

Varvara Gyra,^{*1} Kostis Karpozilos^{**2}^{*}Paris University VIII, France^{**}The Contemporary Social History Archives, Athens, Greece¹varvaragya@yahoo.com, ²kostis.karpozilos@gmail.com

Compositional praxis and historical time in the late works of Jani Christou

ABSTRACT

Background

The avant-garde Greek composer Jani Christou (Cairo 1926 - Athens 1970) composed pieces synthesizing multiple forms of artistic expression and wrote theoretical texts that provide an intellectual and experimental framework for the study of his oeuvre.

His work has attracted over the last years considerable interest generating thus a series of studies that focus on his philosophical and psychoanalytical conceptualizations, his multi-disciplinary prism and his distinctive musical notation. The references to history and ancient civilizations, as well as the connection of his compositions with 20th century socio-historical events provide a multidisciplinary background for the study of his music and writings.

Aims and repertoire studied

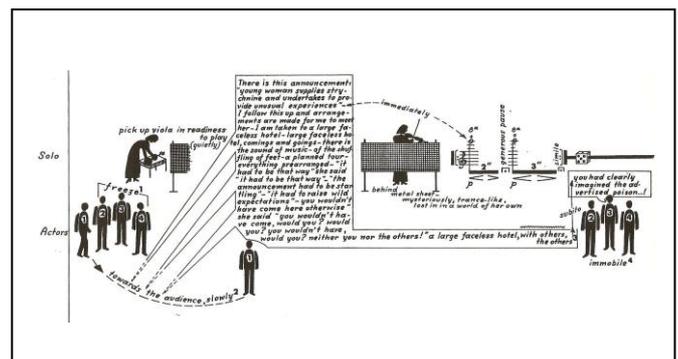
This paper aims to discuss Christou's work in close connection with the turbulent political and social setting of the 1960s by focusing on the influence of the social-political setting on compositional praxis. The charting of these connections allows a discussion on the ideas of Jani Christou on historical evolution, a theme that interrelates with his understanding of the individual's position in the world- the existential question that penetrates his thoughts, writings and reflections.

The 1960s represent the most fruitful period in his career. Christou composes his works during a period when old norms seem to decline amidst significant clashes, while a younger generation –the biological product of the postwar prosperity-revolts combining traditional forms of political expression (protest) with new slogans, such as the famous 'Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible' – 'Be realistic, demand the impossible'. The telling title of a famous documentary of that time, *Confrontation*, which narrates the Parisian May 1968 events, seems to describe a global milieu.

Christou's writings reflect the problematic of that period and, as one can see in his text 'Music and Confrontation' (1968), the notion of confrontation is pivotal in his work: 'I am concerned with a music that confronts; with a music that wants to stare at the suffocating effect, even terror, of much of our everyday experience of living; with a music that does not seek to escape the relentlessness of the patterns in which this experience keeps unfolding. With a music that not only does not attempt to escape this experience, but that seeks out its forms - and eats them up, and throws them up again, just as dreams do'. (Lucciano 2000, 150).

This paper highlights the formative ideas mainly in two major Christou's works -*The Strychnine Lady* (1967) and *Epicycle I* (1968)- and illustrates the appearance and representation(s) of themes, images and debates deriving from the contemporary social and political atmosphere in his musical notation and notes.

The Strychnine Lady is a performance for a solo woman viola player, an instrumental ensemble, magnetic tapes, a red cloth, a metal construction etc. The soloist, a woman who supplies strychnine and undertakes to provide unusual experiences, is the protagonist of an oniric and terrific musical work where dreams connect to reality and where an alchemical text is combined with a Jungian extract.

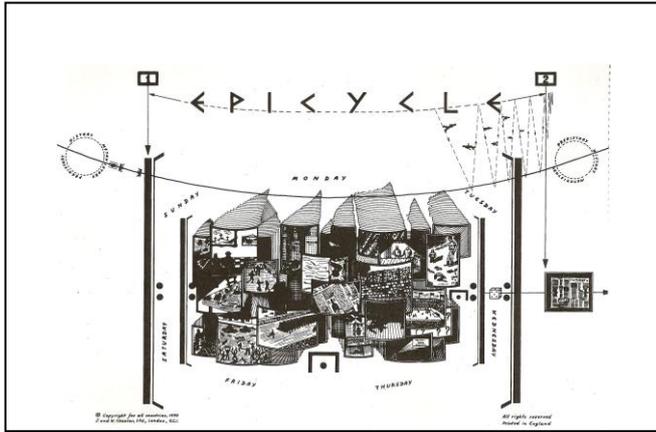


Ex. 1 *The Strychnine Lady*, section 30.

