

**The ‘praxis-metapraxis’ concept: towards a musical performance beyond logic by Jani Christou.**

By Varvara Gyra

In 1968 Jani Christou writes his manifesto *A credo for music*, where he explains that “decoration and aesthetics have been and are powerful negative factors in music”. In his music he doesn’t seek to be nice. In his music he seeks to provoke, to raise essential questions on human existence and to produce an artistic oeuvre that creates soul. He writes:

“The function of music is to create soul,  
by creating conditions for myth, the root of all soul.  
Where there is no soul, music creates it.  
Where there is no soul, music sustains it”.

While the composer abolishes the classical notion of aesthetics, he introduces new concepts: one of the most important ones is the concept of “transformation”. In his *Credo* he explains that he is concerned with the transformation of acoustical energies to music:

**(iii)** The points of interest in a composition are those at which these transformations take place, although the demarcation lines are never fixed.

**(ii)** Basically the meaning of music is a function of our possibility of experiencing such transformations. Music which is meaningless for one person may not only be valid for another, but can also strike him with the force of revelation (for example, a person may listen to a piece of music without being able to relate it to anything he has heard previously. He nevertheless feels that something has moved him).

According to Christou, the shock-provoking methods of 20<sup>th</sup> century music can be symptoms of the necessity for liberation from an inherited worn-out pattern of thought. Thus transformation is the mean to unfold acoustical events into multiple levels and to avoid satisfying only one’s sense of decoration.

**PRAXIS AND METAPRAXIS**

Christou asks the performer to go beyond one’s limits and he introduces the concept of praxis-metapraxis. He explains this concept:

“Any living art keeps generating an overall logic fed by a collectivity of characteristic actions. Whenever an action is performed to conform with the overall logic of the art, that action is a "praxis". But whenever an action is performed so as to go beyond the overall logic of the art, that action is a "metapraxis".”

For instance, a conductor conducting during a concert is a praxis, but if he is also required to walk, speak, scream, gesticulate, or perform any other action not strictly connected to conducting, that could be a metapraxis.

Christou uses often metapraxis procedures to express the sense of terror or panic in his compositions by using material coming from his own dreams. It is interesting to take under consideration that he was going through analysis by Jungian psychoanalysts and he used to keep detailed dream files.

As we can see in the score, the composer uses many graphic elements. For example: expression signs, faces in panic, knives to indicate a sudden stop, objects, masks-suggesting-various-psychological-attitudes, traffic signs, etc.

Let's now have a closer look to some pieces and their scores:

### EPICYCLE

*Epicycle* is a composition that encompasses the idea of an eternal repetition of history. The "repeat signs" indicate repetitive historical patterns and the newspaper symbolizes the transformation of "experiences" into "news".

As we can see on the screen, the score is striking and it contains references to what one could find in the pages of a 1968 newspaper.

In *Epicycle* there is a voluntary abdication of the role of composer, in the sense of organizer of a set of parameters within the limited stretch of conventional performance-time. Christou explains his attitude:

"The role of the composer has not been devalued simply for the sake of the surprise value of some "happening" (which quickly wears off anyway). The role of the composer has been devalued in order to allow whatever elements were available at the time, to behave as symbols of events, and certainly not as "artistic events", nor as synthesized events".

### ANAPARASTASIS III: THE PIANIST

Let's now have a look at another work: *Anaparastasis III: The Pianist* for a soloist, conductor, instrumental ensemble and tapes. It is a piece that mainly consists of sounds and gestures produced by the pianist who is trying to communicate with the piano and with the audience.

In the framework of this attempt of liberation from an inherited esthetic pattern of thought, Christou does not choose a pianist for the premiere of the piece. He chooses a Greek painter, Gregoris Semitekolo, who performs this role in a very dramatic way. The pianist does not play the piano: he laments by producing short cries, he screams while hammering the piano, he makes a desperate attempt to communicate with the audience, he is the protagonist of a terrifying situation and he finishes the piece in a state of a perplexity.

For the composition of this piece Christou introduces the concept of system-antisystem.

#### SYSTEM-ANTISYSTEM

"SYSTEM: The conductor and his team belong to a world which, although it wants to be controlled by some 'system', cannot manage to ignore the events that threaten the coherence of this system."

"ANTI-SYSTEM: On the other hand the soloist, with his activities and efforts at the end of the work to make an explanatory gesture, aims at breaking through the barrier of the coherence of the 'system', and capture a meaning beyond the 'system'."

One could take into consideration the time and the place where *The Pianist* was composed: it was composed in 1968, one year after the dictatorship that started in April 1967 in Greece. The failure of the attempt of communication with the piano and with the audience described on the score makes one think of the problematic of communication in society at this time and more precisely the social and political context.

In his text *A music of confrontation* the composer explains that he is "concerned with a music that confronts, with a music that wants to stare at the suffocating effect, even terror, of much of our every-day experience of living; with a music that does NOT seek to escape the relentlessness of the patterns in which this experience keeps unfolding. With a music that does not only attempt to escape this experience, but that seeks out its forms – and eats them up, and throws them up again, just as dreams do."

