

## An Attempt at an Analysis of the Factors Influencing a Conductor's Artistic Interpretation: Lovro von Matačić in Slovenia

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Every musical work contains a range of meanings, some more or less explicit and others hidden, that are primarily a reflection of the composer's spiritual world. But every artistic creation is also intended for the outside world – for the listener, in the case of music – and the most direct link between the composer and the sound picture created by the work is represented by the performers. From the point of view of reception, a technically faultless yet routine performance of a work may fail to communicate the essence of its message and its inner power to the listener. In such cases an interaction between the artistic creation and the outside world will not be established and the circle will be incomplete. Only when a musical work is subjected to in-depth interpretation and a harmonious dialogue is established between composer and interpreter are the notes on the page transformed into an authentic and unique sound picture. The path from a routine performance to a convincing interpretation that successfully conveys the composer's intentions while at the same time expressing the subjective view of the interpreter is neither simple nor short. It demands from the interpreter a broad education, a serious and studious approach to the work, the ability to develop their own ideas, and a wide range of experience. In the case of orchestral music, the journey from written score to performance is entrusted to the conductor, who represents the most direct link to the sound of work. While at first sight the conductor may appear an absolute authority, this is not actually the case. The conductor's work consists of a constant engagement with a multitude of factors that together shape

the interpretation of the chosen work. This paper will consider the influence of musical training, scientific analysis and findings, capacity for individual expression, pulsations of the cultural environment and, last but not least, the abilities of performing ensembles on the overall principle of artistic expression, with reference to a specific conductor, Lovro von Matačić (1899–1985), who was influential in Slovenia in the interwar period and beyond. Possessed of prodigious musical talent and the recipient of an excellent education, he was notable for his sensitivity towards musical literature, his deft command of instrumental forces and, last but not least, his cosmopolitanism, which also carried over into his artistic presence. This paper focuses on the period between the two world wars, when he was active in Ljubljana. This was a period that saw him move beyond the initial stage of his conducting career and enter a phase of mature artistic activity.

Lovro von Matačić came from a prominent Croatian noble family of military officers, high officials and artists. His father Koloman studied law at the University of Vienna while simultaneously studying solo singing at the conservatoires of Milan and Vienna. In 1902, having spent a few years in senior administrative posts in Rijeka, he dedicated himself to opera singing, winning renown in prestigious opera houses from Milan to Vienna and Berlin and ending his career in his old age as a member of the ensemble of the Zagreb Opera. His first marriage, to Baroness Hervojić, produced three children. After she died, he met the Romanian actress Constanța Nichitescu-Rizo during a stay in Opatija. A professional actress with engagements at the *Volkstheater* and the *Theater in der Josefstadt* in Vienna, she performed under the *nom de théâtre* Constanze von Linden (taking the German surname of her mother's side of the family). The two married and their son Lovro was born in 1899. His wide-ranging abilities were undoubtedly connected to both his father's and his mother's genes, while his upbringing and domestic environment were no less important. Some commentators have linked his spirited conducting to his Mediterranean origin, while others relate it to his Romanian roots on his mother's side. He grew up with the children of his father's first marriage and their grandmother, a woman of considerable culture. The family spoke German and French at home and before long the young Lovro was also conversant in Croatian and Italian.<sup>1</sup> His multilingual background served him well in his later endeavours in the operatic field and in his artistic career in general. His half-sister

1 An extensive biography of Lovro von Matačić appears in the monograph *Matačić*, ed. Eva Sedak (Zagreb: Fond Lovro & Lilly Matačić, 1996). The chapter "Životopis glazbom" is by Eva Sedak, 21–187.

