

**ICMC | SMC 2014 Concert Reviews
Athens, Greece**

**Monday 16 September
Platonic Rhizomes in Computer
Music: A Tribute to the Platonic
Concept of the Mathematical
Nature of Music
20:00-21:30
Outdoor Theater, Plato Academy**

by Danielle Sofer

The satellite event at Plato's Academy brought together the music of two contemporaneously living Greek composers, Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001) and Anestis Logothetis (1921-94). In constellation with Plato's timeless ideas, the two shared a philosophical and theological curiosity, and both frequently turned to multimedia works aimed at the fusion of sight and sound towards greater, all-sensory experiences. The concert comprised one work from each composer, respectively, opening with Xenakis's *La Légende d'Eer* (1977-8) and concluding with Logothetis's *Globus* (1978). Both works deliberately appeal to a certain degree of indeterminacy, and both aspire to engage equally with visual and auditory aspects, though, *ad oculos*, neither included visual elements in this

performance.

Prior to the 8pm concert was a round table with some of the greatest minds of computer music to date. Shaded by olive trees, and flanked on either side by a 1st Century gymnasium and a sacred house from the Geometric era, the speakers, Jean-Claude Risset, John Chowning, Gerard Assayag, Marcus Novak, Agostino Di Scipio, Makis Solomos, Alan Marsden, Peter Nelson, Cort Lippe and Clarence Barlow, gathered to discuss the significance of ancient philosophy for our current age. Material chaos was staged as a metaphor for musical composition; the garden in our midst was transformed into an infinitely animated plateau of transmigrating souls; and, not least, were we reminded of Plato's enduring comment that 'music is an analogy of proportionality'.

Logothetis's **Globus** is orchestrated for 'flute or also other solo instruments with or without orchestra', leaving the performance somewhat open to interpretation. The composer wrote that the work reflects a 'less optimistic world view', one as 'equally dangerous as it is endangered'—and this danger did not elude the audience. Flutist Katrin Zenz performed alone with the electronic part, and to our amazement she also performed without a microphone stand, such that, in order to achieve balance with the

amplified electronic sounds, she was reading the printed score and playing into the microphone. Zenz's excited physical navigations complemented the ephemerality of the work's program, as inspired by 'the superimposition of two sound layers', the microscopic, chromatic meandering of the individual flute and the macroscopic undulations of continuously fragmenting global phenomena. Set outdoors, and illuminated only by spotlight and the nighttime stars, Zenz, who has previously recorded the work under the Naxos label, gave a captivating realization of Logothetis' esoteric graphic score. Though it was late in the evening after a long, eventful day, her beguiling performance was undisturbed by restless observers—outside, that is, of the ambient drone of chirping crickets.

Xenakis's monumental **La Légende d'Eer** takes its name from Plato's famous myth in the *Phaedrus*. As Socrates tells it, cicadas were once human. Utterly enchanted by the muses, they were moved to dancing and singing, and were eventually lulled into an uncontrollable state of ecstasy—*ek-stasis*, meaning to be out of place or out of body. The enraptured were so enamored with the feeling induced by the muses that they stopped eating and sleeping, and they soon perished. Given their loyalty to the muses, however, they were rewarded with a life of immortality - the only catch

being that they remain in the physical form of cicadas. Like Plato's imagined dialogue, Xenakis collapses the divide between the internal mind and the expanse of the external world. The work opens with piercing 'shooting stars', to use Xenakis' charming terminology – piercing sinusoidal sounds that gradually fragment into the instrumental sounds of the African Kundi, the Japanese *Tsuzumi*, the mouth harp and the thumb piano. Twittering insects sonically adjoin two metaphorical realms, the real and imagined, marking the boundary between rational control and unconscious thought, and the intersection between the grounded and manic. These so-to-speak worldly sounds, the insects and instruments, are counterpointed by the synthetic electronic sounds so dominantly characteristic of Xenakis's compositions. The intersection of the natural and electronic environments was, at this performance, ever more apparent, since the simulated insects were also confronted by the live interjections of those in their surrounding native habitat.

