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Compositional Praxis and Historical Time in the Late Works of Jani Christou

ABSTRACT

The avant-garde Greek composer Jani Christou (Cairo 1926–Athens 1970) composed pieces synthesizing multiple forms of artistic expression. He also wrote theoretical texts providing an intellectual and experimental framework that reflect his philosophical and psychoanalytical conceptualizations, his multi-disciplinary prism and his distinctive musical notation. This paper aims to discuss Christou's work in close connection with the socio-political setting of the 1960s, a decade that signified a period of global turbulence and significant transformations, and to illustrate the influence of the social-political setting on his compositional praxis. More particularly, it focuses mainly on the ideas that informed two major Christou's works — *The Strychnine Lady* (1967) and *Epicycle I* (1968) — and underscores 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 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 according to his 'proto-performance' concept and to his 'phoenix pattern'. Moreover, it analyzes his oeuvre through the 'praxis-metapraxis' concept, which suggests a conceptualization of performance theory, and the direct influence of socio-historical events on his compositional praxis. Finally, it focuses on the use of historical time units as basic elements shaping musical structure and the presence of symbols — repeat signs, dices, etc. — combining the fatality of eternal repetition of history and the aleatoric dimension that characterizes an experimental happening-performance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last years there has been a considerable interest in a mythical figure of avant-garde music, the composer Jani Christou (Cairo 1926 – Athens 1970). His life and his work consistently attract attention for a number of reasons: his enigmatic personality, his philosophical and psychoanalytical conceptualizations, the multiplicity of his work, the expression means that he employed, his eclectic intellectual influences, the musical concepts and terms that he introduced and, finally, the distinctive musical notation of his compositions.

In this context, his references to the historical past, ancient civilizations, philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis, 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.

This paper discusses 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 his compositional praxis. The reconstruction 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.

2. COMPOSING DURING THE YEARS OF CONFRONTATION

This paper highlights the formative ideas 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 1960s represent the most fruitful period in Christou's career. He composes his works during a period when old norms seem to decline amidst significant clashes, while a younger generation — the demographic impact of post-war 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'.¹ The telling title of a famous documentary of that time, *Confrontation*,² 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 1968 text *A Music of Confrontation*, 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, 149.)

Christou draws a distinction between confrontation and violence:

I am not advocating a music of violence, although some of it may often appear to be just that. On the contrary, what seems to me to be important is a subtlety of operation: a quiet picking at the threads of reality; a loosening of the fabric; a soft collapse into pictures of distortion; a slow disintegration; maybe a glimpse into the void beyond — or at nothing. (Lucciano 2000, 150.)

In that socio-historical context of the 1960's and in conjunction with the expansion of Fluxus, Christou introduces the 'praxis-metapraxis' concept that suggests a conceptualization of performance theory, and recognizes the direct influence of socio-historical events on his compositional praxis. Christou

¹ See Detlef (2008, 65–68) on the 1968 protest movements.

² Dreschen, Seymour, and Mc Creary, Eugene, 1970. *Confrontation*. Documentary, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6UP3RLGmciM>>, accessed 25/06/2023.

asks the performer to go beyond his limits and to express himself by means that go beyond his art. He explains:

Any living art keeps generating an overall logic fed by a collectivity of characteristic actions. Whenever an action is purposefully performed to conform with the current overall logic characteristic of the art, that action is a ‘praxis’, or a purposeful and characteristic action. But whenever an action is purposefully performed so as to go beyond the current overall logic characteristic of the art, that action is a ‘metapraxis’, or a purposeful non-characteristic action: a ‘meta-action’. (Lucciano 2000, 98.)

Christou’s formative ideas on compositional praxis and historical time are addressed in two major late works: *The Strychnine Lady* (1967) and *Epicycle I* (1968).

