

# The Premiere of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in Belgrade

Marijana DUJOVIĆ\*

musicologist, independent researcher

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## ABSTRACT

The premiere of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in Belgrade, capital of Serbia, was in 1910. The situation in Belgrade, around 1910 in the field of musical culture, and culture in general, was not so good as in other parts of Europe. In a society with not so many professional musicians, where amateurs were the main carriers of musical life, the young composer and conductor Stanislav Binički, who had come back from his studies in Munich decided to organize with a group of enthusiasts the premiere of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. In this article I will represent the musical situation in the capital around 1910 and show what this premiere brought to audiences and musicians in Belgrade.

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## KEYWORDS

Ludwig van Beethoven, Binički, Belgrade, premiere, Ninth Symphony

## 1. THE MUSICAL SCENE IN BELGRADE AT THE TIME OF THE PREMIERE OF BEETHOVEN'S NINTH SYMPHONY

The premiere of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in Belgrade took place in 1910, at the initiative of composer and conductor Stanislav Binički.<sup>1</sup> Soon after his return to Belgrade from Munich,

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<sup>1</sup> Stanislav Binički (1872–1942) was a Serbian composer, conductor, pedagogue and organizer of musical events. His opera *Na uranku* (At dawn) was the first performed Serbian opera in 1903/1904. Binički was the founder of the first symphonic orchestra in the country in 1904, the co-founder of the first Music School in Belgrade named Srpska muzička škola (Serbian Musical School) in 1899, and the founder of the Opera department in the Royal National Theater in Belgrade (Kraljevsko narodno pozorište u Beogradu) in 1920.

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\* Corresponding author. E-mail: marijanadujovic@hotmail.com

where he studied, Binički became one of the most active musical organizers in the city. During this period (1899–1910), he was especially focused on the organization of music and cultural life in Belgrade. Stanislav Binički decided to organize the premiere of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with a group of enthusiasts that was mostly made up of musical amateurs.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the population in the capital significantly expanded: between 1866 and 1914, the number of Belgrade inhabitants increased from 25,000 to 100,000.<sup>2</sup> The city's infrastructure<sup>3</sup> was slowly improved: a sewage system was built in 1905, enabling the supply of drinking water, and one year later the tram network was electrified.

The main carriers of musical life in Belgrade and Serbia before World War I were numerous choral societies, formed mostly from musical amateurs.<sup>4</sup> Their repertoire was varied, and always included the national Serbian compositions (secular and church music), aiming at stirring patriotic ideas (especially in those Serbian choral societies in the diaspora). Choral societies often organized events/shows with a mixed repertoire made up of choral compositions, poetry reading, performances of short instrumental pieces, short acting performances (skits), etc. At the beginning of the twentieth century several choral societies were active in the capital. Before World War I Stanislav Binički was a conductor of several choral societies. From 1905 he led a choir named Stanković.<sup>5</sup> The choir mostly performed works by Serbian and Russian composers of the nineteenth century. With the choir Stanković, Binički started performances of thematic concerts, marking the anniversaries of famous composers. This kind of repertoire was presented to Belgrade audiences with the aim to hear some pieces which had never before been performed in Belgrade or were not familiar to audiences. Besides that, Binički included numerous excerpts from various operas with the goal to prepare domestic audiences for the operatic repertoire as well.

The most significant cultural institution in the capital, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was the Kraljevsko srpsko narodno pozorište u Beogradu (The Royal Serbian National Theater in Belgrade), today known as the National Theater, founded in 1868. Before the Great War the repertoire sometimes included musical plays, such as: operas (either in full or simply represented by some parts), operettas, and plays with music (*komadi s pevanjem*). For the purposes of its repertoire the National Theater employed a small theater orchestra formed mostly of amateurs and musicians from military orchestras.

In 1909, the Serbian opera singer with an international career, Žarko Savić,<sup>6</sup> founded a private opera house named Opera na bulevaru (Opera at the Hotel Boulevard), which worked only

<sup>2</sup> Nataša MIŠKOVIĆ, *Bazari i bulevari: Svet života u Beogradu 19. veka* (Beograd: Muzej grada Beograda, 2008), 309.