Elsa, a good pianist, soon noticed Lovro's interest in music. He enjoyed listening to the piano and singing. He followed her playing with great interest, particularly when she told him fairy tales while playing Beethoven's sonatas. This had such an effect on him that for the rest of his life he would understand music through pictures or images. Of his youthful experience he said: *"Although I could not yet read music, by listening and following the picture painted by the notes, I knew exactly which page the dragon was on and when the knight would arrive."*<sup>2</sup> On another occasion he wrote: *"With every piece of music, I have visions that develop, from chord to chord, into a story, which I am strongly aware of when conducting."*<sup>3</sup>

When Lovro was eight years old, the family – father, children and grandmother (Constanța and Koloman were no longer living together) – moved to Vienna and he began his intense musical training. During the first year he sang in the choir of the *Peterskirche* in preparation for an audition with the Vienna Boys' Choir (*Wiener Sängerknaben*). He passed the audition and joined the choir in 1908. At the same time he attended the *Piarist Gymnasium*, where he studied piano, organ and music theory along with Latin and Greek. Singing in the Vienna Boys' Choir provided him with a broad musical education and taught him discipline and perseverance, qualities that remained with him throughout his life. No less important was the choice of repertoire performed by the choir. This covered a broad spectrum of composers from Palestrina to Bruckner and beyond. A glance at Matačić's own core repertoire confirms just how influential this period was on him, and he conducted both Palestrina and Bruckner at his first major concerts.<sup>4</sup> The famous boys' choir was directed at the time by Franz Schalk (1863–1931), a former student of Bruckner's and one of the leading conductors in Vienna. Bruckner's Mass in D minor made such an impression on the young Matačić that he would later attribute his decision to pursue a career in music to Bruckner's works.<sup>5</sup> Matačić is still regarded as one of the most successful interpreters of Bruckner's symphonies. The Bishop of Dubrovnik allegedly once said to him: *"I know, Lovro, that you are a believer, even if you don't go to church. But when you conduct Bruckner, it is like fifty Masses."*<sup>6</sup>

2 Ibid., 26.

3 Jelka Kušar, "Lovro Matačić," *Stop*, June 26, 1984, quoted in: Marko Košir, Primož Kuret, Peter Bedjanič, *Lovro Matačić v Sloveniji* (Maribor: Pro Andy, 2014), 245–6.

4 Sedak, ed., *Matačić*, 41.

5 Ibid., 27.

6 Ibid., 29.

After his voice broke, Matačić continued his musical education privately, with teachers from the Imperial Academy of Music and the Performing Arts. Among the names mentioned are those of the conductor and composer Oskar Nedbal (1874–1930), who conducted Vienna's *Tonkünstler-orchester* from 1909 to 1918 and was also admired as a conductor of ballets and operas,<sup>7</sup> and the composer, choir director and conductor Ignaz Herbst (1877–1954), who from 1908 worked in Vienna as a music writer and teacher of contemporary music theory.<sup>8</sup> The fact that as a young man Matačić became acquainted with the works of great composers, the development and influence of the Second Viennese School, and other figures involved in contemporary music theory is not without significance. He benefited from excellent and influential teachers who provided him with a broad musical education and a thorough knowledge of the classical and more modern repertoire, singing, instruments, music theory, composition and conducting. As a private student he had no formal qualifications, but this never proved an obstacle to his artistic career. As he himself put it: “*Life has given me a diploma.*” Another important factor in Matačić's education was the general cultural and musical life of Vienna before the First World War, which was in many ways revolutionary and ground-breaking. This was a period of great philosophical and sociopolitical changes that began with the *fin-de-siècle* period of the end of the nineteenth century and continued into Expressionism and sociopolitical unrest against the backdrop of the turbulent end of the Austrian monarchy. Among Matačić's contemporaries who went on to establish themselves as excellent musicians were Clemens Krauss (1893–1954), Karl Böhm (1894–1981) and Hans Swarowsky (1899–1975). All three later became great conductors, as did Lovro von Matačić himself. Common to all of them was the development of a profound form of interpretation which they achieved with versatile ensembles and exceptional soloists.

In 1916, while visiting his father in Munich (the latter was appearing at the Opera), Matačić would occasionally play the piano in the hotel lobby. Among other things, he would play excerpts from Wagner's operas, and it was this that attracted the attention of Gustav Brecher (1879–1940), music director of the Cologne Opera, who was staying at the hotel and was

7 Ludmila Peřinová, “Oskar Nedbal and Vienna,” <https://www.oskarnedbal.cz/dokumenty/clanky/O.Nedbal%20and%20Vienna.pdf>.