This cross-epochal exchange between fourth century BCE, the mid-twentieth century, and the year 2014, reduced the temporal gap between then and now to almost zero. Yet as it turns out, it's still possible to rain on one's parade. Though a video by Marcos Novak was due to be screened alongside Xenakis's *La Légende d'Eer*, somewhat uncharacteristically for

the Mediterranean coastal climate (but well within character for outdoor events in general), the rehearsals were greeted with a torrential downpour, leaving inadequate time to run the planned video. Fortunately, the rain stopped in time for the round table, and the concert sans video proceeded without a hitch. Perhaps it was lucky for us that the video didn't work, since this turn of events forced us to focus on the sound of Xenakis's not-so-timeless piece. *La Légende d'Eer* is definitely a product of its time, the sounds bound to the temporality in which they were conceived. And yet, this fact was of course the inescapable charm of this concert: the incomparable experience of listening to the music of our community's idolized precursors at the birthplace of Western philosophy.

Wednesday 17 September
Music for String Quartet / Music for Solo Strings
20:30-22:00
Onassis Cultural Centre, Main Hall

by Juan Parra

The evening concert on the Wednesday was devoted to works in which the interaction between strings and electronics was the main focus.

First up was Than van Nispen tot Pannerden's **NLN-live**, an application

for live non-linear and interactive music performances, which presented a component of audience participation that, although not necessarily straightforward in terms of its influence on the musical result, provided an entertaining and light element to an otherwise quite conservative concert situation. A member of the audience was asked to join the ensemble onstage and play a game of *Space Invaders* that at some level seemed to determine the duration of the piece being performed. I volunteered to be the gamer, but being a child of the 1980's, my hunger for alien destruction put the game (and the rendition of the musical output) to a halt too prematurely. This motivated the call for a new volunteer, who struggled with *Space Invaders* for long enough for the piece to run a longer course.

Later in the program the notion of interactivity with a visual element was revised by Richard Hoadley's **Calder's Violin**, a piece for violin and electronics. In this particular case, the linear relationship between the visual aspect (a score being generated on the spot) and the friction with Giorgos Panagiotopoulos' attempt to "sight read" the score provoked an interesting musical result, where the structural tensions and twists were caused more by the fact of the score being generated in real time than by the actual musical challenges presented in the notation.

Other pieces of note were Takayuki Rai's **Active Figuration** for violin and computer (again performed by Giorgos Panagiotopoulos). Rai has a peculiar and distinct musical language, where the relationship between instrumental material and electronic sounds play with questioning the relational interdependence of causality and non-causality. *Active Figuration* showed a level of maturity that is rarely seen in composers dealing with computer media as their primary source of musical expression.

Giulio Colangelo's **Organismo aperto no.1** was one of several pieces performed in the concert by the Audio String Quartet. I found it to be the most convincing of the lot in the way it dealt with the exchange of statuses between instrumental and electronic media within a piece. What was created in the electronic part clearly informed the composer's decisions in the instrumental score, to such extent that the media itself seemed to be rendered irrelevant: one could just enjoy.

Friday 19 September
Music with Solo Instruments IV / Music with Harp
16:40-18:00
Onassis Cultural Centre, Upper Hall

Music for ensemble II (with The Paxos Ensemble and Guests) / Music with Voice(s), Conductor: Alexandros Diamantis
18:00-19:30
Onassis Cultural Center, Main hall

Invited Composers' Concert, with The Paxos Ensemble and Guests, Conductor: Alexandros Diamantis
20:30-22:00
Onassis Cultural Center, Main hall

by Alyssa Aska

The musical program on the evening of the Friday was extensive and diverse, with concerts containing music for ensemble and electronics; solo and electronics; video music; and fixed media. The Friday also featured the Invited Composers' Concert, where works by some of the leading composers in the field were presented. It was a rather successful evening, with great performances of well-composed pieces. Unfortunately, logistical concerns concerning the festival organisation proved to be a challenge. The concerts were booked without any time between them, and many of them started or ended late. This made it impossible for one to attend all of the concerts in their entirety. Additionally, the evening was more tightly packed with music than other nights, and the concerts seemed to be rather less attended than those of previous nights. As

Friday was the last day of the conference, this was likely due to listening fatigue. The following is a review of a few select pieces of the evening, with a particular focus on the Invited Composers' Concert.