<sup>3</sup> The term *infrastructure* means the abandonment of the Ottoman urban style of architecture, with the aim to build a city in the manner of pro-Western architecture.

<sup>4</sup> Serbian choral societies were established in the early nineteenth century mostly in the territory of the Habsburg Monarchy (today part of the Vojvodina territory in Serbia). These societies were some kind of society clubs, where people shared political ideas with a considerable effort to spread Serbian culture to Serbs outside the country. After some time, these kinds of choral societies were also established in Serbia. The interesting fact is that members of choral societies did not only belong to high-class society, but were also highly educated people from lower-class society. Tatjana MARKOVIĆ, *Transfiguracije srpskog romantizma – muzika u kontekstu studija kulture* (Beograd: Univerzitet umetnosti u Beogradu, 2005), 128–153.

<sup>5</sup> The name of this choral society was given in memory of the Serbian composer Kornelije Stanković (1831–1865).

<sup>6</sup> Žarko Savić (1861–1930) was a Serbian opera singer, pedagogue and performer. He studied in Vienna. Savić was a member of opera houses in Berlin, Dresden, Lübeck, Freiburg, Baden-Baden, Düsseldorf, Stuttgart, Riga



for two seasons, until 1911.<sup>7</sup> Among other significant musical institutions was the Orkestar Kraljeve garde (Military Orchestra of the Royal Guard), founded by Stanislav Binički in 1904. This orchestra was the first symphonic orchestra in the country.<sup>8</sup>

Besides the theaters and opera houses, concert venues included the concert hall Kolarac (today known as the Zadužbina Ilije M. Kolarac, i.e. the Ilija M. Kolarac Endowment Foundation of Ilija M. Kolarac). Before 1914, concerts of art music were often in cafés or taverns (*kafana*) or, during the summertime, in parks. Serbian taverns had an important role in the development of political, social and cultural life during the second half of the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century. After the Second Serbian Uprising (1817), cafés were one of the public places where Serbs could gather. Also certain significant political decisions were made in cafés. It is known that members of the organization Crna ruka (Black Hand), a group of officers led by Dragutin Dimitrijević Apis (1876–1917), met in the Kolarac tavern in order to organize the overthrow of one of the two Serbian royal families, the Obrenović, in 1903, assassinating the authoritarian king Aleksandar (1876–1903) and his wife Draga Obrenović (1864–1903).<sup>9</sup>

With the departure of the Ottoman administration from Serbia, entertaining in Belgrade became more diverse in the cafés and in the halls of the hotels.<sup>10</sup> Local café music had already been surpassed by the mid-nineteenth century, so innkeepers and bosses began to hire foreign musicians, mostly from Austria-Hungary, with a Czech origin, who usually came in groups, forming vocal-instrumental ensembles. Performances of Serbian choral societies were also common. Before the so-called “beer concerts” organized by Binički with the military orchestra,<sup>11</sup> it should be noted that other cultural events took place in Belgrade cafés, for example the first theater guest performances in the café Djumurkana (Turkish custom house) in 1841; the first cinema projection was in the Zlatan Krst (Golden Cross) café in 1896; and the first cinema was opened at the Hajduk Veljko café in 1906.<sup>12</sup> Concerts held in cafés, including those performed by the Orchestra of the Royal Guard, were predecessors of specialized art-music halls. During the process of Europeanization, different cultural practices from the West were transferred to the Balkans, so that the café concerts were a novelty in the second half of the nineteenth century. These kinds of places were meeting-points and gathering places for audi-

and Hamburg. During 1911–1914, he led the National Theater in Novi Sad (Serbia). After World War I he moved to the USA, where he worked as a singer pedagogue until his death. Stana ĐURIĆ-KLAJN, “SAVIĆ, Žarko,” in *Muzička enciklopedija*, vol. 3, ed. by Krešimir KOVAČEVIĆ (Zagreb: Jugoslavenski zavod, 1977), 277.

<sup>7</sup> Roksanda PEJOVIĆ, *Српско музичко извођајство романтичарског доба* (Beograd: Univerzitet umetnosti u Beogradu, 1991), 236–245.

