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**THE MAIDEN AND DEATH:
A COMPARATIVE READING OF THE HOMONYMOUS
COMPOSITIONS OF NIKOS SKALKOTTAS AND
ANTIOCHOS EVANGELATOS AS NARRATIONS
OF GREEK TRADITION**

Abstract: Nikos Skalkottas's (1904–1949) first ballet score, *The Maiden and Death*, was written in 1938. It is one of his most important tonal works, its plot being derived from a well-known folk-poem with the same title. Antiochos Evangelatos's (1903–1981) homonymous symphonic ballad, written three years later, uses verses from the same folk-poem. The present comparative study attempts to analyze aesthetic aspects of these two works which are viewed, moreover, as aesthetic entities in music history of a wider cultural background.

Key-words: Nikos Skalkottas, Antiochos Evangelatos, Greek music, ballet.

Nikos Skalkottas's (1904–1949) first ballet score, *The Maiden and Death*, was written in about 1938. It is one of his most important tonal works, its plot being derived from a well-known folk-poem that is included in Nikolaos Politis's collection entitled *Eklogai apo ta tragoudia tou ellinikou laou* (*Selection from the Greek folk's songs*). Antiochos Evangelatos's (1903–1981) homonymous symphonic ballad, written three years later, uses verses from the same folk-poem. While Evangelatos's work is faithful to the texture of the text and his music can, consequently, be heard as an elaborated structure of Greek demotic song, Skalkottas uses the first part of the verse (up to the maiden's death) as an introduction, to be followed by a freer version of the plot in which love and death find their exuberant manifestation through music in the very romantic sense of the words.

Both these works raise questions of gender through the juxtaposition of a maiden with death, an idea which is derived, in their case, from a folk poem but which is also embraced by the romantics in many genres of art. Evangelatos's treatise of the subject follows the rules of an epic tradition which evokes nationalistic messages through folklore. Skalkottas's work crosses the cultural boundaries of the Greek nation by exemplifying a Tristanesque notion of "eros as death".

The present comparative study, thus, attempts to analyze aesthetic aspects of these two works which are viewed, moreover, as aesthetic entities in music history of a wider cultural background.

The juxtaposition of a maiden (representing youth and the upsurge of life) with death (representing man's unavoidable destiny) is an idea of central importance in both works under examination.

The death of a beautiful woman, according to Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), is the most poetic subject in the world.

An overview of the aesthetics of death and, more specifically, of a youth's juxtaposition with death, from ancient Greece onwards, would include important stories as is the case of Iphigenia's sacrifice, a virgin who sacrifices herself in order to bring victory to the Greeks who were fighting against the Trojans, of Antigone's self-denial who ignored the royal command of King Kreon by burying the dead body of her brother Polynikis in accordance with divine law, and of Persephone's death for the sake of nature's rebirth.¹

Later, in Greek demotic song, we also come across the idea of the fateful juxtaposition of life with death or that of the painful limits between life and death. We see, for example, dead heroes returning back to the world of the living people, as is the case of the song of the Dead Brother.²

In European art tradition, romanticism's aesthetics focus on the notion of "death" as an expression of sublime ideas.

The poet Novalis (Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg, 1772–1801) identifies the first experience of love with death. The first kiss is always a kiss of death and death is a more powerful union of two lovers.

For the romantics, sexual differences and the reproduction of a dualistic nature (man-woman) are considered not only as a primal source of life but also as a passage to death. The reproductive sperm becomes a sperm which brings death to every living creature.³

The notion of the "aestheticization of death" is very important for many Lieder of Schubert as, for example, for *An den Tod* (1817), *Der Jüngling und der Tod* (1817), *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (1817), *Todesmusik* (1822),

¹ The popularity of Antigone's story can be confirmed by the fact that at least thirty operas have librettos based on it.

² Most narrative dramatic folk songs, belonging to the category of "variations", can be considered as derived from the late era of antiquity at which Greek tragedy ended up to the form of a tragic "pantomime". The *Bridge of Arta* and *The Dead Brother* should be mentioned as examples; narratives in both of them are similar with myths of ancient Greek tragedy.

³ The phenomenon of the "aestheticization" of death belongs to nineteenth-century German culture and was central in the philosophical thought of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860). A few years earlier, another philosopher, namely G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831), recognized the philosophical power of negation which, according to him, appears at the surface through the continuous dialectic "becoming" of the Spirit. Also, the union of the opposites, which Hegel envisages, at a personal level, implies the union of the two genres which coincides with the individuality's death.

