

- Tanya Domi: Hi, this is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering groundbreaking research and scholarship in the arts, social sciences and sciences. In this space we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating, cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.
- Tanya Domi: Merima Ključo, a renowned accordionist and vocalist Jelena Milušić, have a new creation. Their duo album Lume is a conceptual work consisting of 10 love songs from different parts of the world and one cycle of five songs composed by Ključo, which is based on Romanian, Croatian, Kosovar and Sephardic traditional pieces. In different languages, Lume has various meanings, the world, life source of light, illusion, fire, spark, lover, humanity. Much more than love. The link connecting the songs together is a universal theme of love, which will be performed at the Graduate Center, CUNY this week.
- Tanya Domi: Welcome to the thought project, Merima and Jelena.
- Jelena Milušić: Thank you so much Tanya.
- Merima Ključo: Thank you Tanya, for having us.
- Tanya Domi: It's so thrilling to have both of you here. I cannot believe you're here in the studio. So, you are both Bosnian artists. Merima is a renowned accordionist and recitalist who has performed internationally with many orchestras, who has a significant range, an incredible range of musical interests from traditional [Sevda 00:01:50] to classical jazz blues and in particular Sephardic melodies, which thrill my heart.
- Tanya Domi: You have engaged in many collaborations now with you, Jelena a contralto vocalist, which I have to say I want to know the audience, that among my favorite women singers, the ones who are contraltos are the most incredible, which you are. You also have a broad range as in blues, jazz, rock, Sevda and world music and you two have performed internationally in numerous collaborations with other artists. How did you find one another and when did you decide to engage in this beautiful project that produced Lume?
- Merima Ključo: I knew about Jelena for many, many years. I was following what she was doing and then about two years ago a good friend of mine showed me the newest video that Jelena recorded with her colleague guitarist. And I was really blown away. I thought like, "Oh my God," because for the first time I heard her using this contralto, which you just mentioned, and I thought, "This is such a rare and beautiful voice, I have to get to her. I have to say how I really love this new video."
- Merima Ključo: So I contacted her and I contacted her colleague, and I told them that this is really brilliant what they did. And very soon after that they invited me to be a

guest at their [inaudible 00:03:26] and I met Jelena for the first time. [Atilla Oxo 00:00:03:31] is the guitarist that Jelena works with and I knew him from before. And then I suggested to Jelena that we should definitely work together also next to the project that I was invited as a guest, I wanted especially to work with her and I wanted us to develop together this project [crosstalk 00:03:54].

Tanya Domi: So, she was really persistent.

Jelena Milušić: Well, I mean I see it as some sort of a divine intervention. I think it was just meant to be. And as she said, she knew about me and I knew about her. I also followed her work. I didn't know her personally, but I was quite amazed by what she was doing and collaborations she had. And she was quite extraordinary and different, but I had no means or not really means, but I didn't really reach out because I thought, "What would she want to do, and work with me." Anyhow, so I was admiring her from afar and when she did contact Attila and me, it was really a funny situation because he said to me, "Hey, you know Merima Ključo contacted me and she really gave us a compliment on our video." And I was like, "Well she didn't contact me," I found her mail in spam or something, like it didn't really go in my inbox. And then three months later I replied to her and I was very happy and that's how we kind of got in touch and Merima said everything from there, how it went on.

Merima Ključo: Yeah. I would like to come back to that because when I sent an email to Jelena saying how wonderful their new video is and I didn't hear anything from three months, I thought, "Oh, she must be arrogant, but [inaudible 00:05:12]," and then three months later she's like, "Oh, I'm so sorry I got your email."

Tanya Domi: Yeah, technology. So, this is quite a tour for both of you. You began in Belgrade in early October and America is your third country on this tour, where it appears that you're ending after this concert here, this Friday, unless you have other news for our listeners. How have you been received?

Merima Ključo: We were actually first in Croatia. So at the beginning of this year-

Tanya Domi: I stand corrected. I stand corrected.

Merima Ključo: Yeah, so we were first in Croatia in [inaudible 00:05:47], that was our first concert after the promotional concert that we had in Zagreb. And then we went to Slovenia and after that we were again in Croatia and then we were in Belgrade. And we were received everywhere really fantastically, so with a great audience and they probably didn't know what really to, okay, there is a voice and there is an accordion, especially with an accordion, people are often very confused, or they don't know really what to expect if they don't know about my work. So they think, okay, accordion and voice or voice and accordion.

Merima Ključo: It's really nice to see how shocked they are after the concert in a positive way. Yes, yes. And I always get the similar reactions wherever I'm performing that you have people who say, "I have never heard an accordion sounding like this," or very often I also hear, "Until today, I hated your instrument. Thank you for changing."

