

A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE AND INTERNATIONAL THREADS TO POSTMODERNISM AT THE FIFTH HELLENIC WEEK OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

The Fifth Hellenic Week of Contemporary Music (Athens, 1976) has been mainly considered in the context of a major political event: the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974. However, it may also be seen as a landmark for the transition to a postmodern era in Greece. The musical works presented during the Week, as well as their reception by the musical community are indicative of this transition. This paper aims at exploring those two perspectives and places the emphasis on the second, through an analytical comment on *Le Tricot Rouge* by Giorgos Kouroupos and the critiques in the press.

KEYWORDS: Postmodernism, Greece, Fifth Hellenic Week of Contemporary Music, Graphic and Verbal Scores, Giorgos Kouroupos

The Hellenic Weeks of Contemporary Music, which were organized by the Hellenic Association of Contemporary Music during the decade 1966–1976, were events of seminal importance for the dissemination of the avant-garde in Greece. The Association commissioned many new works from Greek composers, while numerous performances and lectures were given on “new” music. This resulted in a passionate dialogue on political, social, aesthetic and technical issues. However, in the mid-70s the conflicts and polemics of the 1950s and 1960s gave way to a mutual acceptance and peaceful coexistence of several trends. This transition from the polemical to the disengaged has been associated with two different perspectives. First, it has been linked to a major political change: the fall of the military dictatorship (thereafter Junta) that

ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974. Secondly, it has been associated with the international transition to a postmodern era (Samson 2013: 535-536). In this paper I will suggest that the Fifth Week of Contemporary Music, which took place in 1976, emerges as a landmark of this transition, and I will place the emphasis on the international perspective. In particular, I will focus on Giorgos Kouroupos's piece *Le Tricot Rouge* [The Red Knitting],² for a singer and a pianist, which was presented in the Fifth Week, and I will argue that the work and its critical reception, as well as the broader attitude of listeners during the Fifth Week, are closely associated with postmodernism.

Before presenting *Le Tricot Rouge* I will briefly mention some biographical information about Giorgos Kouroupos. He was born in 1942. After graduating in the piano (1965) from the Athens Conservatory and mathematics (1967) from Athens University, he studied with Messiaen at the Paris Conservatoire (1968–72), where in 1971 he was appointed assistant for the propagation of contemporary music. He returned to Greece in 1976 and worked as a freelance composer and also held several positions in musical institutions (Leotsakos 2001). In 2003 he was appointed professor of composition at the Ionian University.

Le Tricot was written in 1976 and it is not only a musical performance but also a dramatic event, or, in other words, a musical theatre piece. The composer specifies in his subtitle that the singer and the pianist should be “above all good actors”. The form is a closed predetermined structure consisting of 16 consecutive “[scenes]”³ in a fixed order. In the score there are mainly graphic and verbal instructions (in French) with only the occasional use of conventional notation (in scenes 2, 4 and 9), but still leaving indeterminate most of the musical parameters. The composer gives the interpreters detailed stage directions: what to do, where to look, how to look, how to react to one another, where to go, among others; apart from the piano the performers make use of a scarf. However, he doesn't provide them with the actual music to play and in some scenes there is not any performed music at all.

The text doesn't exist in the conventional form that serves a specific narrative. It is mostly a fragmented, disparate and non-specific sonic material: phonemes uttered with a gagged mouth (scene 7), a variety of vowels (scene 3), meaningless syllables (scene 2: tsak – klik – klak – kla – tsi – pto – kia – kia), unspecified military commands (scene 10), or totally indeterminate improvised text (as in scene 14 where the instruction to the baritone by the composer is as follows: “improvise (using the full scale of your potential)”). For the music the composer uses two contiguous techniques: firstly indeterminacy, when he indicates only some of the musical parameters (for example, in scene 2 he indicates the dynamics, the articulation and to a certain degree the rhythm) and, secondly, improvisation (for example, in scene 14 as already mentioned above).

