Yorgos Sicilianos and the musical avant garde in Greece

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Abstract: Yorgos Sicilianos (1920–2005) is one of the most important figures of musical modernism in Greece. Along with Yannis A. Papaioannou he pioneered the introduction of the musical avant garde in post-50 Greece through his musical work and his institutional activities. The introduction of modernist idioms by Sicilianos and Papaionannou in the mid 50s has been regarded either as a disruptive force to the preeminence of the Greek National School or as a necessary adjustment to the 'contemporary' international developments, a difference in reception that reflected the two opposing movements, the 'conservative' and the 'progressive', which would dominate Greek musical life until the mid 70s.

This paper focuses on the several phases of the second period (1954–1981) of Sicilianos's work and aims at situating them in the context of Greek musical life, looking at factors like institutions, composers, performers, critics and the audience. On the other hand, the paper attempts to illustrate how, in the last phase of the second period of his work, the composer appropriates techniques that have been associated with postmodernism, like indeterminacy, collage, quotation and eclecticism, staying however within the framework of a modernist attitude.

Methodologically, the paper relies on documentary research and analysis, as well as on the investigation of issues of performance and reception, aesthetics and ideology.

Yorgos Sicilianos (1920–2005) is not a composer widely known internationally. In Greece he is moderately known, mainly among musicians and music-lovers. He is however a composer who had an important contribution to the transition of Greek art music after the mid 50s towards musical modernism, and to putting an end to the dominance of the Greek National Music School. Recent times in Greece have seen an increasing interest in his work, manifested with concerts, recordings, and musicological research. Sicilianos is now considered one of the most important figures of musical modernism in Greece. Starting from the mid 50s, along with Yannis Andreou Papaioannou (Chardas 2004, 14), he was a pioneer in introducing the international musical avant garde into Greece through his musical work and his institutional activities.

Sicilianos was born in Athens in 1920. He lived there for most of his life until his death in 2005. He received his basic musical education (harmony, counterpoint and fugue) in Greece, at a time when the Greek National Music School, led by Manolis Kalomiris, dominated musical life. The Greek National Music School is difficult to define musically; it can be said, however, that its ideology did not agree with musical modernism, and was even dismissive of it (Belonis 2009, 130-131). Earlier attempts to introduce modernist idioms by Dimitri Mitropoulos (who in the mid 20s composed *Ostinata in tre parti*, for violin and piano, the first Greek twelve-tone work) (Kostios 1996, 35) and by Nikos Skalkottas (who in the late 20s composed his first twelve-tone works) (Zervos 2008, 62), had been rejected and marginalized by the audience and by the critics (Kostios 1995-1996, Belonis 2008, 444, Romanou 2009, 169). Sicilianos knew Skalkottas—he even met him once to show him his music—but, at that time, he was not familiar with his work and had never listened to his music (Christopoulou 2009, 31). On the other hand, all teachers of Sicilianos in Greece, Kostas Sfakianakis (1890–1946), Marios Varvoglis (1885–1967) and Georgios Sklavos (1888–1976), were important figures of the

¹ The present paper draws on the author's unpublished PhD dissertation on Yorgos Sicilianos ([V. Christopoulou], Β. Χριστοπούλου, «Γιώργος Σισιλιάνος – Ζωή και Έργο» ["Yorgos Sicilianos – Life and Work"], (PhD diss., Athens Univeristy, 2009). References to the dissertation or to the original sources are made selectively according to the importance and originality of the provided information. Unless otherwise noted, archive material is from the personal archive of the composer.

Greek National School. In that environment, naturally, Sicilianos's works during his studies in Athens remain within a tonal framework while they are ideologically orientented towads the renewal of the National School.

In 1951 Sicilianos went to Italy to continue his studies in composition with Ildebrando Pizzetti, a conservative Italian composer and among the most venerated of his generation. He studied with Pizzetti in the Santa Cecilia Academy in Rome until 1953. During that period his aesthetic and ideological orientation remained the same as in the previous years in Athens. In a letter written in Rome in 1952 to his close friend Yannis A. Papaioannou, he talks about the need to create "an integral Greek National School [...] together with those who purely and truly care for the music of our land". Later in the same letter, Sicilianos says: "from now on I want to try consciously to find the point where Greek folk song meets with Byzantine chant [...] To find the original source from which our people created its songs, and do that without resorting to an imitative 'folklorism' à la Kalomiris" (Sicilianos 1952).

