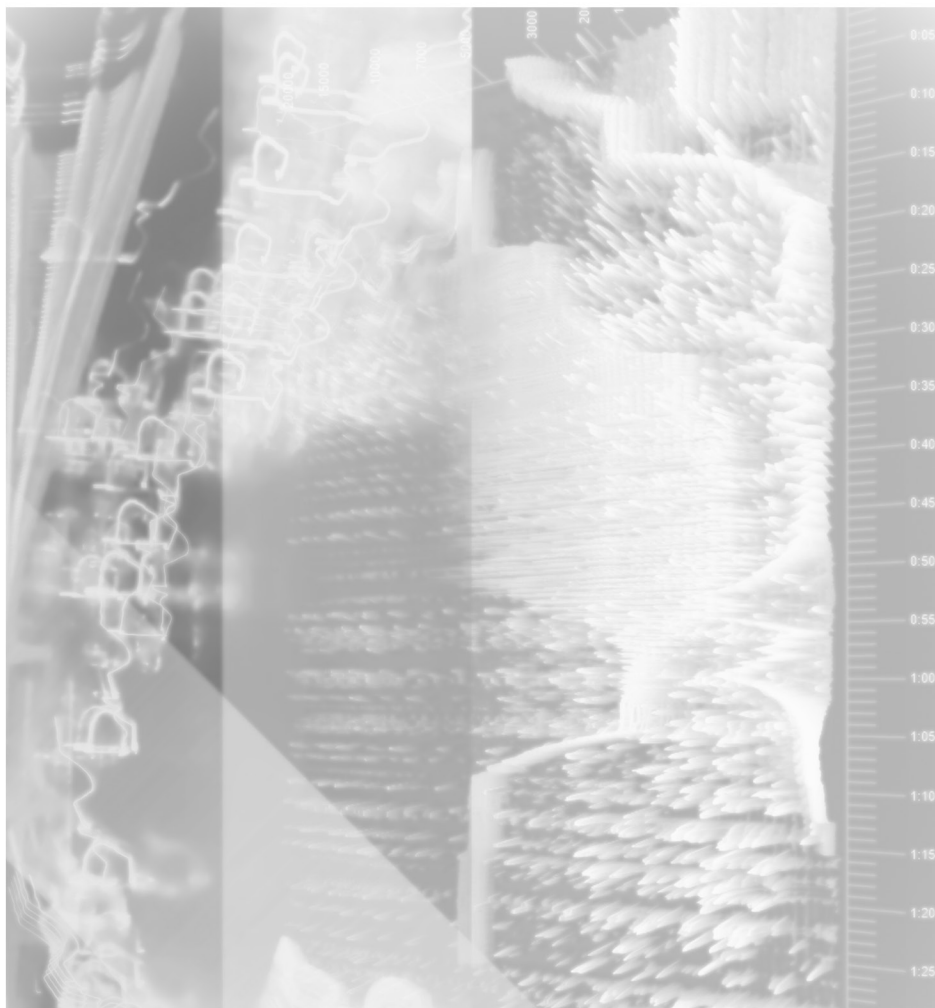


I N S Δ M

JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ART AND TECHNOLOGY



Three Extraordinarily Painted Seasons... and This is Not the End Serbian Protests 2024–2025

Ivana Stefanović

INSAM Journal of Contemporary Music, Art and Technology

No. 15, December 2025, pp. 29–35.

IVANA STEFANOVIĆ

Belgrade, Serbia

THREE EXTRAORDINARILY PAINTED SEASONS ... AND THIS IS NOT THE END

SERBIAN PROTESTS 2024–2025

Two things happened one after another. First, on November 1st, 2024, the canopy of the main railway station in Novi Sad (Serbia) collapsed, killing 16 people, including two children. Soon after, the state of turmoil and dissatisfaction turned into student-led protests and faculty blockades. The students realized very quickly that it had not been an accident, but a crime, the crime of negligence, corruption, sloppiness, the crime that its perpetrators were trying to cover up and “sweep under the carpet”. Some time had passed before January 14th, 2025, the day when I started to write down something about all these events, since in the meantime everything has metamorphosed, turning into a long-lasting social process that has outgrown all known forms, thus becoming an unprecedented physical and spiritual collective entity, complex, multicolored, and multifaceted, hitherto unseen in these regions. The formation of a certain, previously unknown cultural and social formula has begun; what initially started as a student-led protest grew into massive demonstrations led by high schoolers, parents, professors, citizens and people... becoming more widespread and general. Faculty buildings, rectorates, and universities all over the country were under blockade for months and the citizens were not allowed to enter them. All events, almost exclusively, took place in public open spaces, streets, squares, crossroads, as well as roads which people walked, ran, hiked, cycled, and slogged through in the rain, sometimes only in sneakers, and other times wearing bandages. The students, high schoolers, and some older people accompanying them marched through various cities and villages in the country, even-

tually arriving to Strasbourg and Brussels. Hundreds and hundreds of kilometres of road underfoot. And this is all that should be said about the reasons and the causes of the given phenomenon.

