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The theatrical dimension of the performer in the last works of Jani Christou¹

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Jani Christou composed his first work, *Phoenix Music*, in 1948, a time in which he took interest in contemporary trends. Later, however, he followed his own path, creating a personal composing language. Within this independence, he introduced new terms into the vocabulary of music, which expressed his composing needs (e.g. *praxis-metaprxaxis*, *system-anti-system*, *protoperformance* etc.). He designed scores of a predominantly visual character, he wrote, among other essays, *A Credo for music* where he stated his views in a plain but complex way, and composed works based on a wide philosophical background³. His last works represent his full composing intentions and are characterised by intense theatricality. More specifically, the works *Anaparastasis III: The pianist* (1968), *Mysterion* (1966), and *The Strychnine Lady* (1967), studied in this article, are key works in which the composer calls the performer to break free from conventional interpretation, thus satisfying their multi-faceted requirements.

In his work *Anaparastasis III: The pianist* (1968), Christou holds a surprise for the audience, as he chooses not to appoint the solo role to a real pianist, as one would expect judging from the title. The composer entrusts the leading part to an actor, visual artist Gregoris Semitecolo, who is asked to emphasise on the theatrical aspect. The dramatic character of the composition is directly related to the definition of the term "*anaparastasis*" (re-enactment): it is a "show", namely a presentation of an event through recurring stage action that combines, inter alia, music, movement and speech. In other words, it is the revival of an action already taken in the past that is repeated herein.

Christou's interest in the concept of repetition is evident in many different aspects of his work. As seen in his writing *Music and protoperformance*, the cyclic process is a kind of ritual in which man has been involved since the beginning of history. More specifically, this process includes the revival of a basic model and occurs in actions carried out periodically by a single person or a group of people, during events which various peoples attribute to the will of "destiny" (e.g. natural disasters and disease), to periodic natural phenomena (e.g. the moon cycle, the succession of the four seasons), to

¹ Translation from Greek: Katerina Pronaki, copy-editing: Nikos Papakonstantinou.

² www.mmb.org.gr/files/2010/Πρακτικά%20Συνεδρίου.pdf

³ This article is based on a part of my PhD thesis entitled *Esthétique et principes compositionnels dans l'œuvre de Jani Christou* (University of Paris VIII, December 2008). For more information you can visit www.varvaragyra.com.

the renewal of cosmogony through the celebration of each new year etc⁴. Thus, a desire for eternal return to our roots is created, which Jani Christou acknowledges when dreaming that he has lived many lives and feels nostalgic for an earlier existence, which he needs to connect with⁵. In this way, he confirms that repetition and cyclic process are motives not only for composing but also of a more personal nature.

In *The Pianist*, the performer starts in a re-enactment governed by the "system - anti-system" principle. In the context of the "system", the soloist is asked to follow certain rules while taking into account that he belongs in a world whose consistency is fragile and unstable, as it is constantly threatened by external factors and events⁶. In contrast, the "anti-system", which he himself is involved in, invites him to exceed the limits specified by the predefined rules. The means by which the performer manages to move away from the "system" and thanks to which he conquers the space of the "anti-system" is dramatic action. The actions, the movements, the screaming and the silence that reach their climax when, at the end of the play, the pianist attempts to communicate with the audience, indicate the attempt to exceed the limits of the "system's" consistency and declare the birth of the "anti-system". Thus, the ensemble musicians are invited by the symbolism of *scatter* to abandon the predetermined path and interpret their role freely. Nevertheless, the autonomy indicated by the *scatter* symbolism remains an illusion of independence, as there can be no absolute freedom⁷.

Christou gives not only a theatrical but also a psychological aspect to the events taking place during the *Pianist*, and describes in detail the actions that need to be taken both by the conductor and the musicians: in principle, the conductor provides every pattern⁸, which corresponds to a particular action, and then indicates to the musicians exactly the moves they need to make. In addition to defining the main characteristics of the patterns, the conductor must also define their psychological attribute, providing the corresponding depiction symbolised by synthetic notation⁹. When Christou asks the conductor to talk, shout, play the gran cassa or tam-tam or take various actions beyond the conventional boundaries of directing an ensemble, he does not seek just a sound effect and is not only interested in the acoustic aspect of these actions. The composer does not expect the maestro to produce only sound or music, but at the same time assigns him the duty to inspire a particular theatrical and psychological atmosphere, as his movements, his facial expressions and his general attitude aim to influence the musicians and help them channel the maximum of their energy into the interpretation of their role.