Tanya Domi: Wow, very interesting.

Merima Ključo: Which I have to say my instrument, it's not just because I'm playing it, but [crosstalk 00:06:59] it's a beautiful instrument.

Tanya Domi: I grew up with a grandmother who played the accordion, who was from Albania and I can remember her in the living room playing it. And it's something I will never forget. So you've been in Croatia, you've been in Belgrade, you're from Bosnia. What is that like? I mean, it's post-war, it's post-conflict, all the people there are having their lives, they're going on. But I know that there's politics in the background, there's always politics.

Merima Ključo: There's always politics in the background definitely, and if we get ourselves involved too much in that, in a way that we let the politics direct how we will behave or how we will think then I think we have a problem. But in our way as an artist, the whole world is our home. So for me, honestly, I lived for many, many years in the Netherlands, I have also Dutch nationality so I'm also Dutch-

Tanya Domi: So you're a global citizen. [crosstalk 00:08:05].

Jelena Milušić: Canadian-

Tanya Domi: You're a Canadian?

Jelena Milušić: And Bosnian, yes. And I lived in Berlin for four years and as a refugee I was two years in Belgrade and then 10 years in Canada. And then I moved back to [inaudible 00:08:15]-

Tanya Domi: You both are truly global citizens.

Jelena Milušić: And we were the lucky ones in a sense, when we had a situation in our country, I think it was better time than it is now in the world. And we had the opportunity to go somewhere and to be received and to continue with our lives. I mean, it was not easy, but it's certainly much easier than it is for people today, or before in the past. And we had the opportunity to build our lives over again and now it seems like the world is a much heavier place than it used to be.

Tanya Domi: Absolutely. Your point is a good one because you're able to leave and go continue to do your work and study and have a life. I also wanted to say is that

during this tour Merima, you performed with Miroslav Tadić up in the Catskills and you also performed the [Sereva Haggadah 00:00:09:17]. I mean, you're on this tour, how do you prepare for such significantly different sets of music? Different scores? That is quite a range.

Merima Ključo: Yeah. In a way, I'm now lucky enough or lucky enough, I actually very much choose with whom I'm working, and those three projects particularly, so my project with Jelena and with Miroslav Tadić and my Sereva Haggadah, they are... Sereva Haggadah is my own composition so I know every single note, you can wake me up in the middle of the night. And the same thing with Luma, Jelena and my's project and also project with Miroslav, all of music in this case of Luma I arranged and composed for us. And in case of [inaudible 00:10:14] with Miroslav Tadić, we arranged music two of us together. In a way-

Tanya Domi: So it's in your head and it's in your bones, right? It's there.

Merima Ključo: It's just there.

Tanya Domi: I see. And you can access it.

Merima Ključo: Definitely. Anytime. I have to of course practice every time and kind of remind myself or prepare myself. Definitely. But that's my profession and I do it with love.

Tanya Domi: It's wonderful. One reviewer said the following about the Luma album, and I quote, "Pleasant pain is caused on the one hand by the richness of the artistic expression of Merima Ključo, whose every tone, interval, cord or cluster on the accordion grows out of the layers of determination and melancholy. And when Jelena Milušić incredible vocals intertwine, I wonder if Merima's accordion also has a human voice among its registers. It seems to me that this kind of grown up music of two people cannot be heard very often. Indeed, if I may say so, having listened to the songs over and over."

Merima Ključo: That's really a beautiful compliment and I have to say that Jelena is, okay, I can talk of course about my instrument forever, but I would like to give enormous credit to Jelena because she has first of all, enormous and beautiful range of her voice and she can go in this very deep register and then again she can go very high, and it's... Another wonderful critic from Serbia, Maria [inaudible 00:12:02] said about Jelena, "It is as if there are several performance in one," same like what they say for my accordion, they say also about her.

Merima Ključo: And you will get the chance when you hear us this Friday-

Jelena Milušić: And see us.