In addition to studying at Pizzetti's class, Sicilianos, along with his then fellow students and later lifelong friends Franco Donatoni and Reginald Smith Brindle, was member of an artistic circle keen on recent developments in contemporary music. Through that circle he became familiar with the music of Bela Bartok and of the composers of the Second Viennese School and he also met Luigi Dallapicolla (Christopoulou 2009, 37-38), who was the main advocate of twelve-tone music in Italy. This had a strong impact on the composer. The first work he composed after finishing his studies in Italy, Concerto for Orchestra, op. 12 (1954), is also the first work in which he used the twelve-tone method. Seen in the context of Sicilianos's oeuvre this signified an overall change of orientation towards the new music and an acknowledgment of the necessity to come to terms with recent developments and ensure a dialogue with his contemporary avant garde. The Concerto for Orchestra initiates the composer's second creative period that lasted 25 years and is characterized by searching and experimentation.

In terms of technique the Concerto for Orchestra shows the influence of the Second Viennese School and of Bela Bartok, through the use of developing variation (mainly in the 1st movement), of the twelve-tone method (mainly in the 3rd movement) and of the Bartokian 'night music' (3rd movement). The twelve-tone row is essentially built out of minor and major thirds with apparent tonal references, while the four movements of the work are written in sonata, scherzo, ABA and rondo form, respectively. As a result, to a large degree, the Concerto stays within a traditional context, even though it was the work through which Sicilianos broke the bond with the Greek National School and adopted modernistic idioms (Christopoulou 2009, 58-61).

The Concerto for Orchestra was premiered in November 1954 by the Athens State Orchestra led by Andreas Paridis. Other works by the young composer had been presented before (starting from 1948) and had been received favourably by the critics who saw in Sicilianos a promising composer who could play a leading role in the Greek art music. This favourable attitude remained unchanged when the Concerto was presented, although a couple of critics questioned the possibility of combining twelve-tone technique and recent developments in general with the need to create a 'Greek' music, either within the context of the Greek National School or according to the tenets of socialist realism (Christopoulou 2009, 62-63). However, the critics that in the years to come would become the main advocates of avant garde hailed this development as necessary for the future of Greek music: "Mr. Sicilianos with his Concerto for Orchestra, and a few days before him [Yannis A.] Papaioannou with his Symphony, convey a new message: the effort to combine Greek music with contemporary European musical expressive means. This is a difficult and uphill effort, some times even ungrateful, that constitutes nevertheless an essential demand. [...] This is an irreversible need for the new generation of our composers, who are burning with the desire of renewal" (Anoyanakis 1954).

After Rome, Sicilianos went to Paris (1953–1954) where he joined the composition class of Tony Aubin in the Conservatoire as an attendant. Paris at that time was the center of the latest

developments in serialism and that environment must have had a great influence on the young composer, even though he did not manage to enter the 'Messian circle'. His next journey was to the United States (1955-1956), where he attended the class of Walter Piston in Harvard University, of Boris Blacher in the Tanglewood Summer Festival, and of Peter Menin and Vincent Persichetti in the Julliard School. These journeys reinforced his decision to keep up with contemporary developments. In New York he met the conductor and fellow Greek Dimitri Mitropoulos, who showed interest in Sicilianos's Fisrt Symphony, op. 14 (1956) and said he would premier it with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra (Christopoulou 2009, 66-67). The première of the Symphony, which is technically quite similar to the Concerto, took place in March 1958. Critical reception was divided, but the work was unanimously seen as eclectic and in any case not as an avant garde composition (C.S.R. 1958, H.C.S. 1958, Johnson 1958, Kastendieck 1958, Lang 1958). On the contrary, upon its first performance in Greece later in the same year (November 1958) by the Athens State Orchestra led by Andreas Paridis, the First Symphony was received more or less the same way as the Concerto, i.e. as a work that keeps up with recent developments and breaks the bonds with the traditional Greek National School (Anoyanakis 1958, Arkadinos 1958, Lalaouni 1958).

That contrast in reception shows that musical circles in Greece at that time were not up to date with the developments that took place in Western Europe and in the United States. In an interview Sicilianos describes the situation of Greece upon his return in 1956 as follows:

At that time everything in Greece had fallen apart. There weren't left any commonly accepted models to which one could refer in order to work creatively. Skalkottas was still seen as the black sheep, the outcast that every 'serious' [...] person should avoid. There were only two paths left: either one would stick with a kind of academicism [...] or one would try to build his own way of musical expression, his own musical language, even if this meant that one would risk being incomprehensible to the public at large. Even though I have always believed that art is not made for its own sake but it is addressed to the fellow human being, I chose with no hesitation the way of the black sheep. However I missed people with whom to exchange my thoughts, to discuss in a calm, serious and impartial way the issues I really cared about. Fortunately, there were four persons left: my wife [...], the musicologist and critic Avra Theodoropoulou, and the composers Yannis Christou and Yannis A. Papaioannou (Fais 1992).