Todtenopfer (1814), *Winterreise* (1827), and so forth. The subjects of two of those Lieder – *Der Jüngling und der Tod* (poetry by Josef von Spaun, 1817) and *Der Tod und das Mädchen* (poetry by Matthias Claudius, 1817) – are based on the juxtaposition between a maiden and death. In *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, in particular, death is treated as a welcomed refuge away from the turmoils and torments of life. The juxtaposition is an extreme one since the maiden represents the peak of life while death the unavoidable fate of human existence. Through their symbolic juxtaposition death is revealed as an inviting to eternal rest. Both these Lieder, articulate the youth's Weltschmerz through an idealization of femininity ("fair" and tender) and a friendly appearance of death.

Another characteristic example of a similar symbolism as above, in romantic music, is Brunnhilde's sacrifice, or to put it differently, the "spirit" of her sacrifice, in Richard Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1874); this "spirit" can be interpreted as acting as a healer for decadence (which is caused by the thirst for power of the owner of the ring). Death, as the sublime union of two souls (male and female) in one whole, finds its most romantic manifestation in Isolde's death, in Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* (1865). At the end of the scene, the orchestra replaces Isolde's voice in order to repeat the culminating point of the two lovers' duet (second Act) articulating the wholeness of time (the real "present", which according to Wagner and Hegel is pure memory); Isolde overcomes this notion through her death. The overcoming of time, death, in its very Hegelian essence, is manifested musically and coincides with the eternal union of Tristan and Isolde in one "whole".

The idea of "death" is also articulated in narrations of epic tradition, that is, of narrations of heroic actions which acquire their meaning within a people's community. An individual's death, in stories of heroic deeds, validates the idea of "collectivity", or "nation"; moreover, the hero's coming to terms with death articulates, at a deeper level, the idea of nation's diachronicity.

Revivals of epic traditions at later periods, as is the case with the inter-war period in Greece during which the works of Evangelatos and Skalkottas were written, help a nation to "re-define" itself. Epic narratives become a source of inspiration for a cultural re-evaluation.⁴

Evangelatos's treatise of the juxtaposition of the maiden with death follows the rules of an epic tradition which evokes nationalistic messages

⁴ It is worth mentioning that, at the inter-war era, youth, a notion which we analyze in this study, was idealized. (See, for more detail, Georgia Ladogianni, "I antapokrasi tis notis (The youth's response)", *Kinoniki krisi kai Aisthitiiki Anazitisi ston Mesopolemo (Social critique and Aesthetic Quest in Inter-War Era)*, Athens: Odysseas Publishing House, 1993: 326–345). G. Theotokas, for example, in his first treatise, entitled *Eleuthero Pneuma (Free Spirit) (1929)*, states that guarantee for social reformation is nation's adolescence. (G. Theotokas, *Eleuthero Pneuma (Free Spirit)*, ed. K. Th. Dimaras, Athens: Hermes, Nea Elliniki Vivliothiki, 1973: 24)

through folklore. He respects the character of the demotic song since, although he develops an elaborate version of it, it can easily be heard at the “surface” of the work’s structure. Such an attitude towards tradition raises positive comments and reviews by the music critics of that time. Sofia Spanoudi, for example, on the occasion of the work’s premiere on December 1941, comments on the articulation of “...Greek psychosynthesis, Greek light, Greek passion”, elements which are articulated in this work since, as she explains, *The Maiden and Death* “...comprises all characteristics of an orthodox national art”. As she continues writing, “...with this marvelous ballade of life and death, our musician could penetrate deep inside the complex soul of the Greek nation and its true origin of pure demotic song, which was the source of inspiration for his beautiful creation”.⁵

We have to observe, however, that it is Evangelatos’s attitude towards the demotic song’s tradition which is responsible for raising positive comments for the national character of his composition and not any symbolic depiction of ideas through music itself. In other words, the ideas expressed in this work, as received by the critics of that time, have to do with the demotic song itself as part of a national tradition.

