

GEORGE ZERVOS

## Nikos Skalkottas as a Greek International Composer

The title of this lecture suggests a distinction, which reflects a specific cultural state that characterizes 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe: We might as well think how strange it would sound, had we replaced the name of Skalkottas with that of a 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century German composer, since the works of Bach, Beethoven, Schumann or Wagner are both German and international, thus rendering a title such as “Beethoven – or Bach, as a German and international composer” practically obsolete.

The division between local, national and international features sprang up for the first time during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, i. e. during the romantic era, mainly in the European periphery, where the growing popular element was partly or not at all embodied. The appearance of national schools and styles in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century brings attention to the problem of co-existence of heterogeneous cultural patterns. The further we move from the centre to the periphery, where the great central-European musical tradition is weaker, the more difficult it is to maintain or create a new important elevated musical tradition. In Greece, among other countries, whose musical landscape is characterized by a) a lack of the great eras, which marked the evolution of western musical history, specifically those of the Renaissance, Baroque and Classicism, b) the subsequent identification of the beginning of the scholar cultural tradition with the advent of the romantic movement, c) the existence of a rich but monophonic and not well-tempered folk musical tradition – the situation is even grimmer. Therefore, the appearance of the first scholar polyphonic music on the Ionian Islands is not a coincidence, since the area, from both a social and a political perspective, has been under Venetian rule (1386–1797) and the first 19<sup>th</sup> century composers from the Ionian Islands have been educated, in most cases, at conservatories in Italy. In fact, they expressed themselves in Italian, since the greatest bulk of their work was dedicated to opera. We should emphasize here that the almost exclusive occupation of those composers with

the different genres of vocal music and especially opera is not a mere consequence of the cultivation of the specific medium in neighbouring Italy, but it also expresses two historic parameters of cardinal importance:

- a) Opera is the appropriate kind of music for expressing the national, cultural and social ideals of a nation's composers
- b) It is a most convenient solution for composers who come from countries, which lacked the great tradition of genres and forms of the absolute European music.

Contrary to 19<sup>th</sup> century composers, those who were born and worked during the 20<sup>th</sup> century re-discovered the different forms and genres of absolute music. In the 1950s especially, the countries of the European periphery played a crucial part in musical avant-garde movement with great names such as those of Penderecki, Ligeti, Xenakis, Christou, Logothetis etc. Therefore, what was once considered a disadvantage – the lack of a great musical tradition – often turned into an advantage, as expressed in John Cage's dictum to the remark of a well-known musicologist: "Americans, with no great musical tradition, must have a very serious problem", and he answered: "You, the Europeans, with a great musical tradition, must have a very serious problem", clearly implying that a great tradition might inhibit the development and expression of anything new. The work of all these composers, Polish, Hungarian, Greek (most of them born in the 1920s) can be described as cosmopolitan-international, where the local-national element is either completely absent or – when it is present – difficult to be traced.

Nikos Skalkottas was born in 1904. He represents the second generation of Greek composers, which includes Yiannis Konstantinidis, Antiochos Evangelatos and Leonidas Zoras (born in 1903 and 1905 respectively), who served national ideals. The first generation, the founders of the Hellenic National Music School represented by Manolis Kalomiris, Marios Varvoglis and Georgios Lampelet were born at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (in 1883, 1885 and 1875 respectively). All Greek composers born in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are more or less involved in the attempt to incorporate elements from folk tradition in the genres and styles of the western European musical tradition. As far as Skalkottas is concerned, although he has been identified with twelve-tone music (especially by the first scholars of his work, see G. G. Papaioannou), latest research shows that his involvement with the ideals of the National Music School has been much greater

than once thought. The restoration of music scripts and recent recordings have revealed a series of tonic works written mainly in the last years of his life, which redefine the composers' music idiom, ultimately broadening the boundaries and aims of his 36 Greek Dances (1931–1936), thus including him among the National Music School group as well. Of course, given the fact that Skalkottas died at the age of 45, his turn towards tonality or his approach to the ideals of the National Music School composers in his symphonic works after 1945 does not preclude his breach from atonality, since he continued to compose twelve-tone chamber music works in that same period. After all, his tonal, atonal and twelve-tone idiom is always present in the 25-year span of his career.

