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Melancholy Subjects, Melancholy Objects: Nikos Skalkottas's 16 Songs

ABSTRACT

Background

The empathetic emphasis put on Nikos Skalkottas's portrayal as a melancholy subject is common to most biographical accounts of his life (hi)story (e.g. Papaioannou 1997; Thornley 2002; Mantzourani 2011). The discursive import of this emphasis rests upon the positioning of melancholy under 'the dialectic of genius and illness, of spiritual empowerment and paralytic sadness, of subjective intensification and an absorption into the realm of objects' (Pensky 1993, 21). In fact, Skalkottas scholarship has kept biographical and analytical discourse clearly separated from each other, yet implicitly connected in promoting his image as a quintessentially modern subject whose symptomatic alienation matches the *Einsamkeit als Stil* of his modernist musical idiom (Vouvaris 2015). In this context, investing in Skalkottas's melancholy has been instrumental in validating his genius, a common illocutionary commitment of all scholarly attempts to secure his position in the canon.

What has not as yet been thoroughly investigated is the way Skalkottas's melancholy plays into our understanding of his music. Approaching it as what Susan Sontag (1977) terms 'melancholy object' can tell us something not only about the music itself, but also about melancholy in general, granted that the melancholy 'way of seeing' subsists in the dialectical interval between two moments: the melancholy subject producing melancholy objects and the melancholy objects constituting 'a realm of objects of contemplation that in turn constitute the melancholy way of seeing' (Pensky 1993, 16).

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The aim of this study is to interpretively approach two of Skalkottas's 16 Songs for mezzo-soprano and piano ('Loneliness' and 'Ideal') as melancholy objects in an attempt to capture both something of his music as the product of a melancholy subject, and something of the sound of melancholy under the inescapable 'sign of the subject' (Pensky 1993, 16). As Skalkottas's most substantial contribution to the song genre, this is a compelling choice, given the apparent tangents between Skalkottas's life story and the one of Stefanos Georgidis, the protagonist of *As Everyone: Diary Leaves*, the 1940 novel by Chr. Esperas that interspersedly includes the sixteen poems that Skalkottas set to music. Georgidis is a young law student with avid literary aspirations, who has to give them up after the death of his father in order to accept a job offer by his uncle in his groceries wholesale business. Isolated from the company of his erudite friends, he starts keeping a diary in which he includes poems that he writes in order to 'feed the flame of the Ideal within' (Esperas 1940, 14). Similar to Georgidis, Skalkottas had to

leave Berlin and the Schoenberg cycle in the spring of 1933, and settle for a rank and file violinist position in the Athens symphony orchestra, continuing to compose with practically no hope of having his music performed or published.

The exploration of these correspondences in the present study extends beyond the narrow exegetic horizon of past research, which has limited its purview to drawing cursory musico-biographical associations in search for an etiological strategy to account for Skalkottas's choice of poetry (Thornley 2004). More specifically, it allows these correspondences to inform the critical apparatus employed for the structural interpretations it proposes in hope of ultimately suggesting a possible way to account for Skalkottas's incessant composing after his traumatic return from Berlin to Athens despite the almost complete lack of public interest in his music.

Methods

A key presupposition of this study is admitting the heuristic fiction of the musical work as subject on the grounds of its 'demand to be read *as if* it were a subject, because it is ensnared in the same subjective orders with the same kinds of symptoms as the individual' (Klein 2012, 246). In approaching Skalkottas's music *qua* subject, a Lacanian perspective is adopted (indicatively, Lacan 2006). Defined as a position taken up with respect to the system of law-like conventions, ideas, and beliefs that shape a culture's discourse (the 'symbolic order' or the 'Symbolic'), the subject exceeds the deceptive sense of a coherent self, granted by the realm of the ego's illusory otherness (the 'imaginary order' or the 'Symbolic'), and encompasses a sense of radical, inassimilable alterity (the 'Other'). The Symbolic and the Imaginary pertain to different aspects of language, the former to the signifier, the 'meaningless material element in a closed differential system' (Evans 1996, 189), and the latter to the signified, the deceptively stable product of the process of signification. Inasmuch as it is the signifier that is repressed from consciousness, participating with other repressed elements in a complex associative network that runs in accordance with its own automatic rules, the unconscious is a structure of signifiers. As such, it may be conceptualised as a kind of knowledge unbeknown to the person that possesses it, a kind of symbolic memory that attests to the subject's unique history (Fink 1995, 19–23).

As a product of the subject's history, the symptom is associated with the 'Real', the third order of subjectivity that stands for 'that which has not yet been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization' (Fink 1995, 25). In this context, the symptom may be regarded as a message from the Real about the subject of the unconscious addressed to the Other (Fink 1995, 73), a cryptic message whose sender is deceptively considered by the subject as extrinsic to herself, when, actually, it is the subject herself that sends it (Lacan 1991, 149). The encounter with this message as symptom manifests a

traumatic experience, ‘a sort of lump that the [signifying] chain is forced to skirt’ (Fink 1995, 28).

In the context of the present study, seeking to track the symptom in Skalkottas’s music *qua* subject entails seeking to identify the ‘stain’ on the music’s symbolic order that disrupts the automatism of its signifying chain. Pitch-class set analysis is a defensible choice for this purpose, given that the abstract pitch-class set may be taken as a signifier in its meaningless differentiality.

Implications

Each of the two analytical vignettes in the present study illuminates a different aspect of the symptomatic structure of Skalkottas’s music. On one hand, the discussion of the opening of ‘Loneliness’ reads the diverging correspondence of the vocal line to the bass line’s quasi-dodecaphonic automaton as music’s attempt to pick a position in response to the Other and stage its own desire. This is an attempt doomed to fail, as the traumatic encounter with the desire of the Other soon impels the music to literally retrograde. Ironically, this symbolic gesture of renouncing desire overwrites the same terrifying prospect that it appears to propagate.

On the other hand, the discussion of ‘Ideal’ sets in relief the uncanny return of a counter-melodic element, originally repressed in the inner piano part of the song’s opening. This return is correlated with music’s impulse to survive its own ending, giving in to the death drive as an ‘uncanny excess of life, an ‘undead’ urge that persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death, generation and corruption’ (Žižek 2006, 62–63).

Identifying symbolic gestures of renouncing desire and uncanny returns as succumbing to the death drive implicates Skalkottas’s insistence to compose with no hope of having his works acknowledged and appreciated as a manifestation of his sublimating attempt to aim for a symbolic life beyond his biological death. In this light, Skalkottas’s music as melancholy object becomes his vehicle to traverse melancholy and (re)invent himself as subject *qua* music.

Keywords

Skalkottas, Lacan, Melancholy, Psychoanalysis.

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