mihailo trandafilovski

Step(pe)s
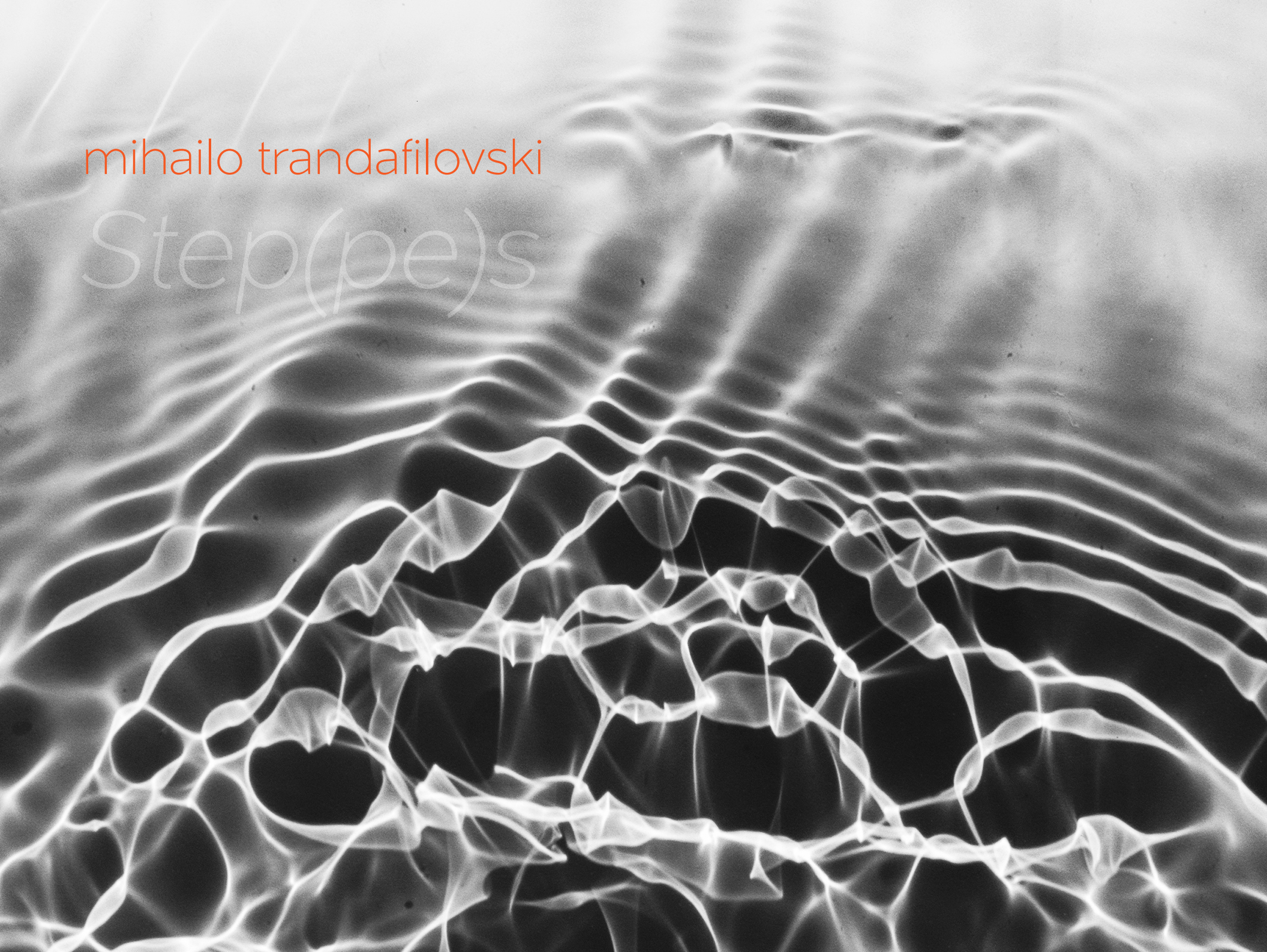
Step(pe)s

1.	*Orbit*	12:46
2.	*Wave*	9:38
3.	*Shore*	11:30
		33:54

mihailo trandafilovski

composer, violin

neuma records

In December 2020, London and the UK were heading towards another hard lockdown; it was clear that my usual musical life, in which direct communication with people is essential (I play in the Kreutzer string quartet), was not something I could expect to go back to in the near future. In terms of my work as a composer, 2020 turned out to be quite productive – perhaps a natural consequence of spending a lot of time at home. But, I was keen to do something different during this looming lockdown; one idea was to start working on an 'audio catalogue' of violin techniques and sounds I had been exploring in previous compositional work – particularly in the last 10 years or so. Apart from performances and recordings, I have done presentations of aspects of this work as research; hence, I thought a systematization would be useful, both in terms of future presentations of this nature, and for me personally.