Skalkottas perceives the maiden/death juxtaposition as an exuberant romantic manifestation of supreme love identified with death. His dancing suite, thus, crosses the cultural boundaries of the Greek nation by exemplifying



a Tristanesque notion of “eros as death”. He uses demotic motifs derived not only from Greek but also from a wider folk tradition; however, his compositional techniques applied to their harmonization as well as to important parts of this work follow contemporary European techniques of art music.⁶

It is worth mentioning that the culminating point of this work (its central part) is a three-part slow waltz. According to its choreographic plot, “[Konstantis] raises in his arms [the dead body of the Maiden] and she, now spirit rather than body, dances with him, thus obeying the supernatural power of love. They dance intoxi-

⁵ Sofia Spanoudis, “Antiohos Evangelatos ‘The Maiden and Death’ (1941)”, *Ta Nea*, 23/12/1941.

⁶ More specifically, according to the musicologist Kostis Demertzis, the work’s musical style is influenced by Russian music (especially Prokofiev) and blends atonal elements with a tonal musical language. (See Kostis Demertzis, *I Skalkotiki Enorhistrosi (Skalkottas’s orchestration)*, Athens: Papazisis Publishing House, 1998: 290, 353)

cated by the love and passion felt for each other”.⁷ I cannot avoid comparing the feeling of an other-worldly melancholy of this waltz with Camille-Claudel’s sculpture *La Valse*, a sensitive and brilliant work of Rodin’s most talented pupil, in which the bodies seem to move at the limits of their balance, merging dance, music and love in one whole. Similarly to the maiden’s and Konstantis’s waltz, Claudel’s lovers escape from time, weight and material world through their dance.⁸

The notion of “death”, consequently, articulated by means of an “international” language of music (the cosmopolitan waltz), acquires a positive power against the negatively perceived notion of “present time”, depicted musically by the Greek tsamikos dance; waltz and tsamikos, thus, are juxtaposed to each other as two heterogenous traditions (cosmopolitan and folk ones, respectively) while the composer expresses the most important idea of the choreodrama, that is, the eternal union of two lovers, by means of the first one. Even deeper, the opposition between life and death aims at the ideal reunion of man and woman after death, a purely romantic idea, as already stated, which is related to the supernatural notion of an ideal human being. Skalkottas, thus, internalizes the notion of “death” according to the spirit of German idealism.

The premiere of this work, at its first version for a small orchestra, according to the musicologist John Thornley, took place in 10/5/1940; it was performed for a second time, according to the musicologist Kostis Demertzis, in its second version for a larger orchestra (1945–46), at 23/3/1947, with the State Orchestra of Athens and Georgios Lykoudis as a conductor.⁹ Also, it was performed later by the Greek choreodrama of Rallou Manos; however,

⁷ Quoted in Yannis Sabrovalakis and Nikos Hristodoulou, “The Maiden and Death, Dancing Suite for orchestra”, leaflet from the CD entitled *Nikos Skalkottas, The Maiden and Death, ballet suite, Piano Concerto No.1, Overture Concertante* (World Premiere Recordings, Iceland Symphony Orchestra, 1998), 9–11: 10.

⁸ We can also associate such a symbolic level with extracts from Maurice Rollinat’s *Les Névroses*, which are as follows:

<i>La Musique</i> : O Musique, torrent du rêve, Et roule-moi dans l’infini (p.68) infinite.	O Music the flow of dream Roll me away in the
<i>Le Piano</i> : Le rêve tendrement peut flotter dans tes sons	Dream can tenderly float in your souls,
La volupté se pâme avec tous ses frissons Dans tes soupirs d’amour et de tristesse vague (p. 69)	Voluptuousness unfolds itself quivering In your sighs of love and vague sadness
<i>Chopin</i> : Le vertige infernal des valse fantastiques (p. 71)	The endless vertigo of the fantastic waltz.

(Maurice Rollinat, *Les Névroses*, Paris, 1972. Rollinat’s poem was published by Charpentier in 1883 and reprinted many times during the same year.)

⁹ See Demertzis: 11, 73.

it was based on a different plot than that of the original version which, also, included a few musical cuts.