8 Christian Fastl, “Herbst, Ignaz,” Österreichisches Musiklexikon Online, [https://www.musiklexikon.ac.at/ml/musik\\_H/Herbst\\_Ignaz.xml](https://www.musiklexikon.ac.at/ml/musik_H/Herbst_Ignaz.xml).

9 Sedak, ed., *Matačić*, 33.

particularly fond of Wagner. An established composer and conductor in his own right, Brecher had also worked with Richard Strauss and Gustav Mahler.<sup>10</sup> Recognising the young Matačić's remarkable musical gifts, he offered him a job at the Cologne Opera. Matačić became a répétiteur and also undertook various technical duties backstage. We may assume that the main reason he accepted the position was an agreement that Brecher would give him private lessons in conducting.<sup>11</sup> While discharging his relatively menial duties, Matačić had the opportunity to follow events on stage, listening with particular interest to the works of Wagner, which were the foundation of the repertoire. Wagner became his new lodestar, which he would follow for the rest of his life.

After the brief military interlude of the First World War, during which he became seriously ill, he returned to his native city, Rijeka, where the year 1919 found him playing in cafés and seeking a suitable musical engagement. As luck would have it, it was in this environment that he met the intendant of the opera house in Osijek, who offered him a job as assistant conductor. It was in Osijek that he met the Slovene conductor Mirko Polič (1890–1951), with whom he would later work in Ljubljana. Despite his lack of experience, Matačić was given the opportunity to conduct two operetta premieres in Osijek.<sup>12</sup> Barely twenty years old and with little experience, he nevertheless felt qualified to write concert reviews, and also attracted attention to himself in this way.<sup>13</sup> In June of that same year, he appeared in the double guise of pianist and composer at a chamber music evening in the hall of the Zagreb conservatoire. This was a period in which he would introduce himself in public as an accompanist and composer. His first compositions actually dated from his *Gymnasium* years but are believed to be lost. At the chamber concert in Zagreb, it was his songs for solo voice and piano that were performed, with Matačić himself appearing as accompanist. Composing, playing and writing were just as important to him as conducting. As he himself put it: "*In my view, conducting is not enough. One also needs experience of composing, playing, writing.*"<sup>14</sup> He devoted himself to composition throughout

10 Anon., "The Leipzig General Music Director Gustav Brecher," <https://www.rundfunkschaetze.de/en/edition-gewandhausorchester-leipzig/02-oper-leipzig/brecher-gustav/>.

11 Ana Vidić, *Lovro Matačić* (Zagreb: Fond Lovro in Lilly Matačić, 2019), 33; Sedak, ed., *Matačić*, 34.

12 Sedak, ed., *Matačić*, 34.

13 Ibid., 36.

14 Ibid., 37.

his life, alongside his conducting.<sup>15</sup> Connoisseurs of Matačić's work believe that his method of studying scores through the eyes of the composer significantly influenced his interpretation and the aesthetics of the sound.<sup>16</sup> He believed that musical activity on multiple levels was necessary to shape a truly artistic personality. Some people even believe that composition was his secret desire or unrealised dream – unrealised because life had marked him above all for conducting.<sup>17</sup>

When Matačić was called up for military service in the army of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in the second half of 1920 and sent to Novi Sad, he was appointed conductor of a military band, which he mainly conducted in promenade concerts. An ambitious and enterprising young man, he managed to talk his way into working with the newly founded opera company in Novi Sad, which came under the aegis of the Serbian National Theatre – despite his youth and his lack of experience and formal qualifications. Over the course of two seasons he was given the opportunity to conduct *Cavalleria rusticana*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Tosca*, Gounod's *Faust*, *Carmen* and *Il trovatore*. Professional critics particularly praised the performance of Mozart's *Requiem* on 13 February 1922, in which he drew on the combined forces of Novi Sad's choirs, music societies and opera ensemble. With this performance, wrote the critics, he proved his greatness and even surpassed his opera performances.<sup>18</sup> This successful start to an independent conducting career was interrupted shortly afterwards by the dissolution of the Novi Sad opera company, which coincided with the end of Matačić's military service.

