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DIMITRI MITROPOULOS' LONESOME PASSAGE TO MODERN MUSIC

Abstract: It is not widely known that Dimitri Mitropoulos' first public appearances in Greece were as a composer. His early works (ca. 1912–1924), distinguished by the blend of elements of the late-romantic style with intensely impressionistic references, reflect the search for a personal, 'advanced' harmonic musical language. In his works written after 1924, Mitropoulos abandons tonality and adopts more modern idioms of composition (atonality and 12-tone method). He is the first Greek composer to follow the modern musical tendencies of Europe, when music by Manolis Kalomiris and the other composers of the Greek National School was dominant in Greece.

Keywords: Dimitris Mitropoulos; Nikos Skalkottas; Ferruccio Busoni; *Passaglia*, *Intermezzo e Fuga*; *Ostinata for violin and piano*; *Concerto Grosso*.

Dimitri Mitropoulos (1896–1960) constitutes perhaps the most charismatic musical personality which Greece has ever produced. He became famous all over the world through his outstanding explanatory performances (specifically works of the later-romantic and the modern period), as the conductor of several orchestras in Europe and America, and by his exceptional ability to play piano and simultaneously direct some of the early 20th century compositions in virtuoso concerts. Apart from his astonishing ability to memorise works with enormous technical and interpretative difficulties, which he directed by heart with more success than any other conductor in his period, he was the only one who dared to shoulder the double role of interpreter and conductor (from the piano), in performances of modern composers' works with: 'such an advanced musical language and such technical requirements that even the best pianists avoided including in their repertory'.¹ Nevertheless, something that is not widely known is that Mitropoulos, this multidimensional personality, appeared as a composer in his early career in Greece.

Mitropoulos showed his talent for composition from a very early age, from the first years of his systematic music studies in the Conservatory of Athens (1910–19). Throughout the duration of his studies there, simultaneously with the piano and theoretical studies, he also tested his synthetic abilities, occasionally presenting part of his synthetic works (mainly for piano) in public concerts. His natural melodic inspira-

¹ Postolos Kostios, *Dimitri Mitropoulos: Leben und Werk 1896–1960*, (Athens, Hellenic Foundation for Culture, 1995), 26.

tion with bold dissonances and varying timbre and orchestral combinations in abundance with intense distinct signs of a personal character, reflected both his romantic temperament and his need to express himself sentimentally in this manner.

By the end of his musical studies in Greece in 1919² Mitropoulos had shown that he incorporated many elements of the late romantic period with a lot of impressionistic references in his works, the result of his tuition by Armand Marsick in addition to his personal cosmopolitan temperament, which was perhaps the emanation of his family and wider social environment during his juvenile years. The Belgian Armand Marsick contributed decisively to the young composer becoming acquainted with the romantic French musical culture and the impressionist composers of this period. This is portrayed in the precocious works of Mitropoulos through his synthetic style, the texts that he selected to melodize, and of course in the titles of his compositions. It is easy to distinguish in his compositions until 1921 that his inspiration is guided,³ in most cases, by a 'programme' or some accompanying text, without it being in restrictive structural engagements, as the objective was only the expression of his sentimental world.⁴

During the period 1920 to 1924 he travelled abroad, where he had the chance to observe closely for the first time musical developments in a musically advanced Europe.⁵ Initially, he went to Brussels from 1920 to 1921 and after that to Berlin from 1921 to 1924 where a period of historic alternations and conflicts in music and generally in arts presided.⁶ There Mitropoulos was contacted by the famous composer, pian-

² Mitropoulos was given his first music lessons before 1910 by the Italian pianist Achilleas Delbuono. In 1910 he began his systematic musical studies at the Conservatory of Athens. He studied theory under the guidance of Philoctitis Iconomidis (1910–12) and Armand Marsick (1912–19), and piano under the guidance of Georgios Agapitos (1910–11), Thisseas Pindios (1911–13) and Ludwig Wassenhoven (1913–19). See Apostolos Kostios, *Dimitris Mitropoulos*, (Athens, National Bank of Greek Cultural Foundation, 1995), 24–5.

³ See Apostolos Kostios, 'O Synthetis Dimitris Mitropoulos' [The composer Dimitris Mitropoulos] in *Dimitris Mitropoulos – Afieroma sto sinthetiko tou ergo* [*Dimitris Mitropoulos – Tribute to his compositional work*], (The Athens Concert Hall, 1996), 16–8.