In those circumstances it took Sicilianos about four years to complete his next work of absolute music, the Third String Quartet, op. 15 (1961). In the meantime he received some commissions from distinguished Greek theaters and artistic companies for whom he composed four works of incidental music, with themes from ancient Greece (among them music for two tragedies produced by the Greek National Theater for the festivals of Athens and of Epidaurus). From then onwards Sicilianos would focus on the classical antiquity in his search for 'Greekness', distancing himself from the Byzantine and folk tradition. However, none of the above stage works was in the core of Sicilianos quest for his technical language. The work connected with that quest was the Third Quartet, his first entirely twelve-tone composition. The Third Quartet also brought him an international distinction, the third prize in the Liège International Quartet Competition in 1962 (Christopoulou 2009, 90). The first performance of a second version of the work (Synthesis for Orchestra, op. 21, 1962) by the Athens State Orchestra led by Andreas Paridis in November 1962 divided the critics, eliciting sharp negative criticism and at the same time strong praise -some said it was one of the greatest pages of Greek music- reflecting the intensifying conflict between the two opposing movements of that time, the 'conservative' and the 'progressive' (Anoyanakis 1962, Arkadinos 1962, Chamoudopoulos 1962, Lalaouni 1962, Leotsakos 1962, Giatras 1962, Varvoglis 1962).

Avant garde music was gaining ground in Greece since the early 60s. Prof. Katy Romanou considers the last scene of Kalomiris's opera *Konstantinos Palaiologos* (1962)—"written in an awkwardly contemporary musical language"—as a symbolic landmark for the "end of the preeminence of the National School in Greek musical life" (Romanou 2006, 231). In 1952 the United States Information Service (USIS) inaugurated a series of events to promote avant

garde music. The promotion of avant garde music became more systematic in the 60s through institutions such as the Workshop of Contemporary Music of Goethe Institute (founded by the musicologist Yannis Papaioannou and the German composer Günter Becker in 1962), the Experimental Orchestra (founded by Manos Hadjidakis in 1964) and the Hellenic Group of Contemporary Music (founded by Theodore Antoniou in 1968) (Romanou 2006, 236). In this effort, the Greek Section of the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM), founded in 1964, and the Greek Association for Contemporary Music (ESSYM), founded in 1965, played a leading role. Sicilianos was a founding member and Vice-President (1964–1968, 1965–1969, respectively) in both (Christopoulou 2009,107). These associations organized the Weeks of Contemporary Music (1966-1968, 1971, 1976), which commissioned and presented for the first time many new works. On the whole, those institutions differentiated themselves from the traditional concert institutions (such as the Athens State Orchestra) and, as a result, gathered around them a new community of composers, performers, critics and audience, among whom a passionate dialogue was created. Also, for the first time there was a sense of catching up with contemporary developments and of original and up-to-date contribution to contemporary developments (Christopoulou 2009, 108, 121-122 &153).

During this favorable period for contemporary music in Greece, Sicilianos entered a new stage in his creative life. In his Concerto for Cello and Orchestra, op. 22 (1963) he uses for the first time serial techniques, while in the Variations on Four Rythmical Patterns, op. 24, for orchestra (1963), he uses the Fibonacci series for the organization of rhythm. In Stasimon B', op. 25 (1964) on Euripedes' Iphigenia in Tauris, for mezzo soprano, womens' choir and orchestra, he combines these techniques with his interest in ancient drama. In Perspectives, op. 26, for orchestra (1965) he explores the issue of spatial treatment of sound. The common element in all these works is extensive precompositional planning which involves twelve-tone rows, and sketches on rhythm which are then invested with tones (Christopoulou 2009, 109). The Variations were premiered by the Argentine Radio Symphony Orchestra led by Andreas Paridis in Buenos Aires (May 1964) while the Stasimon B' and the Perspectives were chosen to represent Greece and were premiered in the 39th and 41st Festivals of the ISCM, in Madrid (May 1965) and in Prague (October 1967), respectively. The fisrt two, Variations and Stasimon B', were received favorably by the critics (Christopoulou 2009, 111-113). For the third, Perspectives, there is no information available. On the contrary, when Variations was presented by the Athens State Orchestra led by Andreas Paridis in Greece (January 1966) not only did they arouse the usual conflict between the two opposite sides, the 'conservative' and the 'progressive', but the 'conservative' side also expressed a very extensive, passionate and dismissive theoretical concern about the issue of new music (Drakou 1966, Giatras 1966, Kazasoglou 1966, Leotsakos 1966) which provoked the reaction of the composer through a letter published in the press (Sicilianos 1966).