Despite being unemployed and once again forced to earn a living as a café pianist, Matačić did not despair. In May 1922 he introduced himself to Matej Hubad, the director of the mixed choir of the Glasbena Matica in Ljubljana, when the choir performed in Novi Sad as part of a tour of Serbia. Hubad agreed to write a letter of recommendation on his behalf to the intendant of the Ljubljana Opera, Friderik Rukavina (1883–1940). The following

15 Matačić mainly composed vocal-instrumental works, from art songs to more extensive pieces for soloists, choir and orchestra. A list of works can be found in: Ibid., 373–6.

16 Matačić's views on the study of literature and the right to a subjective attitude towards interpretation is discussed in most depth by Petar Bergamo. Petar Bergamo, "Interpretacija kao symbol," in *Matačić*, ed. Eva Sedak (Zagreb: Fond Lovro & Lilly Matačić, 1996), 191–203.

17 Ibid., 193.

18 J. P., "Mozartov Requiem u Novom Sadu," *Politika* 17/1922, February 17, 1922, 7, quoted in: Sedak, ed., *Matačić*, 37.

month Matačić was invited to Ljubljana to conduct trial performances of *Madama Butterfly* and *Carmen*. He did such a good job that in August that year he was offered a permanent position. Critics praised him and recommended him for future collaborations, while also pointing out some deficiencies in his conducting technique and routine.<sup>19</sup> His permanent engagement was confirmed on 15 August 1922, at the same time as those of Julij Betetto, until then a soloist at the Vienna Opera, the promising young tenor Mario Šimenc, and the Russian director Vasily Sevastyanov, an émigré from St Petersburg, with whom Matačić worked closely during his first Ljubljana period.<sup>20</sup> Following his successful performances of *Madama Butterfly*, *Carmen* and *Tosca*, Matačić was entrusted, at the start of the 1922–23 season, with the premiere of Janaček's *Jenůfa*, a work that places significant demands on the conductor, in what would be the first performance of this opera anywhere in Slovenia. The critics were unanimous that the premiere was a great success for the company and that the conductor had led the performance masterfully and with spirit. Spirited direction, intimate familiarity with the score and the ability to achieve the homogeneity of all the performers were among the qualities frequently remarked upon in reviews of operas conducted by Matačić even in later phases of his career. Reviews of *Jenůfa*, the first production he led on his own, compared him to Milan Sachs (1884–1968), a Czech-Croatian opera conductor celebrated precisely for his interpretations of Janaček's works.<sup>21</sup> It is not beyond the realms of possibility that Matačić had heard one of Sachs's performances of *Jenůfa* – the opera that brought him international fame – while living in Zagreb in 1920.

It was also during Matačić's tenure in Ljubljana (1922–24) that the Ljubljana audience was introduced to *Notre Dame*, a contemporary work by the Viennese composer Franz Schmidt (1874–1939).<sup>22</sup> Composed between 1904 and 1906, the work was premiered in Vienna in 1914 and most frequently performed in the early 1920s. Schmidt, a composer and cellist with Hungarian roots, attended the Vienna Conservatoire (later Academy), where he studied composition and theory with Robert Fuchs and Anton Bruckner and played the cello in the Vienna Court Opera Orchestra under

19 Košir, Kuret, Bedjanič, *Lovro Matačić v Sloveniji*, 47.

20 Ibid., 48.

21 E. A. [Emil Adamič], "Kultura. Opera. Madame Butterfly," *Slovenski narod* 56, No. 129 (8 June 1923): 3, <http://www.dlib.si/?URN=URN:NBN:SI:DOC-AA1WR7I7>.

22 "Repertoar. Notredamski zvonar," *Sigledal*, <https://repertoar.sigledal.org/predstava/3340>.

Gustav Mahler.<sup>23</sup> Although it is not known precisely when and how Matačić first came across this work, it is possible that he heard it in Vienna as a boy. The opera is a late Romantic work in which one can hear the influences of the Hungarian temperament and of organ music – in other words of Bruckner. It would therefore seem that the work appealed to Matačić for a variety of reasons.