Although there is no text in a conventional form, there is a narrative built around the basic idea that the baritone and the pianist come into confrontation. This confron-

2 All translations from French and Greek to English are my own.

3 In this paper I use the term “scenes” in order to refer to the consecutive sections of the score.

VALIA CHRISTOPOULOU

A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE AND INTERNATIONAL THREADS TO POSTMODERNISM...

tation starts at scene 5. In scene 4 the scarf is on the keys. The baritone sings held notes pianissimo. The pianist tries to “catch” the notes of the baritone, but fails, because of the scarf hiding the keys. In the next scene (5) the composer writes: “the baritone is having fun with the difficulties of the pianist. He changes his notes faster and faster. He makes the notes shorter and surprises the poor pianist. This increases until the pianist is having a crisis and plays with his fists anywhere. He makes the scarf fall”. In the rest of the piece there are several conflicts between the singer and the pianist, or else points of tension alternating with more relaxed actions. All this adds up to the climax of the two final scenes, where the pianist strangles the singer (scene 15) and kills a spectator with a revolver (in scene 16, the final scene).

This macabre ending lends the whole work a tragic quality. However, there is an element of wild humor and sarcasm which is equally significant and is found throughout the piece. For example, in scene 7, a parody of pianistic virtuosity overlaps with the vocal manipulations of the gagged baritone. The instructions read as follows: “the pianist [after having gagged the singer with a scarf] is able to demonstrate at last his qualities. He improvises in a slow and pompous way. He goes from piano to subito forte and the other way round from chords to skillful arpeggios etc. in a pompous delirium of self-satisfaction ...”. In the next scene, the baritone ties the hands of the pianist with the scarf. They play a march (the pianist with clusters), which “becomes more and more fascist”. It ends with the baritone screaming military orders, marching on the scene and taking the pianist’s seat (scenes 8-11). And it becomes ever more aggressive and grotesque when the pianist and the singer are ridiculed in scene 13 which brings to mind some of the silent movie comedies: “[...] [the baritone] chasses him [the pianist] with kicks. [The pianist] finds refuge under the piano. The baritone is left alone. He doesn’t need this asshole”. I would therefore argue that this piece could be seen as a caricature of a recital and also as a critique both of western musical culture and of the political establishment. The parody of the march in particular may be viewed not only as a critique of dictatorial regimes, but perhaps also as a critique of implicit political assumptions and notions concerning the Western art music tradition.

Many of the above-mentioned features of Kouroupos’s piece may be associated with musical postmodernism: the fragmented textual and musical material, the episodic character of the 16 consecutive scenes, a quote (for instance, the march: even though it isn’t borrowed it in fact functions as an extraneous material, a “found object”), indeterminacy, improvisation, humor and irony, as well as disdain for the distinction between “high” and “low” styles, which serve obvious political and cultural ends (the theoretical background on musical postmodernism in this paper is based mainly on Glog 2012). Finally, there are also elements of music theater, which lends itself to cultural and political critique, as opposed to the modernist work which is viewed as a unified, self-contained entity. However, all this material is embedded in a teleological closed form, culminating in a climax. As a result, although the piece questions conventional cultural codes on several levels, and does seem subversive, it finally leads to a kind of closure that makes the material seem coherent. It conveys its meaning and critique, as a truthful and spontaneous expression. Thus *Le Tricot*

Rouge fits within a postmodern context while at the same time bears some links to the modernist tradition.

Apart from identifying postmodern elements in the piece itself, I want to also consider its reception. To that end I will use Katy Romanou's critique in the newspaper *Kathimerini*. About *Le Tricot* Romanou writes:

Giorgos Kouroupos's work *Le Tricot Rouge* reminded me of Beethoven who, they say, became furious with those who were moved by his improvisations, calling them ridiculous. In our time, it is more important for music to be interesting than to invoke emotion, and this is exactly what 'Le Tricot Rouge' derides and makes ridiculous. Thus it is one of the few works that we cannot describe as ... 'interesting'! It is comic and vulgar – almost a joke. However, although it makes us laugh spontaneously, at the same time it creates an unpleasant void, because it strips naked the social function of 'interesting' music nowadays; a truthful, powerful work and, in its own way, 'not interesting' (Romanou 1976).