<sup>8</sup> Most of the members of this orchestra were Czech musicians, who came to Serbia to live and work. Since the second half of the nineteenth century Czech musicians started to emigrate to Serbia, looking for employment. Czech musicians greatly influenced the development of musical education and musical culture in Serbia. Plenty of Czech musicians formed a significant part of Serbian musical society until World War II. Roksanda PEJOVIĆ, “Češki muzičari u srpskom životu (1844–1918) I,” *Нови Звук*, no. 8 (1996), 51–58.; ead., “Češki muzičari u srpskom muzičkom životu (1844–1918) II,” *Нови Звук*, no. 9, (1997), 65–74.

<sup>9</sup> Divna ĐURIĆ-ZAMOLO, *Хотели и кафане XIX века у Београду* (Beograd: Muzej grada Beograda, 1988), 176.

<sup>10</sup> See: MIŠKOVIĆ, *Bazari i bulevari*, 291–333; ĐURIĆ-ZAMOLO, *Хотели и кафане*, 177–178.

<sup>11</sup> The term “beerconcerts” as concerts in cafés is taken from Roksanda PEJOVIĆ, “Stanislav Binički kao dirigent i organizator muzičkog života u Beogradu,” in *Stanislav Binički, zbornik radova*, ed. by Vlastimir PERIČIĆ (Beograd: Fakultet muzičke umetnosti u Beogradu, 1991), 5–54., 12.

<sup>12</sup> ĐURIĆ-ZAMOLO, *Хотели и кафане*, 177–178.



ences, who socialized during the performances, showing that their behavior was unlike that at concerts in specialized music halls.<sup>13</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century in Serbia, relatively few educated musicians lived and worked in the capital. In the year of the Beethoven Symphony No. 9 premiere in Belgrade, only one Music School had been established in the capital, named the Srpska muzička škola (Serbian Music School), founded in 1899.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. THE ORCHESTRA OF THE ROYAL GUARD CONCERTS

Although the concerts of the Orchestra of the Royal Guard were seemingly just one kind of many café concerts, they were certainly innovative. With these concerts Binički had the chance to create a more extensive and diverse repertoire for the Orchestra of the Royal Guard. In the beginning of the twentieth century the aim of these concerts was to introduce audiences to the classical instrumental music of Western/Central/Eastern European composers, which was not very well known to Belgrade audiences, and Binički thought audiences should be gradually educated to accept firstly so-called light music, simple pieces, salon miniatures, before they could follow excerpts from operas, and later symphonic works. The names of composers listed in concert programs, in addition to established composers (mostly from the era of Romanticism), included a number of unknown or forgotten authors.<sup>15</sup> The first concert by the Orchestra of the Royal Guard with Stanislav Binički as conductor was held at the café Kolarac on May 16, 1904 and the last (known) at the National Theater, led by composer Miloje Milojević on May 16, 1914.<sup>16</sup> For the whole decade this orchestra with its main conductor Binički worked as a group of great enthusiasts. They performed alone or with renowned soloists from Serbia and abroad.

The repertoire for concerts by the Orchestra of the Royal Guard were made up of the works of (most often) German authors, especially from the period of Romanticism, such as: Franz Schubert, Carl Maria von Weber, Robert Schumann, and even Richard Wagner; and certainly many numerous pieces from the works of Italian opera masters were included, such as the operas of: Gioacchino Rossini, Giuseppe Verdi, Giacomo Puccini etc. The Orchestra of the Royal Guard also performed works by French composers, such as the compositions of: Camille Saint-Saëns, Léo Delibes, Jules Massenet and Georges Bizet, as well as the compositions of the Viennese Classical composers: Joseph Haydn, Ludwig van Beethoven, and to a lesser extent the compositions of Wolfgang Amadé Mozart. Besides the compositions of Western European

<sup>13</sup> Conventions on audience behavior (and performers) during art-music concerts, which were still current and established in the nineteenth century, were not applied at the time when Binički organized the first instrumental concerts in Belgrade, because the factors that formed the conventions were not consistently familiar (for various reasons): performing in an adequate space, where the performers and the audience sit in separate venues, a code of ubiquitous dressing, etc. See Jelena ARNAUTOVIĆ, “Конвенције на концертима уметничке музике,” *Мокрањац* 15 (2013), 61–70.