During the following two weeks, I organised possible sounds and techniques in groups and started recording these (with a Zoom recording device, rather than professional equipment); they included a range of left- and right-hand techniques, from plain open strings played with various degrees of bow pressure and varying bow position in relation to the bridge / fingerboard, to stopped notes, 'pure' intervals, harmonics, vibrato, tremolo, glissando, scratch and white noise, different kinds of pizzicato and many techniques / sounds in between (transitions). The majority of these would usually be described as 'extended techniques', but this term is not ideal: extension implies a norm, whereas I like to think of the above elements as part of a continuum. A natural consequence of this approach is that 'normal' sound becomes a relative concept – for example, I have found that after exploring a range of scratch sounds, going back to a 'normal' way of producing sound has meant incorporating subtle gradations of scratch / pressure / density (i.e. increased sensitivity to new colours); the same applies to bow placement (in relation to the bridge and fingerboard), which, in combination with pressure, can be used to emphasise specific harmonics of the spectrum, within the same fundamental pitch. Likewise, in terms of left-hand techniques, there is much to explore: subtle control of horizontal / vertical movement of the fingers opens up numerous microtonal pitch possibilities (naturally, not limited to equal temperament on a string instrument), 'pure' intervals and resultant tones, width and speed of vibrato and glissando – as well as transitions between vibrato and glissando, between stopped notes and harmonics, etc. I think of this gamut as inexhaustible – but I believe that my attempt at classification, even in these preliminary stages, made me more aware of details and possibilities.

These recordings were followed by several improvisations based on this 'catalogue' – with no specific aim in mind, but simply as further exploration.

I then transferred everything to a DAW and played with various combinations of the above. The possibilities looked exciting, and gradually a range of potential explorations opened up that I had not imagined before, and that would not be possible within my usual compositional work. Specifically, this involved the controlled use of reverb and panning. A 'dry' environment (e.g. the beginning and some later sections of the first movement) helped to bring certain sounds and colours (such as white noise, scratch etc.) to the foreground – emphasising bow-string contact and resulting with a 'closed' sound, 'in' the instrument. The acoustic environment gradually 'opens up' throughout the piece: more reverb felt natural when the ensemble expands, and then a spatial aspect

was developed – the use of reverb is not uniform, but varied in different channels and at different times to create an interplay between sounds close and sounds far. A second, complementary spatial aspect is developed through the use of panning (again, controlled in a very detailed way throughout the piece).

Apart from these two elements, and cutting / pasting, no processing was involved – all the sounds heard were actually played. In addition, I felt it was important not to lose the 'feel' of a home recording, so background noise was not tampered with, except in several places where it was obtrusive.

Thus, in some ways Step(pe)s explores similar ground to some of my other works, written for live performers (such as Fibers AND Coils and Četiri): for example, in terms of developing instrumental techniques and sonorities intrinsic to the instruments; a harmonic network based on the open strings (pure fifths), pure intervals and harmonic series; general structural / formal concerns etc. At the same time, there are dimensions in Step(pe)s that are unique to the medium, and I found the pairing of these two approaches exciting.

As mentioned above, there was no specific plan initially to turn this process into a finished piece. But, through experimentation, a structure started to emerge. At this point, I thought it might be interesting to share the project: I contacted Philip Blackburn at Neuma, and encouraged by this communication, started working on the material more seriously during the following weeks and months – both in terms of detail, and structural planning.

The title, Step(pe)s, refers to the general, large-scale stasis of each movement and the piece as a whole; this is balanced by a dynamic principle (steps / movement). The cyclical quality in Orbit is perhaps obvious, but while this implies tension and release, the cycles are not uniform – the level of intensity increases with each 'wave', contributing to a dynamic development. In Wave, the momentum and overall 'sweep' can be seen as movement in time, or one of the two aspects contained in Orbit; this is complemented by an 'arrival' in Shore, which unifies a number of the elements introduced earlier (e.g. both left- and right-hand tremolo textures, 'pure' intervals, pizzicato gestures, white noise textures etc.). The distinction is not clear-cut, as such general (mythological / universal) themes are also reflected, when 'zooming in', within each of the three movements individually, sometimes in small details – and each movement contains elements from the other two.

Now, with some distance behind, and life (more or less) returning back to normal, I look at the project as very personal, and as a creative experience specific to the lockdown – it would not have emerged if my musical life was more normal. But perhaps there are parallels between the process as described, and a psychological aspect: the very limited, closed space imposed by the lockdown was in many ways restrictive for me, but I believe resulted with the opening of new creative possibilities (certainly not imagined beforehand) – looking 'out' by having to look 'in'.

In Step(pe)s, the acoustic space described, and the sound world in general, develop and unfold gradually – necessarily, in time – thus, some amount of patience is perhaps necessary from the listener. I am grateful to those who are willing to give this a chance and share the experience.

– MT, May 2021

Macedonian-born, London-based composer, violinist and educator Mihailo Trandafilovski's latest album for Neuma (2021) follows portrait CDs on Métier (2018), Innova Recordings (2015) and LORELT (2011), featuring close collaborators Peter Sheppard Skærved, Neil Heyde, Roger Heaton, Roderick Chadwick, Odaline de la Martinez, Lontano, Kreutzer Quartet and the New London Chamber Choir. These enduring creative relationships have been at the centre of his work as a composer and have allowed him to explore and stretch instrumental techniques in idiomatic and often uncompromising ways.

His music has recently been performed by leading contemporary music groups such as Ensemble Horizonte (Germany), Quatuor Diotima (France), Reconsil Ensemble (Austria), Ensemble Fractales (Belgium), Meitar Ensemble (Israel), Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble (Russia), and the European Contemporary Composers Orchestra.

He is a violinist in the Kreutzer Quartet, with whom he has performed and recorded extensively; has an avid interest in the application of new music to pedagogy; and has led a number of shared projects among the arts promoting contemporary artistic creativity to a wider audience.

CREDITS

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