⁴ Apostolos Kostios, *Dimitris Mitropoulos – Katalogos Ergon* [*Dimitri Mitropoulos – Catalogue of Works*], (Athens, Orchestra ton Chromaton, 1996).

⁵ Crossing the borders was an extremely interesting experience for Mitropoulos. Previously he had only been abroad once when at the age of sixteen, more specifically in 1912, he and his fellow student George Sklavos, were accommodated by their teacher Armand Marsick in Rome during the entire summer season. (Apostolos Kostios, *Dimitris Mitropoulos*, *Ibid.*, 24)

⁶ Apostolos Kostios, *Dimitris Mitropoulos*, *Ibid.*, 33–4.

ist, conductor and aesthete of music, Ferruccio Busoni and his associates. Nevertheless, there is no evidence to prove that he was Busoni's student. His three-year-abode in Berlin and his contact with Busoni contributed decisively to the change of his synthetic route, as Busoni, who was a worshipper of composers of 'absolute music', intensely expressed his abomination of programmatic tendencies of romanticism to Mitropoulos.

The shock that Mitropoulos felt in his first meeting with Busoni, when Busoni rejected *Eine Griechische Sonate for piano*, his most important composition until that date, convulsed him. In his interview many years later, Mitropoulos said that he felt a horrible shock at that particular incident and from that moment he did not have any appetite to compose.⁷ Such was the impact created on him by Busoni's speech. As his temperament was naturally full of passion he devoted himself to this god-given characteristic and nothing else. Thus, he felt like a sinner and he wanted to find a balance between his nature, his thought, and his heart. This was a decisive moment, he said, and perhaps he would have given up if the possibility to be a conductor had not presented itself.⁸

During his stay in Berlin from 1921 to 1924, Mitropoulos stopped composing. He began to think progressively about his music career through the prism of regeneration.⁹ In 1922 he started working as a musical repetitor in the National Opera of Berlin, Unter den Linden. His three years abstention from composition helped him to understand the process and absorb the new 'principles' that Busoni supported. Some of them were selectively incorporated into his later works, adapted by his own musical style. On his return to Greece in the summer of 1924, isolated from the place where the advanced movement of the synthetic art and more generally the international musical development existed, he resigned from the use of programmatic titles and texts.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 251–2.

⁸ Mitropoulos admired Busoni and always spoke about him with respect. '[...] I think that Busoni was a fanatic idealist. He was an unusual character', Mitropoulos said in an interview in 1959. Despite the rejection of his works by Busoni, Mitropoulos continued composing: 'Of course I continued composing [...], whilst becoming familiar with the works of Schönberg. It was the period that I started composing with the twelve-note system. From that time on, whatever I composed was done in the same manner'. (From the interview which was given to Josef Müller-Marein and Hannes Reinhardt for NDR Hamburg radio station, in 1959, published with the title of 'Missionary of Music', republished in William R. Trotter, *O ierofantis tis mousikis [The Priest of Music]*, Athens, Potamos, 2000, 720–1).

⁹ He added only one part of piano in the third *Partita for solo Violin* (BWV 1006) of J. S. Bach.

By following the movement of neoclassicism, he subjugated his inspiration in the forms of the previous times (ostinato, passacaglia, invention, fuga, sonata etc). Nevertheless, he wasn't devoted passively to their effects. Thus, he didn't deny revolutionary tendencies of his period, but instead, he hurried to adopt them in his later compositions. He entered atonality territory, but he didn't irrevocably give up traditional tonalities. Despite this, in most of his works he used a much bolder musical language which turned to atonality and even the method of twelve-note compositions.¹⁰ In this way he matched new material with traditional forms, in a conscious effort to wed the old with new, as a product of a creative coupling of his period's elements with the elements of the recent and distant past.¹¹

Mitropoulos established himself as the first Greek composer to write pioneering music, even earlier than Nikos Skalkottas.¹² During the same period in Greece, where Manolis Kalomiris and his 'fellow traveller' composers of Greek National School of Music were at their zenith, developments in advanced musical countries were, if not completely unknown, at least incomprehensible. In these musical circumstances, with no more musical stimulus and above all with no sign of support or comprehension of his efforts from the musical circle of Athens, the effort of Mitropoulos to write in an advanced musical style that even the closest students of Schoenberg did not dare to write becomes much more admirable.