3. STRYCHNINE LADY (1967)

The Strychnine Lady is a performance for a solo woman viola player, two groups of massed strings, brass, percussion (including pianoforte), magnetic tapes, a metal sheet construction, sound-producing objects and toys, a red cloth, five actors and a conductor. 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.

The composition consists of musical and para-musical events and includes actions, gestures and theatrical fragments. The chain of seemingly unrelated events is evocative of a nightmare and of some initiatory rite. In this case the public attending the concert is unaware of the happening to come, and of course it does not know how they will react to this composition-‘tableau vivant’. The para-musical events of *The Strychnine Lady* do not always coincide with the musical activities. Christou writes:

The music proper may exist without these³ other events and vice versa. Basically, there is no ‘communication’ between the two – Nor, and this is more important, is there any ‘communication’ between components within the same type of event. It is rather like individuals caught up in a crowd; they act with the crowd but do not communicate with each other. And if there does seem to be a relationship between components of a particular group, this is because they are reacting to identical signals, not because they are establishing a relationship with each other. (Lucciano 2000, 108.)

At the beginning of the work an actor appears on stage to address the audience. He announces the cancellation of the last work of the program and its replacement by another piece. Suddenly, an actress in the audience shouts ‘I protest’ and generates confusion and disorder in the concert hall. Two actors reach the center of the stage and start ‘displaying a red cloth’. The first actor tries to convince the public that ‘there is absolutely no real cause for alarm’. The escalation between disruption and protest is followed by a gradual de-escalation, since there is ‘absolutely no real cause for alarm’. Nonetheless, these are words that affect the audience and blur the lines between the regularity of the performance and the irregularity of the ‘happening’. Therefore, what appears to be initially a disruption, at the end proves to be a prescribed and pre-composed episode.

³ The ‘para-musical’ events.

While studying this composition it is impossible not to think of the time and place of its performance. The première of *The Strychnine Lady* took place at the Hilton Hotel in Athens in the frame of the 2nd Hellenic week of Contemporary Music, in the early days of April 1967 — a month with strong connotations for those familiar with Greek history since on the 21 April 1967 a military junta came to power signaling a protracted period (seven years) of oppression.⁴ Rumors and conflicting scenarios were circulating in Athens weeks before the *coup d’état*. Everything seemed possible and the period was marked by instability, amidst tensions that ranged from the political field to the disruption of a Rolling Stones concert in Athens on 17 April — the reason being a bouquet of red flowers on stage; according to the police a definite signal of ‘communist propaganda’.⁵

The Strychnine Lady reflects the interest of Jani Christou on the blurred boundaries between reality and myth/fantasy. This work derived from a medieval text and from a dream that Jani Christou had in February 1967. The recitation of some fragments of the medieval alchemical text concerning the union of Gabricus and Beya, and the total disintegration of the male within the female’s body is a form of a re-enactment of a ritual.⁶ The female figure — originating from a dream that Jani Christou had in February 1967 — places an advertisement in the newspaper announcing that ‘young woman supplies strychnine and undertakes to provide unusual experiences’. Strychnine provokes hallucinations when administered in small doses and can be lethal when absorbed in a strong dose. The experimentation of artists with various means to achieve a state of ‘fluid reality’ is a well-explored issue as it is the advent and popularization of new chemical means in the 1960s, the methamphetamines and the LSD being the most well known.

As one can see in a personal note of 27 June 1968, Christou was concerned with the progress of chemical substances, drawing connections between the progress of chemistry — and medicine — and the negative aspects of the development of biological weapons of mass destruction- such as those used in Vietnam. *The Strychnine Lady* actors confess to the audience: ‘We too dreamt that dream [...] we too were disappointed’. In that way Christou means that what can emancipate — drugs, chemicals — can also bring destruction.

4. EPICYCLE I (1968)

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 are visible in *Epicycle I* (1968), a collective performance commissioned by the Hellenic Association for Contemporary Music for its 3rd Hellenic week of Contemporary Music that was held in Athens in December 1968 and in which it received its world première.