According to Christou, anybody can participate in making music, in any way: "Musicians, and non-musicians; actors, and non-actors; dancers, and plain people. Any of whom may perform some gesture, some action, or move about formally, as in some dance, or not formally, as in some life-situation. Any of whom may play musical or non-musical instruments – plain objects which are struck or stroked, or otherwise handled for their sound, or sophisticated electronic equipment processing live sound or play-back, producing calculated effects, or random effects; sounds that are musical or concrete, or that reproduce the ordinary sounds of living. Any of whom may perform within their category (praxis) – a violinist playing the violin, or beyond their category (metapraxis) – the violinist screaming."

Christou was attached to the logic and the origin of circular patterns that were based on the following pattern:

generation - growth - destruction – cessation

His very first work *Phoenix Music* (1948) is based on a "fixed idea" and is connected to the Egyptian myth of phoenix, the mythical bird that dies in flames and that is reborn from its ashes. One can also see the circular pattern in *Epicycle* 1968.

## THE LUNAR EXPERIENCE

Christou wrote a text on circularity under the title *The Lunar experience*: “For countless generations the renewal of vital processes has been experienced according to a common basic pattern of: generation - growth - destruction - cessation, repeated on and on: the pattern of renewal. In the depths of man's prehistory it was the moon's monthly performance that originally drew attention to this pattern.”

One can see the pattern of renewal in lunar imagery as: the nascent moon becoming the full moon becoming the dying moon swallowed up by dark, in regular succession, on and on. Christou comments that “it is not hard to imagine the state of alarm provoked by the spectacle of giant moon decaying into total extinction [] nor is it hard to picture what the response could have been to the moon's most spectacular performances of all: its eclipse. For early man, this was an IRREGULARITY and it could have caused much terror, even panic.”

## ANAPARASTASIS

“Anaparastasis” is a Greek term that means reactualisation, representation. It is a term that occupies an important role in the philosophy of the composer. Christou was born in Egypt and was very interested in local rituals and traditions. He was Greek and he was influenced by ancient Greek drama. He had studied ancient civilizations and religions and was very attracted by renewal rituals. He composed numerous anaparastasis that are mixed media performances combining music, theatrical performance, dance or everyday situations, and ritualizing various aspects of life.

## PROTOPERFORMANCE

Christou introduces the term “protoperformance” that provides a background for the definition of the anaparastasis concept:

“The early archetypal point of view did not know history. Instead, it looked upon everything that took place, whether processes of nature close to man, or in the environment at large; whether single activities of individual men, or the compounded activities of many men; whether the fate overtaking some single individual, or the fate overtaking the group as a whole; it looked upon all of these as repetitions of some aspect of a numinous original, an archetypal pattern - or MASTER-PATTERN, even to the point of identification.

Under such circumstances nothing had any meaning, or any proper existence, unless it could be considered as a repetition of the master-pattern, or as a component of such a pattern; of a master-pattern being and action existing both in time and in the center of every moment in time. This is certainly not what history is about. But it is what myth was about.

And it is also what rituals of renewal were about. These were PROTOPERFORMANCE - re-enactments of the original proto-pattern - the master-pattern; re-enactments in terms of corresponding mythic imagery; key-performances re-vitalising the master-pattern, when its cycle was exhausted, through forms of sacrifice, life for life, keeping it going. Because the pattern simply had to keep on renewing itself, if man and nature were to do the same.

Such rituals were vital acts of re-affirmation, of participation and identification with the master-pattern. Through these "protoperformances" man related - connected - by activating a process of feed-back between the numinous and himself; not for his own benefit only, but for the benefit of the total environment in which he lived and of which he was part."

#### ANAPARASTASIS I: THE BARITONE

*Anaparastasis I: The Baritone* is based on the opening phrase of *Oresteia* by Eschylus. The composer has transformed this phrase into a single word: "astronkatoidanykteronomigyrin" that in ancient Greek means "I keep following the movements of the stars during the night".

The baritone goes through various stades of the exploration of logos: he first uses a complex word, then an altered word, that later becomes shorter, and then is destroyed to become a strange amalgam of breaths and groans. These words express the anguish of the baritone who is the protagonist of a unique performance in a mysterious ambiance that is characteristic in the work of Christou.

Precisely, during his prayer, the baritone pronounces his text while choking and making an enormous effort, with a voice that is suddenly interrupted. Later on, he pronounces separately the words coming from the Eschylus text and he creates an ambiance of panic while the vocal ensemble participates in this terrific atmosphere by using other words suggesting panic. The singer continues on his text in panic until he repeats the first word of the beginning ("astron") solemnly. The tension diminishes progressively and he adopts a glacial attitude before reaching the state of "apallaghi" that in Greek means "liberation".

It is with this precise word, "apallaghi" (liberation), that I would like to finish my paper since it is a fundamental notion in the work of the composer. Christou tried to liberate himself of the musical heritage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and to overpass his own limits. He wanted to attribute to musical performance a role that he considered as essential: a liberating role.