This critique summarizes many of the aforementioned features often associated with postmodernism: firstly, the classical - romantic (and modernist) conception of the musical Work as a closed entity versus the postmodern approach to music as an open process with no determinate result; secondly, the element of irony and the grotesque; and thirdly a critique of the rational and the cerebral in musical experience, which also signals a shift of emphasis from the technical ("interesting") achievements associated with the modernist "autonomy project" to a socially engaged art that questions conventional musical practices and exposes a lack of connection with "real life" and people.

Through the presentation of Kouroupos's work and its critical reception I have so far attempted to illustrate in aesthetic and technical terms how elements of postmodernism appeared in the Fifth Hellenic Week of Contemporary Music. However, as Jonathan D. Kramer has argued in his text titled "Nature and Origins of Postmodernism", postmodernism may also be viewed as a particular attitude. "But postmodernism taken as an attitude suggests ways listeners of today can understand music of various eras. It is in the minds of today's listeners, more than in history, that we find clues to the sources of postmodernism. It comes from the present-from ourselves-more than from the past. Music has become postmodern as we, its late twentieth-century listeners, have become postmodern" (Kramer 2002: 17). Proceeding from this suggestion I will now discuss the change in the attitude of audiences during the Fifth Week.

That change is immediately apparent if we compare the Fourth and Fifth Weeks. Giorgos Leotsakos in his critical note published in *Tá Nea* [?] newspaper attributes it to the fall of the Junta:

[The] audience is differentiated emotionally from audiences during the seven year Junta, who came in large numbers in order to support something regarded as suspicious by the oppressor: the new audiences are more sober and more critical (Leotsakos 1976).

VALIA CHRISTOPOULOU

A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE AND INTERNATIONAL THREADS TO POSTMODERNISM...

Indeed a number of works presented in the Fourth Week, as well as some of the audience reaction, were direct or indirect protests against the regime. In a chapter about the Fourth Hellenic Week of Contemporary Music in his doctoral thesis on Greek Musical Modernism, Ioannis Tsagkarakis includes a section titled *Protesting* in which he spotlights those works: Theodore Antoniou's *Protest II*, for an instrumental ensemble, baritone, actors, strobe lights, electronic synthesizer, tape and slide projectors (1971); Dimitri Dragatakis's *Zalouh*, for clarinet, trombone, tuba, piano, percussion and four narrators (1971); Giorgos Kouroupos's *Greek Song*, for a baritone and piano (1971); Yorgos Sicilianos's Fourth String Quartet (1968); and Stephanos Vassiliadis's, *The secret Songs of silence* for electronic tape [?]. Among those works *Greek song* by Kouroupos and *Protest II* by Antoniou were explicit protests against the regime. In Kouroupos's work the baritone was gagged with a scarf – an obvious denouncement of censorship, and Antoniou's work provoked the audience to a spontaneous demonstration against the regime (Tsagkarakis 2013: 166-170).

Going back to Katy Romanou's critique in *Kathimerini*, she too deals with the same question concerning the change in the audience's reactions in the Fifth Week. However she does so through a different perspective:

Hey folks, all this may be nonsense. Why don't we sing a song all together!' said [the baritone] Spyros Sakkas, the leading figure of the 4th evening of the Fifth Hellenic Week of Contemporary Music, after finishing *Mesostics II* by John Cage, clearly sensing, the audience's lukewarm reaction to this music. And this response to the subdued interest and enthusiasm of the audience, at least in the first four events of the Week I discuss here, is one of the most interesting and revealing remarks of this whole event organized by the Hellenic Association of Contemporary Music and taking place in the new beautiful concert hall of the French Institute. The ambiance [of the Fifth Hellenic Week of Contemporary Music] is infused by the quality of the end of an era and the beginning of another, a quality recalling many other borderline moments in the history of music (Romanou 1976).

Romanou then goes on to mention the basic features of the ambiance of the Fifth Week:

The absence of fanatical fans among the young people and of fanatical enemies among the older listeners. In the Fifth Week of Contemporary Music young people don't have the enthusiasm and older people don't have the scepticism they had in the previous four Weeks for anything that differs from the forms and the performance praxes of the previous centuries (Romanou 1976).