⁴ Mircea Eliade. *Le sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 94-95.

⁵ Jani Christou. *Dream*. Athens, August 25-26th, 1968 (manuscript).

⁶ Jani Christou. *Anaparastasis III: The Pianist* for soloist, conductor, instrumental ensemble and continuum (London: J. & W. Chester, 1971). Composer's Notes, p. 3.

⁷ Jani Christou. *v.s.*, p. 4.

⁸ Cf. Anna-Martine Lucciano. *Jani Christou: The Works and Temperament of a Greek Composer* (Athens: Bibliosynergatiki, 1987), p. 104, annotation (by Giorgos Leotsakos).

⁹ Since 1960 Christou has been using 3 kinds of music notation: synthetic, proportionate and measured. Cf. *Enantiodromia* (London: J. & W. Chester, 1971). Composer's Notes, p. 7-10.

Each musician plays a role, which is an integral part of the ensemble, and is asked to work together with his peers. At the same time, as part of a group consisting of several members, each musician is invited to contribute to the work with their own personal intensity and develop a personal expressive language, autonomous and independent from that of the others. The composer's instructions to this direction are clear. Christou explains to the musician that although they are a member of a group caught up in the same pattern, they are nevertheless on their own. He asks them to be mindless of the others, and in fact perform with individual abandon, contributing as much of their own individual inventiveness as possible, within the limits set by the specifications of the pattern¹⁰.

The actions of the pianist, who is required to follow the above-mentioned rules and play his unusual role, depict the strong theatrical intentions of the composer. One of the most dramatic scenes of the work is that which the composer calls "attempt at communication with the piano" and reveals his theatrical intentions: the soloist "smashes down the lid of the piano furiously, kneels and begins a dialogue with the instrument. He speaks to the piano, crawls under the piano, caresses it, kisses it, licks it, giggles hysterically, rolls into positions of pleading and does whatever is possible to express his "terrifying situation", bringing to mind a character from ancient Greek tragedy. The end of the action finds him in front of the audience, making a last attempt to communicate, which proves futile and makes the ending overwhelming.

While composing the *Mysterion* (1966) Christou was inspired by the tradition of his birthplace¹¹ and more specifically by the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*¹². The composer presents in nine stages the revival of a mystery that takes place in Tebot-Netoru-S, the eighth division of the Underworld, through which Afou-Ra passes by at the eighth hour of the night. The *Mysterion* was written between 1965 and 1966 but it basically came into existence in 1962, in a dream, when the composer dreamt of a situation and a direction that are identical to what is described in the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, whose existence he ignored at that time. In fact, when he reread his personal notes, in October 1965, he himself was surprised by this analogy¹³.

The *Egyptian Book of the Dead* gives instructions as to the attitude one is to have in the realm of the Underworld. It also provides specific information about the rituals that must be performed in order to ensure eternal life for the dead, which remind of the way with which Isis restored Osiris's¹⁴ life¹⁵. According to Egyptian tradition, the Underworld includes twelve divisions through which the Sun passes during the night in the Barque of Millions of Years in order to revive its dwellers. As the

¹⁰ Jani Christou. *Anaparastasis III: The Pianist* for soloist, conductor, instrumental ensemble and continuum (London: J. & W. Chester, 1971). Composer's Notes, p. 2.

¹¹ The composer was born in Heliopolis (Cairo) in 1926.

¹² Cf. *Livre des morts des anciens Égyptiens* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1967). Introduction, traduction, commentaires de Paul Barguet.

¹³ Cf. Jani Christou. *Dream*. July 28-29th, 1962.

¹⁴ This specific god is called "Osiris" in Greek. His Egyptian name is "Ousir" or "Asir" and in his notes - written in English- Jani Christou refers to him as "Ra".

¹⁵ Esther Harding. *Les mystères de la femme: interprétation psychologique de l'âme féminine d'après les mythes, les légendes et les rêves* (Paris: Payot, 1976), p. 189.