The differentiation in expression and the broad spectrum of styles and aesthetics, which characterize every work or group of works, constitute the features that are reinforced by Skalkottas' Greek identity. Whereas for a European composer, the only dilemma would occur between tonality and atonality or twelve-tone technique, which is expressed in a neo-classical or romantic way, for a Greek composer with a considerable participation in the Greek National School, the choices are less limited, all the more so, as there are multiple ways of approaching and incorporating the folk element in the body of western European music. Skalkottas is writing in different idioms simultaneously, but this does not mean that his work lacks development: This would be impossible for any composer, even more so for an ever-seeking composer like him<sup>1</sup>. His short life may not permit safe conclusions concerning his subsequent choices, but, by carefully examining historical evidence, we can focus with a methodological point of view on the following issues:

- A) Research on the spectrum of musical idioms and styles he used.
  - B) An attempt to chronological classification of similar works in order to outline the inner development of his work.
- 
- A) His work comprises
    - 1) Serial twelve-tone works,
    - 2) Atonal works,

---

<sup>1</sup> DEMERTZES, *Musical Language* 11–17.

- 3) Free twelve-tone works, with limited serial or non-serial twelve-tone formation,
- 4) Free tonal works, based exclusively on folk music tradition or directly inspired by it,
- 5) Tonal works in which: a) there exist no – or very limited – folk elements b) there exist folk-style melodies used in a similar manner to those of the Greek National School composers c) there exists a simple popular element rather than the original folk tradition, thus giving them a lighter character.

1. Twelve-tone works comprise a great volume of his opus, covering a period of about 20 years, from 1928 to 1949, the year of his death. During that time, Skalkottas adopts an individual twelve-tone writing style (the use of more than one series, avoiding inversions, limited use of transportation of series etc.), which he applies both to his chamber music works (such as the Sonatinas for violin and piano nos. 1–4, 1929–1935; the Trio for violin, cello and piano, 1936; the three surviving String Quartets nos. 1, 3 and 4, 1928–1940 and the Sonatina for cello and piano, 1949) and to his symphonic works (Piano Concerto no. 1, 1931; Symphonic Suite no. 1, 1935; Violin Concerto, 1937–1938; Symphonic Suite no. 2, 1944). We should stress here that many of these works diverge from Schoenberg’s “orthodox” twelve-tone method in the sense that the series used are often transformed through specific processes, thus becoming hard to recognize.

2. After 1938, Skalkottas begins to compose a series of atonal works alongside his twelve-tone ones. Like the twelve-tone works, these compositions are either chamber music works (the 32 Piano Pieces, 1940; with few exceptions, the Violin Sonata no. 2, 1940; the Sonata Concertante for Bassoon and Piano, 1943) or symphonic works (Concerto for violin, viola, winds and double basses orchestra, 1939–1940; the Double Bass Concerto, 1942).

3. This category comprises works, whose atonality is organized with the twelve-tone technique but which are not serial or at least strictly serial works (constant repetition of one or more series). In these works, series suiting specific structural, functional purposes, are either repeated sporadically, thus creating a rather twelve-tone than serial network (a great example is “The return of Ulysses”, 1942) or they appear in a free serial form serving a kind

of free serial atonality (certain passages from the fairy-tale drama “Mayday spell” are characterized by the eleven-tone series in an atonal rather than twelve-tone harmonic environment) or they never appear, in the sense that it is difficult to define whether such a twelve-tone system results from the existence of one or more series combined with each other or from a complete lack of any serial organisation (the Partita from the 32 Piano Pieces is such an example).