Mark Bokowiec's **Dialogue for Cello and Prosthetic Spine** was performed at the Music for Solo Instruments III concert in the afternoon. The work consisted of accessible, yet refined and idiomatic cello writing. The melodic and harmonic components were pleasing to the ear, and the electronics blended well with the cello. The composer stated that the piece intended to emulate a dialogue between the cello and the prosthetic spine. Although the dialogic elements were not always persistent on the surface, the prosthetic added an interesting visual and dramatic element to the performance. The lack of clear dialogic correlation may be perhaps related to the specific motions that were required to move the spine. Using an interface that allows for more abrupt and specific gestural control might have highlighted the movement-sound connection and made the dialogue more superficially apparent. However, the overall interaction between electronics and live instrument was well-crafted and interesting. The prosthetic spine, developed at McGill University by Joseph Malloch and Ian Hattwick, attaches to the performer outside of their body, replicating their

actual spine. The device has an alien-like appearance; it is translucent and emits a blue glow. The theatre was darkened, which gave the spine a prominent visual focus on stage. The use of prosthetic and the concept of dialogue also touches on a subject often discussed philosophically regarding computer music, which is the attempt to unify electronics with acoustic sound. Dialogues can be seen as a human and machine analog as the human is connected to this prosthetic device. This fusion between man and machine is a very unique approach to gestural controllers, as they are often more object-like in design and function, somewhat analogous to acoustic instruments.

The performance of Juraj Kojs's **Pastoral Care** was captivating from beginning to end. The piece began with the performer, dressed completely in white martial-arts-inspired clothing, interacting with a cloth on the floor. The performer frantically searched through the cloth while the audience watched in suspense, and eventually located a small part of the fujara, a slovak shepherd flute. Once the performer had unearthed this small fragment, he immediately began to produce sound, which was processed by the composer sitting onstage. The performer continued to locate more pieces of the fujara as the piece progressed, and the sonic result therefore kept changing throughout. This also had very apparent

visual and dramatic implications; the construction of the instrument during the performance gave the work a sense of the performer's journey and discovery, an idea that was also reinforced by his dramatic reactions onstage. The electronic elements of the work were meditative and aesthetically pleasing, while also retaining an element of the dramatism that propelled the work. They appeared to be generated in real-time; however, it was unclear the extent to which the composer was affecting the electronics during the piece. It was also not directly apparent why the composer chose to be present onstage, as there didn't appear to be any visually performative elements on his part. The piece concluded as the performer constructed the flute in its entirety, then proceeded to walk offstage.

Marta Gentilucci's work, **...Tutt'ochi**, for Contralto, ensemble, and live-electronics was the winner of the "Best Student Composition" festival award, and thus a highlight piece for the evening. It ought to be expected that the performance and technical elements would be executed with near perfection; however, that wasn't the case during this conference. The stand-out work suffered from a technical error that unfortunately seemed to be far too common at this event. Due to poor organisation, many of the rehearsals were booked last minute, and technical set-ups were left with little time. Despite the hiccups, it was clear that the

instrumental writing of Gentilucci's work was exceptional, and that the vocal writing was particularly well-executed - often a challenge in contemporary music. Marta composed a vocal line that was both musically interesting and challenging, yet suited the performer's voice type perfectly. The instrumental writing was additionally clean, yet charged with energy. The instrumental lines added forward motion to the dramatic and intense vocal line. The dialogue between the instruments and the voice was well-developed and performed with precision. Even with the technical constraints, it is easy to see how this piece won the award. It would have therefore been nice to have heard ...Tutt'ochi as the composer intended.