Christou composed this work at a year of global disruption:

The entire world shook in 1968. Across cultures, people of all generations recognized the significance of the moment. A global

⁴ See Kornetis (2013), chapter 1, section 1, §2.

⁵ See Kornetis (2013), chapter 1, section 7, §19.

⁶ ‘Then Beya mounted upon Gabricus and enclosed him in her womb, so that nothing at all could be seen of him any more. And she embraced Gabricus with so much love that she absorbed him completely into her own nature, and divided him into indivisible parts’ (Jung 2014, 337).

wave of urban protests produced a crisis of authority in nearly every society. Many of the demonstrators who took to the streets in 1968 were young citizens, angered by what they perceived as a stagnant political status quo. (Suri 2003, 164.)

In this socio-political context Christou uses the epicycle, a geometrical model used to explain the variations in speed and direction of the apparent motion of the moon and sun. The small circle is part of a greater movement- the human experience is confined to the small circle, which in fact is only a part of a bigger picture- the eternal turn of a bigger circle that is adjunct to the smaller one.

Epicycle I serves a 'tableau vivant' including musical and para-musical events and is another step towards the implementation of experimental and performative practices. The work may last throughout any stretch of time: days, weeks, months, or even years. Anybody wishing to participate in the continuum is welcome and for this purpose any sound may be produced.

In *Epicycle I* there is a voluntary abdication of the role of composer as one can see in a letter that Jani Christou sent to George Leotsakos:

Since there has been such an abdication, I must accept all the negative aspects of this action, i.e. loose form, no form, repetition, non-sense, lack of synthesis, abolition of the sense of 'climax', neutralization of musical 'impact' and so on and so forth. [...] On the other hand, the role of the composer has not been devalued simply for the sake of the surprise value of some 'happening' (which quickly wears off anyway). The role of the composer has been devalued in order to allow whatever elements were available at the time to behave as symbols of events, and certainly not as 'artistic events', nor as synthesized events. (Lucciano 2000, 110.)

At the same time, the composer indicates various precisions and prerequisites for those participating in the continuum:

Once a participant has chosen his own sound, he must keep sustaining it and must never perform any different sound. [...] The continuum should be mostly only just audible, in a climate of total impassivity. [...] Those joining the continuum must accept that they are entering a climate of total impassivity and must dissociate themselves from all other events [...].⁷

The fact that the audience can participate in the performance by producing any sound that contributes to the 'continuum', but within a pre-decided and agreed upon framework means that on the one hand it takes part in a liberating and emancipatory process, but also indicates the limits of emancipation: people think that they are important and that their epicycle move is the center of the universe, but in fact they are just one part of a much broader cyclical movement (the performance as a whole). The participation of the people in *Epicycle I* is a comment on the fantasy that people participate and shape history -when they protest, when they perform etc.- since the composer has preconceived the main elements of the performance.

The one-page-score of *Epicycle I* allows an understanding of these reflections' and their symbols' graphic integration. The score makes subtle and evident references to events and scenes that could be found in a 1968 newspaper: armed forces are

greeted 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 advertisements, the 'soft power' influence of the Western culture;⁸ a more abstract reference to sports with the advertisement (Pro-Po) referring to the popular gambling on football results in Greece etc.⁹

The composition focuses on the use of historical time units as basic elements shaping musical structure as well as the presence of symbols — repeat signs, dices, etc. — combining the fatality of eternal repetition of history and the aleatoric dimension characterizing an experimental happening-performance. All socio-historical references — the whole score — are enclosed in repeat signs that symbolize the eternal repetition of history and repetitive historical patterns as Christou explains them in his writings on *Epicycle I*. 'Experiences' are situated on the left part of the score and 'news' are visually represented on the right, in the form of a newspaper, next to the signs of repetition. Therefore, the newspaper symbolizes the transformation of 'experiences' into 'news'; these 'news' after a certain point are not new anymore, because according to the composer's credo, history is an eternal repetition.¹⁰ In this perspective, when the composer asks the participants to destroy newspapers, he asks them to destroy the news and to bring some 'irregularity'.