<sup>14</sup> Today the name of the school is Mokranjac which is the name of one of its founders.

<sup>15</sup> Some names of composers who are mentioned in the concert programs of this orchestra are: Sidney, Cirer, Cibulka, Milker. Because of bad spelling and even worse translation into Serbian, it is not possible to completely recognize the names of some lesser-known composers. Marijana DUJOVIĆ, *Stanislav Binički i njegovo doba* (Beograd: Clio, 2017), 54.

<sup>16</sup> N. N., “Muzika,” *Politika* 8718 (May 15, 1914), 3.



authors, this orchestra performed compositions by Slavic composers, such as: Antonín Dvořák, Bedřich Smetana, Mikhail Glinka, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, and the compositions of composers who lived and worked in Serbia like Stevan Stojanović Mokranjac, Josif Marinković,<sup>17</sup> Dragutin Pokorný, Stevan Hristić, and Stanislav Binički. By this time, the repertoire of the orchestra also included symphonic works.

### 3. THE PREMIERE OF BEETHOVEN'S NINTH SYMPHONY IN BELGRADE

Stanislav Binički made a great effort to organize and perform premieres of famous and significant works by Western European composers which were not familiar to Belgrade audiences. He was especially dedicated to preparing performances of monumental vocal instrumental compositions. Before the premiere of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, he performed with the above-mentioned ensembles Joseph Haydn's oratorios *Die sieben letzten Worte unseres Erlösers am Kreuze* (The Seven Last Words of Our Savior on the Cross) in 1907 and *Die Schöpfung* (The Creation) in 1908. The reactions of the audiences and critics were very positive so Binički decided to perform Beethoven's Ninth Symphony for the occasion of the 140th anniversary of the composer's birth. Preparations for the performance began at the end of 1909 and in June 1910. The Choral Society Stanković marked its own 30th anniversary by several musical celebrations, including the premiere of the monumental symphony.

Working with the best musicians in the country at that time as a choral and orchestral conductor, Binički united the musicians from the military Orchestra of the Royal Guard and the Choral Society Stanković, and mobilized numerous other musicians. Finally, there were 126 singers in the choral ensemble. They had daily rehearsals for three months, starting in January 1910, in the hall of the Viša ženska škola (High School for Women, today the Faculty of Pedagogy) in Belgrade. Since the majority of the singers were not musically educated, they learned melodies by hearing and repeating them. The rehearsals were led by Binički and his wife, the Miroslava Binički, the opera singer (née Frieda Blanke, who, by marrying Stanislav Binički and accepting the Orthodox religion after coming to Serbia, changed her name), whose help as a teacher of singing was invaluable. The problem with the lack of instrumental performers was solved in a similar way: the conductor Binički included musicians from the National Theater, music teachers and musical amateurs (engineers, lawyers, pharmacists, professors, students). Finally, the orchestra had more than 70 members, 50 string players and 23 wind-instrument players (see *Plate 1*).<sup>18</sup> The vocal soloists were: Miroslava Binički (soprano),<sup>19</sup> Dara Zavišić (alto), Toša Ristić (tenor), Malan Kremanac (bass). They were also all amateurs except Miroslava Binički.

The concert in which Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 was performed, began with a performance of the overture *Leonora* No. 3. The premiere of the Symphony took place on April 5, 1910 at

<sup>17</sup> Some concert programs mentioned several compositions by Serbian composers which were originally for chorus. Unfortunately the arrangements of these pieces for orchestra have not survived.

<sup>18</sup> PEJOVIĆ, *Stanislav Binički*, 34–35.

<sup>19</sup> Miroslava (1876–1956) was an opera singer and pedagogue. She was born in Germany, where she met her husband, Stanislav Binički, during their studies in Munich. In Belgrade she had performances as a singer at concerts of chamber music, as a soloist in operas in the National Theater, and she worked as a professor in the Music School Stanković from 1911.