'Praxis-metapraxis' is a major concept introduced by Christou and used in this composition. It suggests a conceptualization of performance theory, and the direct influence of socio-historical events on his compositional praxis. Christou asks the performer to go beyond one's limits and to express herself by any possible means that go beyond her art. He explains that 'any living art keeps generating an overall logic fed by a collectivity of characteristic actions. Whenever an action is performed to conform with the overall logic of the art, that action is a praxis. But whenever an action is performed so as to go beyond the overall logic of the art, that action is a meta-praxis' (Lucciano 2000, 98).

Methods

The paper highlights the dialectic between the politics of confrontation, ranging from the Vietnam War to the fear of the Atomic Bomb, and the formulation of Christou's philosophical reflections on music and performance as they are reflected in *Epicycle I*, a collective performance.



Ex. 2 *Epicycle I*.

The study of the score allows an understanding of these reflections' and their symbols' graphic integration to the piece. The musical and para-musical symbols used in the score are studied not only for their musical role, but also for their socio-historical signification. *Epicycle I* features various events and scenes that could be found in 1968 newspapers: armed forces greeted with resistance by crowds of protestors- a direct reference to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in the summer of 1968; the war in Vietnam represented through the powerful image of the General Nguyen Ngoc Loan Executing a Viet Cong Prisoner in Saigon (February 1968); a number of references to mass culture- James Bond films and Coca-Cola advertisement, the 'soft power' influence of the Western culture; a more abstract reference to sports with the advertisement (Pro-Po) referring to the popular gambling on football results in Greece etc.

All these references (the whole score) are enclosed in repetition signs that symbolize the eternal repetition of history as it is explained by Christou in his writings on *Epicycle I*. The composition focuses on the use of historical time units as basic elements shaping musical structure and the presence of symbols (repetition signs, dices etc.) combining the fatality of eternal repetition of history and the aleatoric dimension characterizing an experimental happening-performance.

This issue is addressed in a text of the same year, 1968, titled 'The Lunar Experience'. In this Christou illustrates his understanding of historical evolution through the idea of the eternal cycle of historical time, which is based on the pattern of generation – growth – destruction – cessation. The circular pattern, apparent even in his very first composition *Phoenix Music*, composed in 1948, illustrates the inability of escaping from the 'suffocating everyday experience of living'. At the same time though, the text reveals a sense of urgency or of an exceptional state: 'As never before perhaps, we are all in the grips of the lunar experience, and there simply does not seem to be much we can do about it, except perhaps to take refuge in fantasy (myth's poor relation, or substitute). Fantasies about ideal societies and technological paradises'. (Lucciano 2000, 148). This exceptional state ('as never before'), underlines the inexistent prospect of a permanent and decisive exodus (a salvation) from the eternal lunar experience. In this condition what appears to be an alternative is in essence just a 'fantasy' which takes various forms, such as 'ideal societies and technological paradises'- could this be a comment on the fascination of that period either with the revolutionary East (ideal

societies- China etc) or the utopias of space expansion underpinned by contemporary projects (Apollo program- in 1968: first efforts for manned flight to the moon).

Implications

The authors of this paper study Christou's work on both a musicological-analytical and a socio-historical basis suggesting an understanding of the interrelation between historical evolution and musical praxis (performance, notation, improvisation, aleatoric factor etc.). The analysis of both dimensions highlight the interplay between historical time, eternal repetition and the interaction between individuals participating in collective performances that encompass musical and para-musical events and that provide an innovative example for the implementation of experimental practices in 20th century.

Keywords

Performance / Praxis / Improvisation / History

REFERENCES

- Angermann, Klaus, 1994. *Jani Christou: Im Dunkel singen, Symposiumberichte des Musikfestes Hamburg 1993*. Hofheim: Wolke.
- Klimke, Martin and Scharloth, Joachim, 2008. *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-1977*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kornetis, Kostis, 2013. *Children of the Dictatorship: Student Resistance, Cultural Politics and the 'Long 1960s' in Greece*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Lucciano, Anna-Martine, 2000. *Jani Christou, The Works and Temperament of a Greek Composer*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press.
- Suri, Jeremi, 2007. *The Global Revolutions of 1968*. New York: W. W. Norton.