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 the renewal': generation — growth — destruction — cessation. Christou explains that in the depths of man's prehistory it was the moon's monthly performance that originally drew attention to this pattern; and even if the moon did not provide man with his first experience of the pattern of renewal, it must have certainly given him one of his first awe-inspiring experiences of this pattern. In the 'lunar perspective' the death of the individual and the periodic death of humanity are necessary, even as the three days of darkness preceding the 'rebirth' of the moon are necessary. The death of the individual and the death of humanity are alike necessary for their regeneration (Eliade 1959, 88).

According to Christou the rituals of renewal did not have any meaning, or any proper significance, unless they could be considered as a repetition of a master-pattern, or as a component of such a pattern:

These were proto-performances¹¹ (re-enactments) of the original proto-pattern- the master-pattern; re-enactments in terms of corresponding mythic imagery; key-performances re-vitalising the master-pattern, when its cycle was exhausted, through forms of sacrifice, life for life, keeping it going. Because the pattern simply had to keep on renewing itself, if man and nature were to do the same. (Lucciano 2000, 146.)

⁸ See Kornetis (2013), chapter 2, section 5, §17.

⁹ See Kornetis (2013), chapter 3, section 2, §13.

¹⁰As one can see in his personal notes, Christou studied thoroughly Mircea Eliade's texts on the 'eternal repetition of history'.

¹¹See Trappmann (1994, 65–66).

⁷ Christou, Jani, 1970. *Epicycle*. London: J. and W. Chester, introductory notes.

The circular pattern, apparent even in his very first composition *Phoenix Music* (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. Fantasies about controlling the course of our political evolution, and fantasies about controlling our environment through science. (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’ — this could 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).

The lunar experience concept is used to address human expectations regarding the lunar pattern — that is a dynamic system of circular patterns —, but also the fear of a non-renewal of any of those patterns, a fear that becomes intensified by the additional possibility of an eclipse threatening the whole process.

In any case, even what appears to be irregular, ‘the moon’s most spectacular performance’, the eclipse, is in essence a predetermined part of the eternal cycle emphasizing thus the absence of an actual disruption of normality and the lack of a breaking point over historical time.¹² Thus, in Christou’s works all participants may be subjected to processes of dissolution: amputation of the material they produce and its dissociation, or separate events, representing totally different systems, occurring together; as well as abrupt cessations, abrupt resumptions, fragmentations, exaggerations and distortions that correspond to the eclipse pattern. In a metaphorical fashion, events that seem to be irregular (war) or promise a new beginning in history (revolution) are episodes within an eternal order of events. Humans cannot easily see the whole picture; they stare this ‘irregularity’ with panic and thus they feel trapped and they are confronted to an existential problem.

4. CONCLUSION

Jani Christou explores a multi-disciplinary artistic field that synthesizes multiple forms of expression and encompasses his philosophical and analytical conceptualizations. His major last works as well as his theoretical texts allow a connection with the turbulent political and social setting of the 1960s while the analysis of the musical praxis and the socio-historical element highlight the interplay between historical time, eternal repetition and the interaction between individuals participating in collective performances. More precisely, in *The Strychnine lady* (1967) and *Epicycle I* (1968) the composer uses elements stemming from the socio-historical events that took place in Greece and the World, and integrates them in his music under

various forms: events and symbols relating to the Vietnam War, mass culture, the dictatorship in Greece, the ‘soft power’ influence of the Western culture etc. The theoretical background provided by the composer includes concepts on performance (‘praxis-metapraxis’), on repetitive patterns in history (‘proto-performance’) and focuses on the notion of confrontation that reflects the central problematic of the long 1960s.

KEYWORDS

Christou, Performance, Praxis, Confrontation, 1968.

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¹²See Lucciano (2000, 150).