4. In this category, we classify the 36 Greek Dances (1931–1936). This work is a category on its own for many reasons: a) It is a systematic rather than random or chance attempt to create a complete cycle of dances based on folk tradition, which consists of three series of twelve dances each with a two-hour total running time. b) The different versions as well as a lot of revisions of them, especially during the last years of his life (and mainly in 1949) prove that these pieces were very important to Skalkottas. c) They are a perfect example – unique in newer scholarly Hellenic music – of bridging different music cultures (western homophony-polyphony and Greek monophonic musical tradition) which is achieved in a way which not only does not offend the two traditions but also, on the contrary elevates them to a higher level. d) Contrary to dances of other European composers, especially those of later romanticism, Skalkottas’s Dances are not typecast from a morphological point of view, but each one is based on its own particular morphological prototype<sup>2</sup>, dependent on each subject material. In this sense, many of these dances are, from a morphological point of view, more “revolutionary” than other apparently more complex twelve-tone or atonal works of the composer.

5. In most tonal works of Nikos Skalkottas there is an – albeit sometimes distant – echo of Greek music tradition which frequently appears disguised in kinds of modal melodies, modal harmony and rhythmic patterns which refer to Greek dances and songs. Therefore: a) Even his most westernized works such as the Piano Concertino in C (1948) contains even a few elements that remind us of the Greek musical tradition (third movement). Another important work that could fall under this category is the ballet “The maiden and the death” [“Η λυγερή και ο Χάρος”] (1938), which lacks, apart

---

<sup>2</sup> CHRISTODOULOU, 36 Greek Dances 38–40.

from the Moderato of the Introduction, the Tsamikos dance and certain points of the Waltz melody, any kind of folk character. b) In his last symphonic works, Skalkottas seems to have been trying to adopt a tonal language enriched with modal, folk-like material, not only simply in parts of the work or the scene music but on an absolute music level, a feature which characterised the works of the composers of the National School. The *Sinfonietta in B flat* (1948) and the *Classical Symphonia* (1947) echoes simultaneously the popular feeling, the popular life and in general a view of the cultural situation in Greece. A fact represented by the text which is accompanied by the score of the latter work, where the several movements of the work are described: “[...] like a folk hymnody, a chant of the past, a song of the old-times, as a folk romance, a feast of whistles, lute and folk instruments [...]”.<sup>3</sup> c) In this category we may include works, which were composed during the 1940s (mainly after 1945), especially for dance purposes. These particular compositions in comparison with similar works such as “The maiden and the death” are simpler in such compositional procedures as and on an aesthetic and stylistic level. The “Island pictures” [“Νησιώτικες εικόνες”] (at the beginning of the 1940s), “The earth and the sea of Greece” [“Η γη και η θάλασσα”] (1948) and “The sea” [“Η θάλασσα”] (1949), Skalkottas’s last orchestral work, belong to this group of works, although they show differences between themselves.

6. During the last years of his life (1945–1949), Skalkottas composes –simultaneously with his symphonic tonal works – a series of twelve-tone works (mainly for chamber music), which are characterised by the embodiment of folk-like melodies. These compositions seem to be the continuation of the *Eight Variations for piano, violin and violoncello*<sup>4</sup>, based on a Hellenic folkloric theme of 1938, where the composer uses, for the first time, a folkloric melody in a free twelve-tone environment. However, in this case, the procedure is not exactly the same: Instead of the addition of the twelve-tone environment to the folkloric melody (as it happens in the “Variations”), twelve-tone and folkloric elements are creating a unified complex without important aesthetical contradictions between the two musical languages. The *Two Little Suites for violin and piano* (1946, 1949), the *Duo for violin and*

<sup>3</sup> LEOTSAKOS, *The first Performance* 41–45.

<sup>4</sup> The original title of the composition is „8 Variationen über ein griechisches Volksthema“, 1938.

violoncello (1947) and the Concerto for two violins and orchestra (1945) are based on the above principals, some to a smaller and some to a greater degree.