Clarence Barlow's **Approximating Pi** initially appeared unpleasant, aurally grating, and difficult to withstand. However, there are many intricacies involved in the listening of the work that made it intriguing. Prior to the performance, we were all informed by the composer that the piece was to be extremely loud and relied on phase differences to some extent. Clarence Barlow describes in his program notes a very precise and carefully calculated method for determining frequencies and amplitudes of waveforms, and although the listener could not hear this superficially during the performance, it undoubtedly had a subtle effect on the work.

Approximating Pi was one of the more unique acousmatic works I have ever heard, and I appreciated the fact that the composer did not conform to typical compositional devices and/or forms in the work. The phase differences in the performance were initially quite fascinating; the composer told the audience beforehand to move their heads during the performance to hear them. However, after a couple of minutes this effect lost its novelty, although it was interesting. The piece was quite long for the material but likely would not have had the same effect if the duration was shorter.

Curtis Roads's contribution, **Then**, was played immediately after Barlow's, and was also a very loud and aurally present piece. The materials were quite contrasting, however, as Roads implemented many motivic and rhythmic devices. This work avoided the precise calculations used in Barlow's piece and instead explored material through more compositionally conventional means. Roads also stated in his program note that the work made use of analog tape; this was actually quite pleasant as the recorded sound had the warmth that is quite typical of analog recordings. This is a stark contrast to the previous piece, which was digital and relied on numerical processes. The composer used the contrast between some of the long textural material he generated and the

quick pulses throughout this work and this was quite effective. Roads did make use of many processes that are common in electroacoustic music, such as feedback and delay, but employed them in such a way that the sonic result was novel and interesting rather than contrived and fatigued.

With the elimination of Agostino Di Scipio's work [1], Cort Lippe's **Music for Septet and Computer** marked the only work for live instruments and electronics in the concert. This septet was therefore quite welcome as by this point in the concert one's ears were beginning to grow tired of purely acousmatic works. The performance of this work was quite solid and invigorating, and the ensemble writing really allowed this piece to shine. Lippe composed several sections for interaction with smaller subsets of the ensemble, and the dynamic of interaction and relationships between the instruments appeared to be an important element of the piece. It is also reflected in the composer's title; although it would be appropriate to title the work 'Music for Septet and live-electronics', Lippe used the word 'computer', implying that the computer was an ensemble member. The program notes also clearly stated that the work was intended to facilitate interaction between the performers and the computer in a very organic way. It was apparent to the audience that the electronics were

influenced by the performance, and that some degree of liveness and interactivity was present; however, this wasn't quite as visually or audibly obvious as the interactions between the instruments. Regardless, the electronics themselves were very well blended with the acoustic instruments, and made a positive contribution to the piece, which is not always the case with works for electronics and large ensemble.

Vocalscapes on Walt Whitman by Georgia Spiropoulos also proved to be an interesting addition to the Invited Composers' Concert. The work involved many recorded excerpts of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, which were then modified and spatialized. *Vocalscapes* was not an attempt to have the precise words of the poetry audible at the foreground in the entire piece, and instead throughout the work different excerpts were highlighted, while at times there were many voices speaking at once and none was at the foreground. Rhythmic use of the voice was used effectively, and the work had nice contrasts between rhythmic sections containing speech fragments and sections that were more text-driven. The composer did an excellent job of placing the voices in the space, and in using both space and dynamics to foreground speech when necessary. The contrast between solo and ensemble was therefore very pronounced. It was also additionally interesting to hear

a work spatialized in 6 channels after an entire concert of 8-channel works. The work was at once dramatic and light-hearted, and always engaging. It was a solid conclusion of the concert, and left the listener with slightly invigorated ears after a day of intense listening.

The concluding night of the ICMC-SMC joint conference was full of many featured works and overall presented a diverse body of music. The night could have been improved with looser programming which would have freed up some of the timing constraints and perhaps allowed more time for technical troubleshooting. Minus these limitations, the night was a successful conclusion and an excellent showcase of current electroacoustic music.

Notes

[1] Due to organisational problems that left the performers with only a short time to rehearse his work (*KOINO TOPOI*), Agostino Di Scipio withdrew his piece from the festival. See: <http://agostinodiscipio.xoom.it/adiscipi/dearfriends.pdf>