The numerous performances conducted by Matačić in the 1922–23 and 1923–24 seasons included 14 different operatic works. Altogether total 123 performances and 12 premieres, nine of which he conducted for the first time. He regularly received good reviews.<sup>24</sup> The experience he gained at the Ljubljana Opera was invaluable to the young Matačić – barely 25 years old at the time – both for the development of his practical skills as a conductor and in terms of establishing himself and growing artistically, a process that would later intensify further.

In Ljubljana he also got the opportunity to conduct symphonic music. Here too, he showed that he was developing into an excellent conductor, choosing works that later became part of his core repertoire. Ljubljana did not have a permanent symphony orchestra in the years after the First World War. In 1922 the Union of Musicians assembled an ad hoc 45-piece orchestra, with most of the players coming from the Ljubljana Opera Orchestra. For his first major symphonic concert Matačić chose Smetana, Wagner, Tchaikovsky and Bruckner. The following year, he conducted the same ensemble in a concert marking the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Wagner's death, with a programme consisting of extracts from *The Flying Dutchman*, *Parsifal* and *Tristan and Isolde*. Although these performances received excellent reviews, the critics were clear: Ljubljana needed a bigger, permanent symphony orchestra, since major artistic achievements could hardly be expected with an ad hoc ensemble. In the end, it was the lack of funding available for a permanent symphony orchestra that led Matačić to leave Ljubljana in 1924 and take up the post of conductor of the Belgrade Opera. The latter institution had incomparably greater resources than Ljubljana's opera company, which meant more opportunities for creative achievements.<sup>25</sup> Matačić's career progression followed the same path as that of most other conductors. As he himself put it in later years:

23 Th. Antonicek, "Schmidt, Franz," *Oesterreichisches Musiklexikon Online*, [https://www.biographien.ac.at/oeb1/oeb1\\_S/Schmid\\_Franz\\_1874\\_1939.xml](https://www.biographien.ac.at/oeb1/oeb1_S/Schmid_Franz_1874_1939.xml).

24 Cf. Košir, Kuret, Bedjanič, *Lovro Matačić v Sloveniji*, 47–64.

25 Sedak, ed., *Matačić*, 41.

We all started with operetta and then slowly progressed. Furtwängler, Karajan, all of us. And what did we gain from this? Routine, technique, and we learnt our craft. . . . First you have to consolidate your craftsmanship, and only then can the artistic work begin.<sup>26</sup>

He also emphasised the importance of a broad education:

Young people should not only study music, they should also learn about history, painting, sculpture. . . . They should go to Rome, to the Sistine Chapel, and sit in front of Michelangelo for three hours. After that they will conduct Beethoven better.<sup>27</sup>

He worked in Belgrade from 1924 until 1932 and then spent one season in Riga. He was in Zagreb from 1933 to 1938 and then returned to Belgrade, where he remained until the start of the Second World War. He proved himself everywhere with significant repertoire and artistic achievements, attracting the attention of international reviewers and critics. He conducted the Wiener Symphoniker for the first time in the autumn of 1928 and would continue to perform regularly with them throughout his career. He also became a regular guest with the Berlin Philharmonic, having conducted the orchestra for the first time in the spring of 1936 at the express invitation of Wilhelm Furtwängler (1886–1954). Not long after this came an invitation to the Opéra-Comique in Paris, and he also conducted the Orchestra National de France.<sup>28</sup>

He returned to Ljubljana in 1935 and 1938, as a guest conductor of the Ljubljana Philharmonic (founded in 1934). Although still made up of members of several smaller Ljubljana orchestras, this new ensemble had bolder artistic plans than its predecessors. It numbered around 70 members, which was suitable for the repertoire of the time, and gave a total of 21 concerts before the outbreak of the Second World War. Matačić conducted it on 28 October 1935 in a concert marking Czechoslovak Independence Day, with a programme that included Smetana's *Vltava*, Shostakovich's First Symphony (performed for the first time in Slovenia) and the *Passacaglia* by Slovene composer Slavko Osterc (1895–1941), considered the leading avant-gardist of Slovene music in the interwar period. Matačić garnered excellent reviews for this concert, particularly for the Shostakovich work, written barely