**Plate 1** The premiere of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Belgrade in 1910Živojin ZDRAVKOVIĆ et al., *Beogradska filharmonija 1923–1973*

(Beograd, Beogradska filharmonija, 1977), 30.



the National Theater. The concert was announced as a “Beethoven Evening” and, because of the great interest, it was repeated the next day.

The reception of this exceptional musical event in the given context can be considered from an insight into the reviews which were published in the newspapers.<sup>20</sup> It is noteworthy to emphasize that at the beginning of the twentieth century in Belgrade and Serbia music criticism was mainly not at a high professional level. Only a few reviewers provided a relatively deep insight into the performances.<sup>21</sup> For many people, this concert was an upswing in Stanislav Binički's career and an indication that musicians in Belgrade were ready to perform such a monumental composition. The reviews about the premiere of this composition were written

<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, we have only a few known surviving newspaper articles about the premiere of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in Belgrade. Besides these, we have some information about the preparation and rehearsals from diaries of the Choral Society Stanković. The reception of this performance (and also of the second performance), cannot be evaluated completely, but it is certain that this performance caused a great deal of attention in Belgrade.

<sup>21</sup> The first surviving document of music criticism in Serbia dates from 1824, so music criticism in Serbia can be traced from this year. Until the period between the two World Wars, the music critics were mostly amateurs, although some of them were educated musicians (performers, composers). See Roksanda PEJOVIĆ, *Kritike, članci i posebne publikacije u srpskoj muzičkoj prošlosti (1825–1918)* (Beograd: Fakultet muzičke umetnosti, 1994).

with huge enthusiasm. The famous composer and music writer, Stevan Hristić, was also present at the premiere.<sup>22</sup> In his judgment of the performance he did not refrain from praise; this is the only known article about this performance written by a professional critic:

Finally, Belgrade heard Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. So much work! So much preparation! And so much excitement! ... The performance was very good, but we cannot be satisfied with this relative success, we need to strive for working towards progress. First in line for credit belongs to our worthy, talented and experienced conductor, Mr. St. Binički, and after him all the other participants ...

The program started with the overture *Leonora* No. 3. The introduction of the overture was bad, because of our wind performers. But, the development of the composition was good and prepared us for the famous Allegro theme. In this part the gentlemen violinists showed their best.<sup>23</sup>

The excitement about the performance of the Symphony No. 9 was present throughout the whole city. Binički was officially honored with presents: a golden watch and laurel wreath from fellow admirers in gratitude for his huge effort in organizing this concert.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: THE BENEFITS OF THE FIRST PERFORMANCE OF BEETHOVEN'S NINTH SYMPHONY IN BELGRADE

This premiere demonstrated the fact that in the Serbian capital it was possible to organize performances of monumental vocal instrumental works and, much more importantly, that Belgrade audiences were ready to hear and value them. It gave an impetus to Stanislav Binički to organize with the same ensemble some other significant performances of vocal and instrumental compositions, such as *The Oratorio de Noël* (Christmas Oratorio) by Camille Saint-Saëns in 1911 and the oratorio *Elias* by Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy in 1912. These performances encouraged the composer Stevan Hristić to write the first oratorio in Serbia named *Vaskrsenje* (Resurrection), performed in 1912, also led by conductor Stanislav Binički.

For a long time Binički had a dream – to establish one more Music School in Belgrade, under the patronage of the Choral Society Stanković. The performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 finally secured that opportunity, and the Music School Stanković was opened one year after the premiere of the Ninth Symphony, on March 15, 1911. The second music school in the capital influenced the development of the professionalization of music education, as well as musical performances and culture in general in the whole country.

<sup>22</sup> Stevan Hristić (1885–1958) was a Serbian composer, conductor, pedagogue, and writer on music. His compositions represent late romanticism in the Serbian history of music.

<sup>23</sup> Стеван ХРИСТИЋ, "Бетовенова девета симфонија у Београду," *Српски књижевни гласник* 24/8 (1910), 621–623.