B) In contrast to the classification of the used musical idioms, the delimitation between them is in most cases explicit. If we try to make a chronological classification of similar works, which are based on the same principles of composition, we will meet particular difficulties, since the total of the idioms does not appear to follow a particular evolutionary course similar to other contemporary composers as Schoenberg (tonality, atonality, dodecaphony) or Stravinsky (Russian period, neoclassicism, etc.). Because of an each time different, musical vocabulary and because of the lack of a clear linear evolution of the used idioms, the unique Skalkottian expression constitutes questions which can be answered if we take into consideration the following hypothetical question: What could a Greek composer, born in Greece in 1904 and as talented as Skalkottas really do? Although Skalkottas refers in his musical essays to the work of the Greek composers with flattering words, it appears that (at least until the 1940s) he was not willing to proceed in a way similar to the one of the first generation's composers of the National Hellenic Music School (Lavrangas, Lampelet, Kalomiris, Varvoglis) or of the newer generation (Petridis, Konstantinidis, Evagelatos).

The multiplicity of expression and the segregation in musical idioms strictly delimited between them – with certain exceptions – can be interpreted in two ways: a) The first concerns social-psychological factors and b) the second concerns the nature itself of musical material and the possibilities of expression of a composer through this historically consolidated and given material.

a) Writing tonally, he aims towards a wider (mostly Greek) audience, while adopting atonality or the twelve-tone technique, he multiplies the possibility of promotion of his work abroad, satisfying simultaneously an elite in his homeland. Since 1947 all his symphonic music (Classical Symphonia, Sinfonietta, Concertino for piano, “The sea”) is tonal, while his twelve-tone works are restricted only to chamber music. Possibly this indicates a com-

poser's effort to come out from his isolation and to communicate with a wider audience<sup>5</sup>.

b) A strict segregation of limits between the twelve-tone, atonal and tonal musical idioms, as it is expressed through his works of the period 1928–1938, corresponds to the aesthetic segregation of musical material. Skalkottas's most important tonal work, the 36 Greek Dances and the twelve-tone works, which were composed during the same period as the Dances (1931–1936), such as the First piano concerto, the First Symphonic Suite, the Sonatinas for violin and piano, the first and third String Quartets, constitute masterpieces, each one in its genre. They represent a completed, closed and self-contained world and although they do not communicate with each other, each of them is a supplement to the other.

The same composing ability of Skalkottas is channelled in two different but supplementary directions. The first concerns the continuation of major ideals of the western European musical tradition and is characterised, on a compositional level, by the continuation and the revival of the classical forms (through dodecaphony or atonality) and on an aesthetic level by the efforts of enlarging the post-expressionistic and neoclassical aesthetic experience. The second way concerns the continuation and the enlargement of the ideas of the National Hellenic Music School, which is achieved through the creation of small but original masterpieces (of advanced composing techniques, equivalent to “big-dimensioned” atonal works of that period). The aesthetic level is conditioned by a romantic spirit that, exceeding the narrow limits of national music, is addressed to a “major, superior audience”. The exclusion of every Hellenic element from the major works of absolute music recommends a fact, which implies that – up to the middle of the 1940s, where for the first time some efforts of conjunction of two different aesthetics begin to appear – Skalkottas did not believe that the construction of large scale forms with material derived directly or indirectly from Greek music tradition was possible.

