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**FOUR DAYS OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ATHENS
SEPTEMBER 19-23, 1978**

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The Hellenic Association for Contemporary Music, with assistance from the National Tourist Organisation of Greece, once again organised some 'Days of Contemporary Music', which took place last year on 19, 20, 22 and 23 September in the Theatre on the Lycabettus in Athens. The music was performed by the Orchestre Philharmonique de Lorraine conducted by Michel Tabachnik, who had been invited by the French Ministry of Culture to found this orchestra, based on Metz in North East France, as recently as 1975. The orchestra is funded in equal proportions by the central government, the municipality of Metz and the regional government of Lorraine. For an orchestra outside Paris to promote so much contemporary music in a tight schedule, which also includes opera and operetta, is an adventurous policy with many more or less obvious risks. This was the first opportunity I have had to follow an orchestra through four days of rehearsal and performance, and to talk to some of its members about the problems of presenting such programmes: that is, the juxtaposition of premières and classical masterworks.

To put the problem in general terms: the symphony orchestra as it exists today is essentially a 19th century phenomenon in which intonation and perfect ensemble are of the utmost importance. Good intonation is a product of both ability and practice. Thus problems arise when a fair proportion of an orchestra's repertoire involves idioms far removed from romantic music. However staunch a supporter I may be of the inclusion of such works in concert programmes, their simple juxtaposition with the romantic or lyric can strain a player's facility in ensemble. There are

at least two solutions. One may be that of, say, the London Sinfonietta: to mount mostly contemporary programmes with only the most occasional excursions into the baroque, hardly ever the romantic. The other is to alternate programmes of carefully chosen content in which the various problems are isolated. In Athens the compromise of having one classic in each programme was exacerbated by the tough schedule of four different programmes in five days, so that it would have been better to have omitted them, I felt, or included them in a separate programme.

The first concert presented two Greek works, one already well known in Western Europe. The other, the world premiere of the Symphony in One Movement (1975) by Alkis Panagiotopoulos, showed clearly the influence of Xenakis but with the addition of strange modal sections for the lower strings. Xenakis himself was present to hear the performance of his *Erikhthon* for piano and orchestra. The soloist was Claude Helffer, whose part was in many ways similar to the solo work *Evryali*, both works being based on an 'arborescence' idea, in which a line moves and branches (according to controlled chance principles) in much the same way as a bush. This is more difficult to hear in the piano writing as the line has to consist of repeated notes, as against the sustained orchestral glissandi. *Erikhthon* is a frantic, energetic work, for the listener a perpetual excitement until the last note is cut off in mid flight. An additional contemporary bonus in this concert was the inclusion of Tadeusz Baird's *Elegy for Orchestra*, under a scheme for the exchange of scores organised by the ISCM. It was short, well made and unpretentious.

On the second evening the two Greek works presented were of considerably different types. Anestis Logothetis now lives in Vienna and is well known as a composer who has developed an idiosyncratic style of graphic notation. *Dynapolis* is written on a single page, based on an architectural idea for a dynamically evolving city. The score, which calls for a large orchestra, gives detailed instructions as to the realisation and is divided in a circle into ten sections, including a central 'free' zone to which reference can be made. The conductor controls the timing: a fixed duration of twelve minutes is specified. This is not the place to discuss the problems of graphic notation, but I was surprised and gratified at the discipline combined with the experimentation of sound resource which was elicited from the orchestra. Contrasted to this was Jani Christou's *Six Songs on Poems of T. S. Eliot* (1955-57). Although performed soon after its composition in the version for voice and piano, this was the first performance of the full orchestral version. Written before Christou's move into more mystic and cataclysmic works,² this presents an almost Bergian palette: shades of the *Altenberglieder* but with many post-war innovations in orchestration. This parallel is heard, too, in the ostinati which often accompany the more extended vocal writing, here beautifully sung, especially in higher sustained lyric moments, by Alice Gabbai for whom it was written. Bartók's First Piano Concerto, with Claude Helffer again the soloist, completed the concert.

After a day's break the third concert took place in suddenly colder and wetter conditions, as the rainy season was threatening ten days too soon and unfortunately depleted the audience a little. Opening this concert was a veritable find which London heard later in the season: Anton Webern's early *Im Sommerwind*, described as an 'Idyll for large orchestra', and, written in 1904, dating from his earliest studies with Schoenberg. It is cast in the lushest Wagnerian-Mahlerian terms, but without any hint of the excessive 'post-Tristan chromaticism' of his teacher's early works. The only possible hint at things to come — it is so difficult to determine to what extent this is said in hindsight — is the use of fragments of melody passed from one instrument to another, to an even greater extent than in the works of Mahler. This was followed by a performance of Yannis A. Pappaioannou's Violin Concerto (1971) with Tatsis Apostolidis as soloist. Although finely constructed, its five movements did not appear to be very differentiated or to develop substantially what was some interesting material. Pappaioannou is one of Greece's leading composition teachers and has exerted considerable influence on the younger generation of Greek composers. The concert continued with George Couroupos' *Affrontement* (1972) for two pairs of two soloists, soprano-oboe and baritone-horn, with orchestra and tape. There were several levels of confrontation: the two pairs of

soloists (most of the time in virtual unison with closely imitated material between the two) had a sort of conversation or argument, in turn opposed to the orchestral background; finally the orchestra was 'overcome' by a tape of street and environmental noises, abandoning the platform hastily to leave the soloists to run out last. In some respects a better idea than its elaboration, but it was certainly presented with great panache by its vocal soloists, Eve Brenner and Spyros Sakkas. The concert concluded with Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite*.

The final concert of the four opened with Yannis Ioannidis' *Metaplasis A*, a short, concise work which won second prize in the 1969 Panamerican Contest. Although it finished just as I thought it was getting going, it was pleasantly unambitious, using ideas related to those of Xenakis (clouds of sounds) but without sounding imitative.

Skalkottas' works are one by one receiving belated world premieres and some degree of recognition. His First Piano Concerto was completed in 1931 at the end of his period of study with Schoenberg and bears some relation to Schoenberg's contemporary *Orchestral Variations* and his *Piano Concerto* of eleven years later. To say that the Skalkottas anticipates this later concerto is not to be entirely complimentary, as both Schoenberg's major concertos are cast in an academic mould, especially with respect to rhythmic elaboration. While sharing some of these problems, common in all fairness to much music of the interwar period with the possible exception of Varèse, the Skalkottas work came out with some memorable ideas. The solo part was tackled with obvious sensitivity by George Hadjinikos. The concert and the series concluded with Debussy's *La Mer*. Perhaps because someone was conscious that the presentation of such a French masterwork was probably an important gesture, extra rehearsal time had to be allotted to it, which in the event lifted this performance above those of the other classics.

The 'Four Days' was another valuable contribution to Greek contemporary music, for which the festival organiser, John G. Pappaioannou (not related to the composer), must be given considerable credit. Audiences were smaller than on my previous visit: a combination of colder weather and perhaps that it came at the tail end of the main Athens Festival and clashed with some elements of it. It would be true to say that the same programmes could quite easily be presented with small modifications in Metz. Indeed, combined with contemporary French orchestral music, of which very little is heard outside the exclusively 'avantgarde' festivals, some programmes of universal interest could be created.

NOTES:

¹For Simon Emmerson's review of the June 1977 'Days' see *Contact* 17 (Summer 1977), pp. 38-40. (Ed.)

²See the comments on *Anaparastasis III: The Pianist* in the above mentioned review.