To begin with, Romanou depicts an action fairly uncommon for a classical recital in that the performer (Sakkas) addresses the listeners in an informal and iconoclastic way. Apart from that, one may discern two main points. Firstly, a more uninterested and dispassionate attitude on the part of the audience compared to the polemics of the previous Weeks. Secondly, she discusses signals pointing to a transition to a new

era. Interestingly, this change is also reflected in the reception of music critics during the same period. In the past the critics were divided into two clearly discernible and passionately held positions: broadly speaking the “conservative” and the “innovatory” camps, those who were opposed to and those who were in favor of the avant-garde in Greece. However, since the early '80s this divide doesn't seem very much in evidence anymore and the polemical character of the critique, along with an active interest in developments in musical life, seem to have receded (Christopoulou 2009: 234, 247). In this sense, the behavior of the interpreter, who transcends the traditional strict concert protocol and the disengaged behavior of the listeners, as well as the character of the public dialogue, fits well within what may be viewed as a postmodern attitude, that is, a postmodern acceptance of plural voices.

In conclusion, this paper explored how two different perspectives – a political and an aesthetic one – have affected the construction of meaning of a single musical event, namely the Fifth Hellenic Week of Contemporary Music. From a national perspective, the change in the attitude of listeners may be seen as the result of significant political changes in Greece. However, seen from an international perspective the Fifth Week emerges as an event of seminal importance underlining the transition to a postmodern era, and as such it is closely aligned to analogous developments in the rest of Europe and North America during the period under study. This second perspective is corroborated by the presentation of such works as Giorgos's Kouroupos *Le Tricot Rouge*, which introduces a postmodern material while still retaining some allegiance to more “traditional” formal processes. However, these two readings are in no way mutually exclusive but rather complementary, underscoring the range of forces at play affecting the broader developments of musical life during the last quarter of the 20th century in Greece.

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ΒΑΛΙΑ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΠΟΥΛΟΥ

ΝΑЦИОНАЛНА ПЕРСПЕКТИВА И ИНТЕРНАЦИОНАЛНЕ НИТИ
ПОСТМОДЕРНИЗМА НА ПЕТОЈ ГРЧКОЈ НЕДЕЉИ САВРЕМЕНЕ МУЗИКЕ

(РЕЗИМЕ)

Пета грчка недеља савремене музике одржана је 1976. године у Атини. Рецепција авангардних дела, која су се налазила у средишту претходних издања овог фестивала, драматично се променила — од полемичког и/или ентузијастичног става присутног у претходним издањима, до мирнијег и критичнијег става у Петој седмици. Ова значајна промена повезана је с националним политичким и идеолошким разлозима. Међутим, у ширем европском контексту ова промена може указивати и на прелазак са модернистичког на постмодернистичко схватање.

Овај рад има за циљ да истражи како две различите перспективе могу утицати на конструкцију значења тих музичких догађаја и ставља акценат на „денационализовану” перспективу, која у први план истиче директнију везу од периферије ка харизматичним центрима. С једне стране, из националне перспективе, поменута промена повезана је са војном диктатуром која је успостављена у Грчкој 1967. године, а укинута 1974. године (Leotsakos 1976). Стога су и композиције поручене од грчких композитора и њихова рецепција током Четврте недеље представљале директне или индиректне изразе протеста против диктаторског режима (Tsagkarakis 2013). С друге стране, напор грчке „прогресивне” музичке заједнице да равноправно комуницира са интернационалном авангардом довео је, најпре, до присвајања постмодерних техника у музичким делима, а затим и до прихватања и мирног сапостојања неколико трендова. Овакав став је очигледан у реакцијама публике током Пете седмице. Последично, Пета недеља се може посматрати у светлу свеопштих промена у Грчкој и Европи тога доба (Romanou 1976, Christopoulou 2009, Samson 2013). У овом контексту, овај рад ће се фокусирати и на специфична музичка дела, посебно *Le Tricot Rouge* композитора Јоргоса Коуроупоса (Giorgos Kourooupos), као и на опште ставове музичке заједнице, укључујући ту композиторе, извођаче, публику и критичаре.

Кључне речи: постмодернизам, Грчка, Пета грчка недеља савремене музике, графичке и вербалне партитуре, Гиоргос Коуроупос