Another thing that I can see emerging as an unavoidable theme is how the protest *sounds*. I am experienced in sound hunting, having recorded so many of them, especially in Belgrade, Sarajevo, Damascus, both in nature and in the cities, and these sounds can be heard in my radio art compositions. However, the sound of the current protests is quite different. Not only in terms of its dynamic properties, but also in all the finesse, "colours", its "leafy" formations, together with prevailing voices of young people, both males and females, sometimes even children, and their harmonics. This new, liberated spirit also introduced some mild spices: irony, a pinch of humour and lots of youthful frequencies in the air. A lot of laughter! Lots of tears, joy, and shouts. Bikers soon joined this mixture of sounds, dangerously touring through the cities, roaring on the roads, and paving the way for the students; roaring taxi engines lined and picked up the students all over the country, after numerous actions and events, driving them back safely to different cities. An increasing number of voices got intertwined in that huge sound nest, adding to the volume of the bundle now impossible to untangle, whereas sound mass started waving like a Möbius strip.

The participants (citizens, all the protesters, and all the passers-by) started to realize that in this condensed sound domain, created when a huge number of people are gathered, there is an especially striking energetic power. The city is being filled with sound, it resounds, groans, sings, rings, echoes. The city is breathing, resembling a huge organism. The multi-layered sound dissipates, multiplies, it gets drowned out, overpowering other sounds, it becomes stronger, exceeding the average urban saturation value. And it is precisely this phenomenon that I find worth recording. What otherwise happens quite rarely – this winter, spring and summer 2025 takes place not only every day, but repeatedly, for months – and that is the fact that the protest and revolt are expressed not only by its specific sound, but by the absence of it, through peaceful, deep and solemn silence, which powerfully reverberates in its fullness and soundlessness. It is something astonishingly powerful. "Pumpaj";¹ young people shouted tirelessly, "puuuumpaaaaaj", they sang, uttered, called and... kept silent, which, in a way, produced the strongest shock.

These two opposing auditory "breakthroughs", loud noise and deep silence, emerged almost simultaneously, every time leaning one upon another, taking turns within just a few seconds. The streets are loud, the events happen daily, and the emotional charge is often (too) high. This is how "loudness" and a commemorative silence honoring victims of Novi Sad railway canopy collapse started to coexist side by side. Fifteen minutes of solemn silence and peaceful standing soon turned to sixteen minutes – as the number of victims grew – interrupting the regular day, movement, traffic, communication, tak-

¹ A Serbian slang word, and one of the main slogans of anti-corruption protests in Serbia, meaning *Pump it up!*, *Keep going!*, which points out to the fact that the heart pumps blood essential for life. The slogan is used to provide support, love, and the message of not giving up.

ing one's breath away. Everything would momentarily stop and only the silence would remain. Then, right on cue, everything would burst with sound again.

The Western Balkan region – and we are located on these meridians – historically has had a lot of experience in uprisings, protests, rebellions, revolutions. Working on *Metropola tišine – Stari Ras*² I had been thinking about it myself while recreating associations that deal with noise and silence of ancient events. But that which was supposed to tell something about the past centuries consisted of different material. Back then, I had been collecting ephemeral and perishable remains, traces of records, preserved parts of melodies. During the 1990s, everything accelerated, even the experience itself: I was able to record and thus capture the documentary sound of the collapse of the multicultural and multi-ethnic project of Yugoslavia: the sound of bustle, the sound of processions and mass movements, with or without shouting and chanting, the sound of weeping, the sound of mothers...(recordings from Novi Sad, Belgrade, Sarajevo,... the cities in which I created *Lingua/phonia/patria*³ and *Lacrimosa*⁴); the sound of stone and air reverberating after murderous attacks. The scarcity of performing tools while working in a cold studio during wartime winter increased my sense of anxiety, seclusion and defeat, and it was only thirty years later that *Veliki Kamen*⁵ strengthened me in my idea of exploring tough Balkan themes.