- Merima Ključo: I think it's very important, really adds to the whole image.
- Tanya Domi: The whole thing. The whole gestalt, right?
- Jelena Milušić: I also on the other hand, would like to say something about Merima. And I'm very lucky that she reached out and that we started this project. I've learned so much along the way. I mean, I performed before and I have experience, but in this project I really went into the depth that I wasn't aware was there and she helped me to open up more, to think from a different perspective, to approach the text more seriously, and to really express what the text is carrying because her instrument and the way she plays it, it's a color, it's a sound, it's emotion, it's a universe.
- Jelena Milušić: And it really helped me to open up and to try to also reach into myself and express some things that I wasn't even sure were there. And with each performance, I think it's getting more and more alive and more present and more rich. So I'm very thankful for the wonderful guidance and support from her.
- Tanya Domi: I can hear it because the [Danke cut 00:00:13:51] from Luma, it's presented so beautifully in the video, first of all. And then the music itself is so melancholy and soulful. When you are singing this beautiful song, how do you feel?
- Jelena Milušić: Well, it's one of my favorite songs ever. So when we were building a repertoire and deciding which songs will be part of the program, it was one of my wishes. And since Merima was doing all the arrangements and making the program as a whole, Danke was at that moment, not really fitting into the program because as Merima would say-
- Merima Ključo: Because of the style of the singer who actually compose this song and who was very popular in former Yugoslavia-
- Tanya Domi: And who was this?
- Merima Ključo: [inaudible 00:14:43] He was this Bohemian singer who had really such a different style than anybody else we knew or we know even now and in a way to have such a popular singer and then to take his song and then to present it. Of course, I never copy or I never try to imitate anyone.
- Tanya Domi: So you don't do a cover as we say?
- Merima Ključo: Exactly.
- Tanya Domi: No covers.

Merima Ključo: So I thought, okay, and every song I really take with respect and I respect the text that's in it and I want to kind of paint with my instrument, with the sounds of my instrument the text to kind of help the text even more to be present. And to, if you don't speak the language, to kind of color it in the way that you can understand it. So for me, I said to Jelena, "Look, all the other songs, somehow I hear as a part of one project, but I just still don't know what to do with Danke of [inaudible 00:15:43]."

Jelena Milušić: But I was persistent.

Tanya Domi: You were.

Merima Ključo: She says, "Please."

Jelena Milušić: Please, please, yes.

Merima Ključo: And then one morning I woke up and was really interesting. And that's something that's so unbelievable with inspiration, how inspiration comes, because for me sometimes it can hit me in the middle of brushing my teeth or anything. Oh, wait a second, or on the plane and just taking a sip of wine or glass of water and just thinking like, and then you don't want it to go away. So you want to catch that moment. And same happened with Danke. I woke up and all of a sudden I had a feeling like, okay, she's coming like very shy, but she is there somewhere. So I wrote to Jelena and I said, "You know who visited me this morning?" And she was like, "What's this?" [Inaudible 00:16:27] because she didn't know. And I said, "Danke, she's very shy still, but I think she's coming."

Merima Ključo: So and that all day. So I was-

Tanya Domi: Interesting. So, you were really working with it.

Merima Ključo: Yeah. And then I was walking in Sarajevo and just letting Danke to come to me and kind of being very careful that she doesn't run away, inviting her to come to me. And by the evening she was totally-

Tanya Domi: She was there, she was there.

Merima Ključo: She was there.

Tanya Domi: Wow.

Merima Ključo: So I recorded just instrumental version for the accordion, which is what you hear also now in the [crosstalk 00:17:06] version and I send it to Jelena around midnight. And I said, "Okay, this is it."

Jelena Milušić: I fell in love with her from that moment on.

Tanya Domi: You did? Wonderful. So danke, I mean in German means thank you. So now knowing about your German refugee experience.

Jelena Milušić: It wasn't refugee. It was after I came back to Bosnia from Canada and then I spent some years in [inaudible 00:17:34] and then I just moved to Berlin.

Tanya Domi: I see, so you were just there. Sorry. Excuse me.

Jelena Milušić: Danke in our language is a day.

Tanya Domi: Day. Dan in Danke is, what, alliteration of day?

Merima Ključo: Of Luma [crosstalk 00:17:57].

Tanya Domi: I did ask one of my Bosnian friends when I saw the title, I said, "What does that mean? Does it have something to do with the moon?" And she said, "I don't know." And so I said, "Well it's the album name." Yeah.

Merima Ključo: Well it's-

Tanya Domi: So you go on and you say... Well actually I talk about that in the intro, what it means. So why did you use this word?

Merima Ključo: It was such a nice and short name and title, but that was not of course the main reason. There is a song that we finish our album with and it's a part of my composition and that's based on a Romanian song that's called [Lumet 00:00:18:47]. And then when we started to look into that name, into the meaning of the name Luma, we found that it exists in many, many different languages and it has different meanings. So we thought isn't that amazing? But all the meanings really had to do with light or with love or with fire, lover more than love-

Jelena Milušić: Spark. So it has different meanings.

Tanya Domi: It's quite beautiful. I mean the word is beautiful, the song is beautiful. And speaking of which, the cut that you use in your official video for the album is so fun and playful. Earlier I said to both of you, it's kind of a slap stick combo with Vaudeville, Balkan style and what was your thinking behind it? And actually, I do want to know where it was shot.