Among the works of the period from 1924 to 1928, the compositions: *Passaglia*, *Intermezzo e Fuga* (the first atonal work), *Ostinata*

¹⁰ Apostolos Kostios, 'O synthetis Dimitris Mitropoulos' [The Composer Dimitri Mitropoulos], in CD with title *Ellines synthetes: Dimitris Mitropoulos – Nikos Skalkottas* [*Greek Composers: Dimitri Mitropoulos – Nikos Skalkottas*], (Athens, Radios' archive ERT-ERA, 1997), 11–4.

¹¹ Apostolos Kostios, 'O Synthetis Dimitris Mitropoulos' [The composer Dimitris Mitropoulos], *Ibid.*, 21.

¹² Mitropoulos was eight years older than Skalkottas (1904–49). Nevertheless, the switch that both of the Greek composers made to the modern style of music, was almost simultaneous. It seems that Mitropoulos wrote his first composition in modern style *Passaglia*, *Intermezzo e Fuga* in 1924. Skalkottas first piece work in the modern style, *Sonata for solo Violin*, was written a year later. In addition, Mitropoulos wrote his one and only twelve note composition between 1925 and 1927 (*Ostinata* for violin and piano) while Skalkottas composed his first work with the twelve note series (without having progress to serialism) in his piano compositions *Sonatina* and *15 Little Variations* in 1927. Nevertheless the modernism of the two Greek composers is very different. Kostis Demertzis, 'O Dimitris Mitropoulos apo tin pleura tou skalkotikou erevniti' [Dimitri Mitropoulos from the perspective of Skalkottas' researcher] in *Dimitris Mitropoulos – Afteroma* [*Dimitris Mitropoulos – Tribute*], (Cultural Organization of Athens, 1995), 54. Further reading Apostolos Kostios, 'O Synthetis Dimitris Mitropoulos' [The composer Dimitris Mitropoulos], *Ibid.*, 18.

(“Intermezzo”), the same role is played by the continuous presence of intervals of fourths in the horizontal and the vertical writing.



“Intermezzo”, with a dense flow of notes, intense alternation of timbre areas, and continuous precessions of dynamics with peroration of the twelve-note assonance with all notes of the chromatic scale, substantially constitutes the prelude of the extensive “Fuga” that follows in the Third and last movement of the composition. The head of the subject ‘is built’ through successive intervals overlying fourths, respectively with the beginning of “Intermezzo”, while as much of the answer as the counter subject absolutely maintain their initial interval distances of notes in all their appearances. The structure of “Fuga”, with the almost continuous presence of the subject and countersubject or their extracts in their initial or inversion form, ensures that the composer provides the mesh of the protection that he seeks, so that it does not proceed to further dangerous quests, simultaneously providing him with the possibility for continuous alternations of timbre areas and successive sound increases and ebbs that keep the interest of the listener undiminished.

 A musical score snippet in 3/4 time, featuring a piano introduction. The right hand (treble clef) plays a series of eighth notes, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a series of quarter notes. The music is characterized by a dense flow of notes and intervals of fourths, both horizontally and vertically. The score includes dynamic markings such as *ff* and *subito pp*.

In the first part, the exposition and recapitulation are based exclusively on the basic series, while the retrograde is presented only in the development section. The second part unfolds with a basso ostinato on the piano (left hand) that remains through the duration of the part, and the series functions as the sonata theme, in a combination of atonal and twelve-note elements. Finally, in the Third movement the transpositions of the new series being at the same time as the subject of the fuga, serve as the answer procedure. The series, which simultaneously constitutes also the subject of fuga, has been structured in such a way that its transposition by a whole tone provides the necessary notes for the free inversion of the subject.

The last piece of work to which I will refer to, is the *Concerto Grosso* written in 1928. In that work, Mitropoulos returns to the starting line of atonality and organises his shapeless material selecting as a basic principal the parallel movement of voices, in the four successive movements: with fifth, fourth, third and second intervals correspondingly for each movement.