Now, in 2025, the rebellion is alive everyday, omnipresent, almost unstoppable, with its ritually repetitive component being the *silence*, group silence, the voicelessness of the mass consisting of living people, here and now, simultaneously performing observance of silence in many places. This is when the silence starts ruling the cities, roads, open spaces, squares, crossroads, streets, fields... From 11.52 to 12.08 (although the exact time can occasionally vary) the cities become everyday 16-minute-“metropolises of silence”, turning to meditative sessions, mental “breaks” and purgatories, dramatically changing the cityscape. I am now likely to think that a man who keeps silent is a different man. He stays alone with himself, observes the unobserved, feels the unfelt. This kind of silence with no living soul, a cat, or a machine, when no sounds of footsteps or car wheels can be heard, the silence created by nature “that sleeps” (which brings back my memory of a filming scene of muezzin in Damascus one night of a full Moon⁶) – is a different kind of silence. It is filled with breath of living people withdrawing into themselves, “looking inward”, willingly trying to discipline every voice, speech, breathing, one's heart beats – it projects on the scanner of listeners' senses quite a different inner image. In such silence, the silence of all living beings, huge will and strength is con-

² *The Metropolis of Silence/Stari Ras*, 1992. Radiophonic poem for tape. Performed by “Ensemble Renaissance” (early music ensemble). Sound Engineer: Zoran Jerković. First broadcast on May 27th, 1992. London. Ars Acustica Festival.

³ *Lingua/Phonia/Patria*, 1989. A co-production of Radio Belgrade and Hörspiel studio WDR Cologne.

⁴ *Lacrimosa*, 1993. ORF (Radio Austria) Production. First broadcast on May 6th, 1993: ORF, Vienna.

⁵ *A Large Stone [Veliki kamen]*, 2017. Based on fragments of *Hasanaginica*, a play by Ljubomir Simović. First broadcast on Radio Belgrade 3, May 7th, 2017

⁶ *Prvi istočni san [The First Eastern Dream]*, 1998. ORF Production (Radio Austria) Kunstradio-Radiokunst, Vienna. Audio Editor: Heidi Grundman. Sound Engineer: Gerhard Wieser. First broadcast on Radio Austria, The First Programme, October 8th, 1998.

centrated. The kind of strength that does not rest, but plunges. Thus, careful listening to this silence brimming with life leads to understanding the message sent by human beings. There is something liturgical to it, but I would rather describe it as a painful and struggling ascent of a maturing society.

Are sonic arts (including radio art) "a safe house" for a genuine story about realistic topics? Does, paradoxically, a non-musical document truly preserve the artistic expression from the unwanted layers of pathos and narration, by transposing sensibility into other metaphorical and symbolic artistic spheres? Does sonic art represent truth? Or, does it, at least, give it a chance? And is it even allowed to talk about truth nowadays?

Little is left of nature. City birds usually cannot be heard due to the noise. But they have their own sound identity that can be heard in silence. When people stop, when they keep quiet and lower their head, the birds start behaving as "soloists" and, together with barking dogs, they become the main agents of the silent reality. The birds flutter, flap their wings, "call" each other. A whole flock rises somewhere, and after a sudden change of sound drifts, one can hear a rhythmic wing work that slowly, dynamically "fades away" and disappears, without using a potentiometer (regulator), but by means of mere physical distancing. Trees, birds, and dogs represent rare remnants of nature in urban ambiances, and they should therefore be registered here as a precious rarity. Andersen's fairy tale already showed a long time ago that a mechanical nightingale would not be able to replace a true, living one, whose exclusive singing can cure the emperor. Only the bird that flies, sings, and does not mechanically repeat its song has healing properties. This is perhaps the reason why a bird's singing does not disturb the silence, but rather weighs it, deepens it, granting it the spatial and meaningful dimensions. In the minutes following the beginning of silence, one can hear ravens croaking, dogs barking in the distance, or some random voices from the invisible yard. The presence of these sounds now resembles a family gathering.

Music has been written about since antiquity, whereas untempered sound has been written about only since recently. Those who listen to life sounds do not remain deaf to the possibility of composing and creating an artistic form using "non-artistic" material. This is probably the very moment when the sound art, or sonic art, was established. Only the 20th century brought a realization that the world is filled, perhaps even overloaded, with all kinds of sounds that are not even harmonized, melodized, or musicalized, but the sounds that are by no means simply noise. In social events charged with meaning, reason, and justification, sound quality is being received and processed differently. And it itself gains some meaning, being shaped into an idea or a metaphor.

I observe with my ears, more than with my eyes, what is now going on here.

Cities are very loud environments, and that is why the phenomenon of street silence is in stark contrast with everything that a city represents. The abruptness of the emergence of silence is another striking component. When several hundreds, thousands, or several hundred thousands of people enter the silence simultaneously, does everyone remain alone or not...? This happened for the first time in such a magnificent way at Slavija Square in Belgrade, on December 22nd, 2024, during the early evening hours.