Jelena Milušić: Well, as the song says, in Luma, there is a part where it says, "Life sister life, when will I have enough of you? Maybe one day put a nail in my coffin, maybe then. Your fleeting one is born, another one dies, around and around. One is

born, another one dies, when will I have enough of you, sister life." So basically it's about life and going through all the wonderful and sometimes comic and sometimes hard stages of life. It's like dancing, dancing of life and death and all that life and experience. And we wanted to give it a light note, a playful note because one of our Romanian friends, musicians, violin player, when we met him, he said, "It's so strange when I heard Luma in this way because this is the song that it's usually playing the funerals."

Tanya Domi: Really?

Jelena Milušić: Yes. Because, I mean it talks about life and how it's fleeting and how it is impossible to catch it and to have it for forever because you're always kind of one step behind. So we wanted to make it playful as kind of this intertwined dance of life and love and death and everything in between. It's all connected.

Tanya Domi: It's quite fun to watch. So Jelena, you're a vocal coach and a teacher at [Mostar 00:21:20] Rock School. I was really intrigued because I hadn't heard of this school, which doesn't mean anything.

Jelena Milušić: You should have.

Tanya Domi: I know, it doesn't mean anything. But I mean I do know a lot about Bosnia but I missed that. So I want to hear about this school. I want to hear about the ages of your students and about your work there.

Jelena Milušić: Of course. Well it's a wonderful project that started maybe six or seven years ago. I've been working there for past two, two and a half years and I just finished because I moved to Sarajevo. It's a project started by my good friend, also musician, [inaudible 00:21:58] Maslow who's a percussionist, who's a great advocate for music and for work with young people. And very special thing about this school is that this school is open and available to all young kids from Mostar, but not just from Mostar, but from surrounding towns. So we get lots of kids from Western Herzegovina, and a very big thing about this school is that we get kids from all nationalities who come there to play music, to get to know each other because Mostar has a sort of reputation that it is divided city, East and West side and Muslims and Croatsians.

Jelena Milušić: But this school really brings this kids together and this is never an issue and it's never addressed, okay, we want to bring them together, they come on their own because they want to learn to play music. And this is where they meet each other and become friends, make bands together, play together and don't decide who they're going to work with based on their nationality. But on who they click with. And I mean it's a wonderful program that we work with the kids from maybe 11, 12 years old until 22, three. It's an open project that is not part of school. It's a free activity so anyone can join, you have beginners, you have more developed and we have some bands that were created within the school

and children now playing together or even our ex students are now working in the school. So we're involving the students to become part of the faculty and to work with the kids. And it's a wonderful project. I really, really enjoy it.

Tanya Domi: That's wonderful. And you're partnering with Attila on a forthcoming album with Sephardic tunes? When is that going to be out? I can't wait.

Jelena Milušić: Well, that should be out quite soon. Within some months, I believe. It's in post production. And this is when we invited Merima to be our guest. So I'll-

Tanya Domi: Merima's in this too? [crosstalk 00:24:25]

Jelena Milušić: Yes, she's a guest on three songs.

Merima Ključo: So actually I was invited to be a guest on their album, but then we did our album and so [crosstalk 00:24:38].

Jelena Milušić: She is also a guest on our album.

Tanya Domi: She's got three songs.

Jelena Milušić: Yes.

Tanya Domi: Well nobody's better on the accordion when it comes to Sephardic music. It is absolutely transcendent to listen to you play that music. And speaking of which, what's next for you Merima?

Merima Ključo: Oh, I always keep my project secret until they happen.

Tanya Domi: Until they've been born?

Merima Ključo: Yes, yes.

Jelena Milušić: Not to jinx it.

Tanya Domi: Okay, no jinxing. But you will be on a spring tour in the US playing the Seriva Haggadah and I hope and I pray that we're going to have you back in New York City to perform that at my favorite synagogue. I have a personal agenda here, but I have say having worked in the former Yugoslavia and particularly in Bosnia for really almost 30 years, it'll be 30 years in two years. When I started working, I was a congressional aide with the Congressman, Frank McCloskey, a bridge is named for him in Sarajevo.

Tanya Domi: And the deeper you go into study as a scholar, you get to the arts, you get to the culture, you get to the music. And if there's anything that keeps people like me

that are not diaspora, but keeps me connected, is listening to people, to the art, the music that you all produce. It is a beautiful, beautiful album. Congratulations to both of you.

Tanya Domi: I want to take note of the beautiful quote of Merima's on Jelena's website, and I quote, "Working on yourself is never a waste of time," unquote. Well said. And I hope for the sake of your fans, you will keep working on yourselves together and apart.

Jelena Milušić: Thank you so much.

Tanya Domi: Thank you for tuning into the Thought Project and thanks to our guests, Merima Ključo and Jelena Milušić. The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering and technical assistance by Kevin Wolf of CUNY TV. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.