I

Largo

2. CORNS
en Fa

I
VIOLONS

II

ALTO S

CELLI

BASSI

ff très soutenu

It is a work in which assonance and dissonance, counterpoint and homophony, the elements of neoclassicism with those of modernism and romanticism live together, in a work that condenses and recaps the musical developments of many centuries, from the time of Baroque until the first third of the 20th century.¹⁹ In *Concerto Grosso* Mitropoulos tries to

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

combine the passage in chromatic style in atonality, with the aesthetically and structurally neopclassicism ideal. In the four movements, the composer separates the instruments that he uses in each movement in 3, 4 or 5 groups and organises the various levels of writing depending on the interval which has been fixed from the beginning of each part of work.²⁰ The last part of the composition, an elaborate fuga, consists of an ingenious development of an idea borrowed from Greek folk music, which Mitropoulos had already used in the first of the *Four Cytherean Dances*, in 1926. The composer uses the pattern from the Cytherean dance called *Diplos Palaios* and organises his material with the vertical assonances of intervals of seconds as a base, in the various levels of writing.

Conclusion

We therefore observed in the compositions from 1924 onwards, that the innate romantic nature of Mitropoulos forced him, apart from the form that changed each time, to fix more ways of protecting his work from such types of quests. Mitropoulos was a brilliant artist who consciously selected to offer his services with all of his power, aiming for the development of the art of music according to the needs imposed by the period in which he lived. This was probably also one of the reasons, apart from the influence of Busoni, for his isolation from the remainder of the Greek composers, the weakness of the Greek public, the Greeks' incapacity to comprehend and to accept his pioneering compositional ideas, but also the international recognition and the encomiastic comments in the sector of conducting, that forced him to abandon the composition early. Moreover, his decisions appear objective, in the sense that he always contributed with all his powers as his main focus, so that he could offer as much as possible to the art that he worshipped, music, and to the world that loved him more than any other conductor of his period. This becomes perceptible from the letter to his friend Katy Katsogianni when he took the painful decision to reject henceforth the double role of conductor-pianist: '[...] I prefer to stop in time, before I begin to become a burden on my admirers!'²¹

²⁰ George Leotsakos, *Dimitris Mitropoulos – Concerto Grosso* (Athens, Greek Ministry of Culture and Science, 1980), [I] – [II].

²¹ *Dimitris Mitropoulos: I allilografia tou me tin Keti Katsogianni [Dimitris Mitropoulos: his correspondence with Katy Katsoyannis]*, (Athens, Ikaros, 1966), 63.

Јанис Белонис

ДИМИТРИ МИТРОПУЛОС: УСАМЉЕНИ ПРЕЛАЗ
У МОДЕРНУ МУЗИКУ
(Резиме)

Мало је познато да је Димитри Митропулос (1896–1960) своја прва јавна иступања у Грчкој остварио као композитор. Његова рана дела (око 1912–1924), која се одликују комбиновањем позноромантичарских и импресионистичких стилских елемената, указују на континуитет младалачког трагања за личним, „напредним“ хармонским језиком. У остварењима после 1924, аутор напушта тоналност и усваја много модернији композициони језик (атоналност и додекафонију).

Следећи линију неокласицизма, Митропулос се инспираше музичким формама минулих времена (пасакаља, инвенција, fuga, соната итд). Ипак, не препушта се пасивно њиховим законитостима. Он радо прихвата револуционарне композиционе тенденције свога доба и примењује их у касним делима. Залази у подручје атоналности, али не одустаје од традиционалних тоналитета. У већини дела користи атоналност, па чак и методе додекафонског компоновања, свесно настојећи да повеже старо са новим, односно да дође до креативног споја композиционе технике свог времена и ближе и даље прошлости.

Међу остварењима насталим између 1924. и 1928, три дела су сагледа-на као најзначајнија: *Passacaglia*, *Intermezzo e Fuga* (прва атонална композиција), *Ostinata* за виолину и клавир (прво додекафонско дело) и *Concerto Grosso* (последње дело овог периода које у потпуности сведочи о постизању личног стваралачког израза). Упркос интелектуалној привлачности неокласичних принципа, која је деловала на Митропулоса, сва три остварења указују на композиторову унутрашњу борбу са романтичарском, изразито емоционалном природом. Када се обраћао делима „апсолутне музике“, за њега су неокласични елементи представљали својеврсно средство „самозаштите“ од неконтролисаних стваралачких излива сопствене романтичарске природе.

(С енглеског превела Биљана Милановић)

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