Sun leaves one division to enter the next, the door is sealed and the light is lost. The souls of the screaming dead who are plunged into darkness have one single hope: to be able to board the mythical ship in order to move on to the next division¹⁶. Those who remember and speak the appropriate words of power achieve their objective, while the rest remain stranded in the darkness. The Sun continues his journey through the night and manages to be saved from various risks that would have been fatal if he himself did not know the words of power. He completes his journey towards the daylight, until the night comes. Then he is back in the first division of the Underworld to retake the same circular course, which is repeated continuously.

Especially in the last years of his work, Christou created compositions that are not only based on music, but mainly works that embrace various forms of art¹⁷. He emphasised on costumes and masks - among other things - that contribute to an atmosphere of initiation into a work of another dimension. In terms of design, he was inspired by straight lines and wide forms covering the body and the face of the musicians, which manage to deliver the mysticism characterising his entire work. Christou chooses the mask as he is well aware of its symbolic role in primitive cultures. The mask is not only a means of disguise, which helps one to hide or protect himself from evil spirits, but it is also a basic technique associated with the entry into the magical world of spirits, as visualised by each people respectively. In many different corners of the world, the mask symbolises the ancestors and it is believed that whoever wears it, incarnates them¹⁸. Therefore, covering one's face is one of the most feasible and at the same time vivid ways to portray the souls of the dead starring in *Mysterion*.

¹⁶ It is interesting to notice the correlation between what is described in the *Mysterion* and the rituals of the Eleusinian Mysteries, that inspired the Egyptians to perform ceremonies in Alexandria, which were considered the only place where it was feasible for the world of the living to meet the underworld. Cf. Carl Kerényi. "Eleusis, Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter", in *Archetypal Images in Greek Religion*, vol. 4 (New York: Bollingen Series LXV 4, 1967), p. 106.

¹⁷ Cf. Jani Christou. *A music of confrontation* (1968). Source: Anna-Martine Lucciano. *Jani Christou, The Works and Temperament of a Greek Composer* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press, 2000), p. 145-146.

¹⁸ Mircea Eliade. *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* (Paris: Payot, 1968), 143. Cf. Joseph Campbell. *The Masks of God vol. IV: Creative Mythology* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), p. 570.



Sketch from *Mysterion*

Christou uses movement as a medium, which contributes to the development of the play and intensifies the dramatic character inspired by the music, the direction and the general atmosphere of the composition, by giving specific instructions to the musicians about the way in which they are to move. In *Mysterion*, the three choruses of the play surrender to a dancing ritual, and in most passages that present great dramatic intensity the composer assigns an autonomous role to each musical ensemble that is part of a larger group of performers.

The continuum of "silent action", a key element of the fourth part, is an idea that the composer develops not only in *Mysterion*, but also later, in *Epicycle* (1968). This continuum is illustrated by a pattern that includes interconnected circles and consists of various events, such as a social event attended by a jazz music ensemble. Here the role of the continuum is to indicate to each performer a reduction. However, this is not a simple reduction in the intensity of events, but a periodic reduction in the intensity of the performers' senses, which depends on the evolution of events taking place and have neither beginning nor end.

The actions of the performer in *Mysterion* are based on the use of words of power from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. The words of power are components with similar properties to a musical note or a musical motif, since each one represents a sound and therefore has the same effect and function. As seen above, they are various words, which the souls must remember in order to go from one division of the Underworld into the other, as well as names of doors, gates, objects and people which a person came across in their lifetime. Musicians are invited to pronounce, for example, the name of the door that leads into the eighth division of the Underworld, the names of the celebrated gods, the names of those who destroy, the names of circles, the names of secret gates and those who protect them, and the name of the final door.

The particular interest of the words of power in terms of composition lies in that they are words, which open the way to the next division of the Underworld on one hand and have psychoplastic qualities on the other. The meaning of a word of power, which comes from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* and is used in front of a modern audience - whether it is German or Greek-speaking or of other origin -, cannot have any impact either on the listener or on the performer, since no one is able to fathom it. It is in fact a magical formula in some unknown language. Nevertheless, as Christou writes himself, it is not always necessary to understand words in order to be affected by them. It is not, for instance, necessary to understand what a rioting crowd is saying in order to be affected by the shouting¹⁹.

It is worth examining where this particular interest of Jani Christou in words of power originates from. As is evident from a study of his records, in October 1966 the composer read in the Sunday Times Cyril Connolly's article "Spare the rod and spoil the couch"²⁰, in which the author comments on the book *Psychoanalysis Observed*²¹ and more specifically on the chapter by Geoffrey Gorer that refers to the properties of the words of power. This writing is directly connected with the presence of words of power in the work of Christou, as it distracts him and becomes an object of study.

