is for male choir, soloists, xylophone and kettledrums, the second only for woodwinds, horn and harp, the third for a symphonic orchestra, etc. Strecker knew that such works would be very difficult to get performed and thus would not bring any profit. Another big problem with that works was its 2nd movement evoking Jewish religion, which theme was not at all welcome in Germany in 1934! Strecker was also critical of Slavenski’s attachment to folk music, in particular to that of the Balkans, warning him that if he continues so he will get the label of a “folklorist” (letter no.19, also no.61). In Strecker’s opinion, Slavenski’s music was full of strength that differentiated his music from that of so many weak composers who are at home nowhere (letter no. 17), but he missed a more diverse and elaborate compositional work (letter no. 17) and a more structured form (letters no. 25, 61).

Being an intelligent music editor, Ludwig Strecker tried to guide Slavenski’s career. So, he urged the composer to make an orchestral suite of Balkan dances (letter no. 19) , thus probably inspiring Slavenski to conceive his master-piece “Balkanophony” that is based on a previous cycle “Songs and Dances from the Balkans” for piano. Another instance of Strecker’s positive intervention is his invitation to Slavenski to write a work for the festival in Baden-Baden in 1936. The composer wrote his “Music for Chamber Orchestra” (sometimes called “Music 1936”, a work based on Slavenski’s previous music for the film “And Life Continues”. On several occasions Strecker also advised Slavenski to be careful when he composes for choir, as his music is too difficult to sing and therefore there would not be many choirs interested in putting it on their repertoire.

Slavenski was very self-confident, so for example he wrote about his “Religionophony” as being “the deepest work written in recent time”, “a new IX symphony” (letter no. 81), and so on. As is also common among composers, he was known for his sensitive nature, and was hurt by his works being several times refused for publishing by “Schott’s Söhne“. His reactions to such letter that he received from Strecker were noted by his underlining many lines and writing several question- and exclamation marks in their margins. Once he stated his conviction that he was

handicapped by coming from the Balkans, and not being a West-European (letter no. 81) Strecker's reasons were probably founded, as the times were difficult for music, as they were for so many other spheres of culture and life at the beginning of the 1930's. The economic crisis that brought the decrease in demand of serious music in general, was followed by the nazi dictatorship. As was recalled by Milana Slavenski (Slavenski's wife), both brothers Strecker were opposed to that new regime and they tried to help modern music survive in those circumstances. With that aim, they organised, with a group of friends, a festival of contemporary music in Baden-Baden in April 1936. As already mentioned, Slavenski was among those composers who were asked to contribute a work - among the others were Paul Hindemith, Francesco Malipiero and Jean Françaix (see Milana Slavenski's article quoted in the Bibliography, p. 439-444). With the approaching war, problems became more serious. So, in a letter dated 31.Oct.1938 (letter no.103), Strecker first thanked Slavenski for having received a catalogue of his works in English, but then added: "Since many of the quoted critics were written by non-Aryans, they cannot be of use, at least in Germany, and therefore we shall have to focus mainly on England and America."

No part of Slavenski's correspondence has been published anywhere yet, but all further efforts in that direction will be rewarded with a wealth of information and insight it gives into the musical life in different parts of Europe in the 20th century.