According to our comparison so far, each of the two Greek composers develops his own interpretation for the subject of the juxtaposition of a valliant young woman with death, which is largely related to his personal attitude towards tradition. By taking into account the different personalities and musical styles of Evangelatos and Skalkottas, we can claim, moreover, that, interpretations of the aesthetics of these works, as the one we have developed in this study, can provide us with understandings of different aspects of the Greek intelligentsia's thought of that time. At another hermeneutic level, such analyses can clarify various aspects concerning the relation of Greece with European culture during the inter-war period, something which exceeds the scope of the present study.¹⁰ However, we believe that the findings of such research will be valuable since it was arguably during that period that symphonic music engaged with tradition in a particularly self-conscious and systematic way, as it was the common tendency for composers to investigate methods of incorporating folk music into works from the high art tradition. Other characteristic examples, apart from the works we analyzed in the present study, are the *36 Greek Dances* (1931, 1933, 1935–6) by Nikos Skalkottas, *Kleftikos Choros* (1933) by Leonidas Zoras, *Three Greek Dances* (1934) and *The Death of the Valliant Woman* (1943–45) by Manolis Kalomiris and the *Symphonic Etude* (1938) based on two symphonic songs by Theodoros Kariotakis.¹¹

As a conclusion, we can argue that Evangelatos remains faithful to folk tradition since, although harmonizing the demotic song using European techniques, he respects its music idiom. On the other side, Skalkottas perceives folk tradition as symbolizing a “stage” towards the realization of the sublime idea of love between two archetypal souls, corresponding to romantic perceptions of the perfect union of two human beings into a whole. We should observe that Skalkottas's musical references to Greek folk music take place only in two parts of the work: in the introduction (*Moderato*) and in the *tsamikos* dance. His supreme ideal, expressed by means of music, is the international character of its language, seen through the glass of romantic idealism.

¹⁰ For a more thorough approach to this issue, see Anastasia Siopsi, “Simasiologikes ermineies tis paradosis (I anadiksi tou Manolis Kalomiris se igetiki physiognomia tis mousikis zois stin Ellada [1910–1940]) (Hermeneutics of tradition (Manolis Kalomiris's declaration as a leading personage in musical life of Greece [1910–1940]))”, *Porphyra*, vol. KA, 99–102, n. 100, July-September 2001: 158–170.

¹¹ See a similar observation in Demertzis: 351.

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**ДЕВОЈКА И СМРТ: КОМПАРАТИВНО ЧИТАЊЕ
ИСТОИМЕНИХ КОМПОЗИЦИЈА НИКОСА
СКАЛКОТАСА И АНТИОХОСА ЕВАНГЕЛАТОСА КАО
НАРАЦИЈА ГРЧКЕ ТРАДИЦИЈЕ**

(Резиме)

Девојка и смрт, први балет Никоса Скалкотаса (1904–1949), компонован је око 1938. године и представља једно од његових најважнијих тоналних дела. Симфонијску баладу истог назива и према истим стиховима из народне песме написао је Антиохос Евангелатос (1903–1981) три године касније. Суочавање младих са смрћу било је честа тема античких митова: Ифигенијина жртва, Антигонин бунт, Персефонија смрт. И у грчким народним песмама има много примера тематизације сукоба живота и смрти (нпр. у песми *Мртва браћа*). У европској уметничкој традицији тема смрти је обично везана за идеју узвишеног, а „естетизација смрти“ је карактеристична за многа дела романтичара, нарочито за песме Франца Шуберта и музичке драме Рихарда Вагнера.

Начин како је Евангелатос пришао овој теми следи правила епске традиције која емитује националистичке поруке преко фолклора и он поштује карактер народне песме. Скалкотас, пак, схвата однос Девојке и Смрти као бујну романтичарску манифестацију врхунске љубави идентификоване са смрћу. Дело тиме искорачује из грчких културних оквира и изражава тристановску идеју „ероса као смрти“. Он користи демотске (народне) мотиве из грчке, али и из других фолклорних традиција. Кулминација његовог дела је спори троделни валцер у средњем делу. Меланхолија која има дах оностраног може да пробуди асоцијације на скулптуру *Валцер* Камија Клодела, бриљантног ученика Огиста Родена. Љубавници и у једном и у другом валцеру беже од времена, гравитације и материјалног света уопште. Појам смрти, артикулисан „интернационалним“ музичким језиком (космополитским валцером), добија позитивну снагу у односу на негативно перципиран појам „садашњег времена“ (који је музички осликан грчком игром цамикос).

Приказана дела могу да се ишчитају као различити погледи на однос између грчке и европске културе у међуратном периоду. Евангелатос остаје веран фолклорној традицији користећи народне песме које хармонизује. За Скалкотаса фолклорна традиција симболизује „степеницу“ ка реализацији узвишене идеје љубави, изражене космополитским језиком музичког романтизма.

UDK [78.036: 781.7: 784.4] (495)