Connolly is interested in the abuse of words of power, which the author condemns. This particular type of abuse is of interest to Connolly because thanks to the words of power even "dabblers in psychoanalysis are enabled to belittle their opponents or to cut great men or great artists down to size", namely to exercise significant influence on the receiver. According to the author, words of power are significant in various schools of magic and esotericism, and part of the vocabulary of psychoanalysis and of general psychiatry of his time inherited some of their characteristics²². In fact, his contemporary analysts also testify that when during a session they use a term corresponding to the words of power, they acquire control of the person who is opposite them, and are able to guide them, they explain, to an in-depth understanding of their personality and to a sense of personal security²³.

On the same subject, Freud explains that words have multiple properties: inter alia, they can sometimes be used as praise and sometimes as curses, they can express invocation on one hand or dispelling on the other²⁴. Freud was particularly interested in the words of power, when he incidentally read one of the studies²⁵ of linguistics researcher Carl Abel, who said that the Egyptian language has a large number of words with two meanings, one of which means exactly the opposite of the other. For example, one could mention the case in which the word " powerful " also means " powerless ", or the

¹⁹ Jani Christou. *Mysterion*. 1966 (typed text).

²⁰ Cyril Connolly. "Spare the rod and spoil the couch", The Sunday Times, October 9th, 1966.

²¹ Charles Rycroft etc. *Psychoanalysis Observed* (Aylesbury: Pelican Books, 1968).

²² Anthony Storr. "The Concept of Cure", The Sunday Times, October 9th, 1966.

²³ Geoffrey Gorer. "Psychoanalysis in the world" in *Psychoanalysis Observed* (Aylesbury: Pelican Books, 1968), p. 29-32.

²⁴ Sigmund Freud. *Gesammelte Werke*. Achter Band: Werke aus den Jahren 1909-1913 (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1990), p. 165-176. Cf. Geoffrey Gorer. *v.s.*, p. 32.

²⁵ Carl Abel. *Über den Gegensinn der Urworte* (Leipzig: Verlag von Wilhelm Friedrich, 1884).

case of the word "light", which could also mean "darkness"²⁶. Rivkah Schärf-Kluger, a psychoanalyst at Jung Institute who specialises in the *Old Testament* and the Assyro - Babylonian culture, emphasises that in the *Old Testament* there are words and phrases, which have properties similar to those of the words of power. In this case, names are not just sounds but they have a special function as they are real, thus similar in nature to what they determine, as for example the elements that acquire a name in *Genesis* and in this way star in a ritual of creation²⁷.

Jani Christou deals with the same ritual not only in his study of the words of power, but also in his work *The Strychnine Lady* (1967). The composer addresses the cycle of creation and is mainly interested in the stage of decomposition. Christou's interest in the cyclic process, in terms of both the composition and his existential quests, is already evident in his first composition, *Phoenix Music* (1948), to which he applied a structure that corresponds to the cycle "birth - evolution - death - rebirth"²⁸. The title of his first work is inspired by the Egyptian myth of the Phoenix, the mythical bird that lived in the deserts of Arabia, flew to Egypt and died reaching its destination, to be reborn from its ashes. The goal of the trip was his rebirth, one of the stages of life circle according to the Egyptian tradition.

The soloist of the *Strychnine Lady* stars in the cyclic process: estranged from the other musicians, she remains unaffected by conditions that could affect her psychology and attitude, focuses on herself and stars in a process of self-destruction. In *Strychnine Lady*, various symbols from the composer's dreams connected with his personal concerns are associated with events, which do not seem to have any relation with each other and create a work which Christou compares to a ritual. The composition includes, inter alia, theatrical acts of the performers, reciting of an alchemical text by actors who smoke, mutterings that turn into screams, and a woman's ad who promises strychnine and unusual experiences.

Christou notes that the logic of the play coincides with the logic of dreams, where different situations are confused with each other without any apparent reason -the logic here is that of a dream in which states melt in other states with no apparent outward reason- and notes how musicians are invited to participate in a non-descriptive work that has common elements with the "mortificatio"²⁹. This is an indirect reference to one of the sources that inspired him to compose the *Strychnine Lady*: a quote from Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* referring to the story of Gabricus, as it is described in the alchemical writing *Rosarium Philosophorum*³⁰. According to this passage, Beya hugs Gabricus so

²⁶ Sigmund Freud. *v.s.*, p. 170. Carl Abel. *v.s.*, p. 4.