With the ballet, “The maiden and the death”, Skalkottas composed for the first time a tonal work of big dimensions using a language, which can be considered as an extension of the musical idiom of the Greek Dances, where, however, the folkloric elements of music are limited to a large extent. The

---

<sup>5</sup> A similar point of view supports also DEMERTZES, *Musical Language* 13.



existence of many folk-like elements and the traditional text, on which the ballet is based on, indicates a transformation effort of the folkloric tradition into something ecumenical, exceeding the frames of the Greek Dances. This is a fact verified by the coexistence of neoclassic and romantic features, expressed in a European scholarly way. In the same year (1938) he composes the Eight variations for piano trio on a Greek folk tune: If certain elements of folkloric music in “The maiden and the death” “are upgraded” in a tonal environment, the supposed folkloric theme “is upgraded” in the Eight variations in an atonal idiom of twelve-tone structure. It is remarkable that a) Skalkottas composes his first major tonal work in the form of a ballet and not in the form of absolute music and that b) he mixes tonality and atonality using the form of variations. In the first case, the same external stimulus (content of text) helps him with the realisation of tonal expectations, while in the second type of his variations it allows him to mix two heterogeneous musical idioms.

A work of incidental music will give Skalkottas the opportunity to “experiment” again, and this time he uses a wider spectrum of musical idioms. The fairy-tale drama “Mayday spell”, as the conductor Nikos Christodoulou mentions, “constitutes a historical unique case, where these different styles are interchanged through the creativity of the composer and are here presented in one work: the non serial and freely serial atonality (with some references to the twelve-tone method of the composer), the tonality, the use of traditional folk-like music elements in a tonal and atonal environment”<sup>6</sup>. However, beyond the coexistence of tonal and atonal movements of the same work, it is important to observe that various atonal themes in certain points are becoming “tonal”. This happens either due to the diatonic modal character or to the rhythmical pattern, as it occurs f. e. in the case of the “love theme”, in which the rhythmical structure of dotted notes leads to the characteristics of a tonal melody.

As we have already pointed out, Skalkottas appears to make an important turn after the Second Symphonic Suite (1944), which becomes more noticeable during the last two years of his life, in which the stages of development can be briefly summarised with the following points:

---

<sup>6</sup> CHRISTODOULOU, Nikos Skalkottas 12–15.

1. In 1945, he writes his last twelve-tone symphonic work, the Concert for two violins and orchestra, which he does not orchestrate due to his death. This work, in relation with the previous works, is characterized by the following innovations:
  - a) For the first time a large-scale work of absolute music (the total duration is thirty-five minutes) uses (in the slow movement) a well-known rembetiko song, “Down at Arapia” (“Κάτω στην Αραπιά”), in order to construct five variations in a twelve-tone environment. What was attempted individually in 1938 with the Trio, is now accomplished as part of a three-movement concerto for two violins.
  - b) Comparing the Concert for two violins and orchestra with the Violin Concerto (1938), we realise that Skalkottas juxtaposed a kind of “tonal” serialism, with neoclassic and folkloric (last movement) elements, to the abstractive serial expressionism of the Violin Concerto.
  
2. All the chamber music works from 1945 up to his death in 1949 were composed in serial or in a free serial twelve-tone idiom and are either characterised by a) a neoclassical type of the series “tonalisation” (e. g. first part of the Sonatina for cello and piano), or by b) folkloric type “tonalisation” of the series (e. g. Little Suite for solo violin and piano no.1, 1946), or by c) the use of series in a chord construction (e. g. Sonatina for Cello and Piano, Bolero).  
 Since the series compared with those of the works of the 1930s are less abstract, presenting a high degree of “thematization” (thematic material), many of the above mentioned works are approaching the models of a simpler neoclassical “tonal” dodecaphony.
  
3. All the symphonic works which were composed after 1945, are, as we have already mentioned, are, each time in a particular way, from the simplicity of “The sea”, to the playful character of Nocturne-divertimento for xylophone and orchestra (1949), to the neoclassical tonal Piano Concertino in C (1948) and to the with Greek colour embodied Classical Symphony (1947). It is of course possible to disagree with the above definitions, which are part of an effort to describe the aesthetic character of these works, although their aesthetic intention remains unclear. On the contrary, the early composer’s view – whatever it might be – contained in the pre-1945 works, did not leave much space for ambiguous (unclear) aesthetic responses, even though the latter were never made in one direc-

tion. In older works, such as the Dances or “The maiden and the death”, the compositional processes corresponded to a particular aesthetic and reversely the aesthetic intentions were realised through conventional composed procedures. In works such as the Classical Symphony, the lack of a compact and verified historical aesthetic, the limits of which oscillate between neoclassicism, romanticism and folklorism, disorientate and press the enormous compositional abilities of Skalkottas.