Within only several seconds, more than 200,000 people became utterly silent. Another extremely sonically impressive protest took place in front of Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), a national media service. The speed at which everything unfolded then created a sensation of the abyss in which noise and silence alternated in huge waves, so that one burst of sound was followed by a burst of silence. Sudden bursts of silence for a huge number of people provoke some kind of weakness, they create a sensation of feeling upset, a physical rest provokes unrest. Or perhaps it provokes the opposite? The moment in which two opposing sound realities collide – the familiar, expected one, and another one, representing the immediate discharge followed by silence – brings a dramatic and completely new experiential phenomenon. The moment I am writing this text, the protests have been taking place for months, all these months of daily standing at various Serbian crossroads now enter the third season.

The sound experienced its another “performance” on the big stage playing the big role.

Five months since the protests started, precisely until March 15th, there were many hundreds and thousands of rallies all over the country, with hundreds of thousands of participants. On that March 15th, in the middle of willful and disciplined silence, 300,000 citizens who filled the square and the whole surrounding plateau were attacked by an unknown “weapon”, which is for the time being also called a “sound” or “sonic” weapon. In one of the main streets, a strange sound that can only be described as “something” burst out. Various witnesses reported “something like” creaking, humming, or roaring. It was the sound that could not be identified, recognized, or named. The sound of unclear properties. People who were “hit” by this weapon were terrified, they fell down, had problems with spatial orientation, experienced pain or hearing troubles, which only further deepened and expanded the interpretative range of this ritual social act. Whether we call it a sound cannon or not, this “something-like-sound” was directed towards the silent crowd. It was the culmination of that “something” that has not yet been officially confirmed. Soundwise, the attack lasted for a short time, and it was only the students’ composure that prevented the effects of the potential stampede that could have been caused by fear, and that would have further led to unimaginable consequences. Even the international community got engaged in the investigation that followed.

The first encounter of the opposing sides happened on New Year’s Eve. The students welcomed the new year of 2025 in heavy silence. At the nearby square, a turbo-folk singer was singing at the top of his voice, whereas the young protesters were trying to ignore him. The sound struck the silence. Or the other way round?

In May, the situation already became significantly different: it was no longer possible to ignore the fact that “our children” and “the opposing side” became physically so dangerously close to one another. A noisy para-city consisting of light white tents was created in the middle of the central boulevard and the nearby park. Group A is blocking group B. Now these two groups are so close, never have they been closer to each other. Sounds collide, different music genres collide, whistles collide with the messages of the lyrics. While one group is silent, another interrupts the silence in various ways.

A boundary is drawn, but in the midst of noise, it is hard to discern where exactly the boundary is broken.

Some time later another large intersection is occupied. Now together with the professors who are suddenly deprived of their salaries. The sound that characterizes them is the sound of quiet conversation, pleasant, cultured music, and even concerts in the evening hours. A bit of rock, a bit of jazz, a bit of classical music. The range of diversity is expanding.

None of the rallies that occasionally grew into a continuous row of rallies sounded the same. Dry summer brought an additional background made of various sounds of rustling leaves on the branches; epic scenes accompanied by many flags fluttering in the wind; suddenly the rain joined the city sounds, thunders or a storm outbreak; showers and thunders merging with regular and irregular weather phenomena; Chinese raincoats rustling in the wind, whistles and speakers' voices amplified through megaphones, fighting the storms.

On June 28th, 2025, after a huge protest rally at Slavija Square, the students take off their hi-vis vests, they join the citizens and merge with the rest of the crowd. But this is not the end.

That's when police cordons started to form in order to suppress the protests, "the forces of order" as masked goons walking in boots approach, the violence erupts, batons and shields are used, people are beaten and wounded, there is blood on their faces and their hands. Arrests become more common, and the sound properties become different.

This is where thinking about another and quite different sound encompassing the entire horizon could start, and that would require a new and a different type of essay. However, this one ends here, without following any rules or literary conventions determining what a proper text should look like, it gets out of the rhythm, it interrupts observation, just like when one's eyelids close. All of a sudden.

Translated by Ivana Maksić

SOUNDS OF CHANGES

Ars Acustica review

The piece is available on the *Museum of the Nineties* website.

The content can be accessed via [this link](#) or QR code below:



Photo by Gavriilo Andrić.

Student protests. Serbia, December 6, 2024 – June 28, 2025

Authors: Ivana Stefanović and Ana Kotevska

Duration: 16:25

Sound design: Zoran Jerković

Private production “Samizdat”

Completed on August 25, 2025.

The documentary materials used were recorded on private mobile phones, obtained via social media, or taken from publicly available media outlets.