²⁷ Rivkah Schärf-Kluger. *Satan in the Old Testament* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 25.

²⁸ Cf. Piero Guarino. "Compositeurs d'Égypte: Jani Christou", *Rythme - Revue du Conservatoire d'Alexandrie*, October 1954, p. 5.

²⁹ Extract from a letter of Jani Christou to Rhoda Lee Rhea, February 10th, 1967. Source: Anna-Martine Lucciano. *Jani Christou: The Works and Temperament of a Greek Composer* (Athens: Bibliosynergatiki, 1987), p. 175.

³⁰ *Rosarium Philosophorum*. Secunda pars alchimiae de lapide philosophico vero modo preparando, continens exactam eius scientiae progressionem. Cum figuris rei perfectionem ostendentibus, Francofurti (Frankfurt) 1550.

tightly and with so much love that her body absorbs him and transforms him into many invisible pieces. So, while at first the two of them are two separate entities, after this process they are united.

The composition consists of musical and para-musical events, which do not coincide since each of them can be performed independently from the other. In essence, there is no communication between them, just as in the case of the performers who participate in each event. Each of them looks like a stranger in a crowd, playing with the crowd, but does not communicate nor seeks to communicate with the others. The only connecting bonds between them are the common signs to which all respond³¹.

In *Strychnine Lady* the musico-theatrical action takes the form of a happening. Some of the actors interpret their roles seated among the audience and intervene, without the public being aware at first that they are part of the play. The woman that shouts "I protest!", as soon as one of the actors communicates the alleged changes in the concert programme, upsets the audience who ignore that the situation in which they are protagonists is in fact part of the play, i.e. part of the happening. As an echo of this seemingly outside intervention comes the female voice from the audience, which states that "Johnny plays his violin very well... he is not like the others...", heard in the middle of the composition when the listener has finally become familiar with the special nature of the work.

We should point out that at the time of boom of the hippie movement, journalist John Davies referred to Jani Christou combining his work with the happenings: "It seems that the hippies are not the only ones who make happenings, if we consider that by definition a happening involves spontaneous expression³²". Of course, this is not the only time the Press deals with the composer as a personality that strays from the conventional environment of "serious music". Following the presentation of *Toccata* for piano and orchestra (composed in 1962) in the English Bach Festival in 1971, one of the journalists of the Times noted that regarding the percussion, Christou's composing approaches progressive instrumental rock and the music of Santana³³.

The work of Jani Christou admittedly lies far from the conventional boundaries of musical interpretation and - especially in his last compositions - it touches various art forms, to serve his multifaceted intentions. As we saw in *Mysterion*, *Anaparastasis III: The Pianist* and the *Strychnine Lady*, the readings, the personal quest, the concerns and the dreams of the composer are sources and at the same time triggers of creation and improvisation and combine with screams and silence, creating theatrical tension and ceremonial atmosphere. Christou's art is inspired by the past, as it connects with the tradition of primitive cultures and the Egyptian and Greek cultural heritage, but at the same time it is aligned with current trends and includes contemporary forms of artistic expression that reach their peak through happenings. The composer has based his work on philosophical pursuits, which generate

Source: Carl Gustav Jung. *Psychologie und Alchemie* (Olten und Freiburg im Breisgau: Walter-Verlag, 1972), p. 432.

³¹ Jani Christou. *Thoughts*. March 1967 (manuscript).

³² John Davies. "Setting for a happening", *Star* (Johannesburg), January 20th, 1969.

³³ William Mann. "English Bach Festival, Oxford Town Hall", *The Times*, April 24th, 1971, p. 17.

musical-philosophical concepts and offer the ability to approach his art in a different and personal way. The words of power are elements that add multiple properties to the musical work, and psychology, history and mythology help in this direction by extending the area in which the composer moves, and by opening up interesting prospects for the further study of the work of Jani Christou today³⁴.

³⁴ This article, as well as my PhD thesis, were realized thanks to the help offered to me by the following people: Mrs. Sandra Christou, Chester Music, Novello & Co Ltd, Première Music Group, Mrs. Anne Brossier, Mr. Iordanis Arzoglou, Mrs. Marina Gyra.

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