The observed simplification of writing (both in twelve-tone and tonal works) and the adoption of tonality with multiple aesthetic directions during the last years of his life, was probably the starting line of a new course, but it could also be equally regarded as a parenthesis, after which Skalkottas would continue to explore the major ideas of the Second Symphonic Suite and other major works of chamber music. The aesthetic differentiation of his last tonal work was probably the result of a unification effort of all the previous aesthetic idioms in order to achieve a new musical vision. Progressively moving away from the organised (or not) atonal expressionism, neoclassicism and the romanticism of the 36 Dances during the 1930s and 40s, Skalkottas is obliged to recompose history: Abandoning atonality and twelve-tone technique, he refuses the globalised aesthetic which allows him to express himself without limits. Adopting the tonal musical idiom in his last works, not only in the Dances but also in the large-scale symphonic forms, he discovers a new style and a new aesthetic. This was a difficult attempt considering the fact that, until that period, his major works of absolute music were never realised through tonal idioms or through a language equivalent to that of the National School composers<sup>7</sup>.

The aesthetic quests of Skalkottas, as they are delineated in his last works, reflect the effort of establishing either new partial aesthetics or – more likely – an effort of unifying all the previous aesthetics into one, which would lead into a “new tonality” species, where the technical and aesthetic issues would be balanced again, giving a technical and aesthetical result equivalent to the world of the 36 Greek Dances and the Second Symphonic Suite.

---

<sup>7</sup> PSYCHOPAIDI-FRANGOU, *The National School* 54, 164 (fn. 6).

As a result, the width of the different musical idioms used by Skalkottas constitutes a unique fact, related to specific cultural situations that can be interpreted as follows:

Skalkottas as a Greek and international composer is involved in and therefore expresses himself through two different cultural-aesthetic directions.

The existing European musical circumstances (1920–1950) do not completely cover him from an aesthetic point of view, resulting in the continuous quest and change of his means of expression. It has to be noted that the Greek composer, since his student years under Schoenberg, doubted through his works the absoluteness of the Schoenbergian twelve-tone method, greatly updating the “method of composing with twelve notes” (using many series, avoiding inversions, etc.). Therefore, his return to tonality and the simplification of his musical language during his last years is probably the combination of the quest of his national identity and his critical attitude towards the European musical reality of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### *Bibliography*

- CHRISTODOULOU, 36 Greek Dances = CHRISTODOULOU, N., 36 Greek Dances, in: CD-bulletin comments, Nikos Skalkottas, 36 Greek Dances, The Return of Ulysses. BIS 2002–2003.
- CHRISTODOULOU, Nikos Skalkottas = CHRISTODOULOU, N., Nikos Skalkottas, Mayday Spell, in: CD-bulletin comments. BIS 1998–1999.
- DEMERTZES, Musical Language = DEMERTZES, K., Musical Language and Musical Originality in the Skalkottian Composition, in: CD-bulletin comments, Nikos Skalkottas, Cello Works and Piano Trios. BIS 2003.
- LEOTSAKOS, The first Performance = LEOTSAKOS, G., The first Performance of the *Classical Symphony in A* (1947) by Nikos Skalkottas and the Chronicle of a Radio Production, in: CD-bulletin comments, Greek Composers, Dimitris Mitropoulos – Nikos Skalkottas. Radio Archive of ERA 1 series 1997.
- PSYCHOPAIDI-FRANGOU, The National School = PSYCHOPAIDI-FRANGOU, O., The National School of Music. Problems of Ideology. Athens 1990.