26 Kušar, "Lovro Matačić."

27 Ibid.

28 Košir, Kuret, Bedjanič, *Lovro Matačić v Sloveniji*, 28.

a decade earlier.<sup>29</sup> The newspaper *Jutro* marked the occasion by publishing an interview with Matačić, in which he reveals his views on repertoire policy and the achievements of the musical avant-garde in Yugoslavia at that time. He was content, he said, that the Ljubljana Philharmonic had proved itself to be well-disposed towards modernism, since he himself was drawn to contemporary works. He also described his own attitude to new works and his awareness of the danger of excessive commitment to a particular style and specific composers:

Reproductive artists do not have the right to prejudice the question of whether something is good or not. . . . I am no friend of anything that leads to unidirectionality . . . beauty lies in discovering the new.<sup>30</sup>

The programme of Matačić's second concert with the Ljubljana Philharmonic in November 1938 included Bach's *Passacaglia*, Mozart's Symphony No. 40 and *Night on Bald Mountain* by Modest Mussorgsky, as well as the premiere performance of the symphonic poem *Dance of the Witches* and two movements of the symphony *Duma* – both works by Blaž Arnič (1901–1970), a Slovene composer of symphonic works in a late Romantic style. Critics particularly praised the performances of the Mussorgsky and Arnič works and highlighted Matačić's close familiarity with the scores and his Slav temperament as factors contributing to his convincing interpretation.<sup>31</sup> Matačić's attraction to Arnič's work can perhaps be explained by the music's highly expressive, narrative and mystical qualities – all of which spoke directly to Matačić and stimulated his visual, symbolic perceptions. He concluded his interwar activities in Ljubljana in November 1940 with a concert by the Belgrade Philharmonic.<sup>32</sup> On this occasion, too, he performed works by Yugoslav composers and also Beethoven's Third Symphony ("Eroica"), for what was only the second time, although it later became one of the signature works of his repertoire, just like Bruckner's Third Symphony, which he performed for the first time in Ljubljana at his very first symphonic concert – at the Union Hall in November 1922 with the orchestra of the Union of Musicians.

29 Urška Šramel Vučina, "Ljubljanska filharmonija," *Muzikološki zbornik* 44, No. 2 (2008): 54–5, <https://journals.uni-lj.si/MuzikoloskiZbornik/article/view/3113/2830>.

30 Anon., "Lovro Matačić pripoveduje . . .," *Jutro* 16, No. 250 (27 October 1935): 5, <http://www.dlib.si/?URN=URN:NBN:SI:DOC-NP6LNRSC>.

31 Dr. B., "Koncert Ljubljanske filharmonije," *Jutro* 19, No. 239 (1 December 1938): 11, <http://www.dlib.si/?URN=URN:NBN:SI:DOC-JRBBN50B>.

32 Košir, Kuret, Bedjanič, *Lovro Matačić v Sloveniji*, 76–7.

Although the convincing and unique interpretation of a musical work is dependent on the conductor's talent, technical skill and the influences of the social environment, many other factors also come into play. Lovro von Matačić is one of those conductors with the ability to convert a score into a sound image in such a way as to be able to elicit from it even those elements that the composer was unable to express. The conductor builds a work into a sound image through his or her own unique mental and emotional world, while at the same time drawing on the knowledge, abilities and energies of the performers. Only in this way does a musical work come to life in fully realised form. There is no such thing as a final or definitive interpretation. Analysis of the writings of numerous authors who have studied Matačić's magnificent career allows us to affirm that a musical work is only "completed" when it is the subject of profound interpretation that takes into account the whole of the composer's personality, the circumstances in which the work was created and the structure of the piece, while also giving due consideration to the composer's idea, all musical elements and the architectural structure of the form. The process by which conductors immerse themselves in a composer's oeuvre, their character and the circumstances surrounding the creation of a work is a lengthy one. It is therefore perfectly natural that conductors should dedicate themselves to specific works their entire lives, since only in this way can they deepen their contact with the composer and achieve interpretations of the highest possible calibre. Consideration must also be given to the conductor's own personality, which is the origin of their individual views of a musical work, their intuitive abilities and the strength of their personal energy – all these factors combine to shape the interpretation of the chosen work. Lovro von Matačić was an individual of tireless energy who breathed life into written music and, time and again, impressed upon it his own unique and convincing stamp.

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