In November 1967 Sicilianos completed his Fourth Quartet, op. 28, in which he expresses his anger at the coup d'état that had just established a dictatorship in Greece. In terms of technique, his inclination for precompositional planning and serial organization reached its peak with that work. The Fourth Quartet has two movements; in both Sicilianos uses the same twelve-tone row as well as the same two groups of numbers for the organization of rhythm. The form is the same in both movements, ABA, but it has a different function in each. In the first movement B has a development function, while in the second movement B is a contrasting section. In terms of form, this is the first of Sicilianos's works of absolute music in which he distances himself from traditional models. However, the consistent use of the same basic material throughout the entire work points at the 'traditional' principle of organic unity (Christopoulou 2009,146-149).

Sicilianos' next work is *Epiklesis*, op. 29 (1968) on Aeschylus' *Persians*, for narrator, mens' choir, four womens' voices and twelve performers, is the second work in which he sets an ancient Greek text. (The first was *Stasimon B'*, op. 25.) In this work his preoccupation with ancient Greek drama reaches a new stage through the use for the first time of the Erasmian

pronunciation. In his essay "In search of a lost tradition of tragic music, or Comments on the setting of an ancient tragedy fragment" he argues that "first, [with the Erasmian pronunciation] words acquire an incomparably larger vocal variety, and then, the differentiation in the length of long and short syllables, combined with the prosody of the metre of ancient Greek poetry, makes possible the serial manipulation of at least two musical parameters – rhythm and pitch" (Sicilianos 1971-1972, 213). In the same text Sicilianos talks about sonic characteristics of words which convey a meaning beyond the semantic, saying that in music that may be more important than understanding the semantics of the text (Sicilianos 1971-1972, 211-212). The use of Erasmian pronunciation, along with serialism and with the approach to texts as repositories of vocal sounds, which refers to a post-war musical approach to language (Morgan 1991, 441-445), illustrate the composers' attempt to create a field in which he could draw on ancient drama and avant garde techniques at the same time.

With his next work Sicilianos enters the third stage of his second creative period, in which, in addition to serial techniques, he incorporates freer compositional procedures. In *Episodes II*, op. 30 (1971) for mixed choir, tape and three performers he uses indeterminacy to manipulate pitch and rhythm, and in the choruses' part he uses meaningless phonemes, an element that has a common thread with the handling of the text in *Epiklesis*. In *Epitaph*, op. 31 (1971), a work that is linked to a tragic moment in the composers personal life, the death of his ten years old nephew, he combines serial organization with freer techniques, indeterminacy, use of quotations (two Byzantine hymns) and collage of heterogeneous texts (his own text, some words that his nephew said in English during his hospitalization in England, the three first verses of *Requiem* in Latin, a quote from *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and texts from two Byzantine hymns) (Sicilianos 1981).

Episodes II is not the first work in which Sicilianos used a tape. He first did that in 1965 when he wrote the stage music for Antigone by Sophocles, a piece that he did not include in his Catalog of works and that, apart from the tape, is considered lost. So, Episodes II is the first surviving work in which he used a tape (in part the same as in Antigone), which he made in one of the first Greek electronic studios of that time (Christopoulou 2009, 150, 161). In 1971-1972 he got a scholarship by the Ford foundation to travel in Europe (he went to Munich, Cologne, Paris and London) and to the United States (New York) and to get informed about the latest developments in music. During his stay in Paris he worked in the studio of the Centre International de Recherche Musicale (C.I.R.M.) where he created electronic material using sounds of instruments of Latin America and India (Christopoulou 2009, 170-172, 174). Upon his return to Greece he wrote two works in which he used that material: music for the staging of Medea by Euripides (op. 33, 1973) and Parabole, op. 34, a ballet for mixed choir (without text), piccolo, flute, two percussionists and tape. The ballet draws on the myth of Medea but only in an abstract way. The composer says in an interview that Parabole is a tale in which dream and reality are woven together in an ensemble with undefined boundaries and in which there is no 'myth' as such. While talking about that work, Sicilianos invites every single spectator to interpret the succession of the scenes in their own way according to their psychologic state and the mood of the moment (F.N.K., 1976).

The next work, Etudes Compositionnelles, op. 32, for piano (1974) summarizes a large part of Sicilianos' preoccupation with contemporary idioms. It involves precompositional planning (twelve-tone and serial techniques) as well as freer compositional procedures, prepared piano and quotations. The work consists of eight studies. In the personal archive of the composer there is also a ninth unfinished study, titled "(... pour la forme IV: Etude aléatoire)", in which Sicilianos experimented with open form. The first five studies deal with distinct parameters (rhythm, timbre, harmony, melody and dynamics), while the last three address the issue of form. In the first study, "(pour le rythme...)", rhythm is organized by means of numerical sequences that determine the values of the notes in a way that precludes the periodic appearance of strong and weak beats. The use of a twelve-tone row, as well as the rhythmical sequences, are determined in a precompositional stage. An important role is played by the

dynamics indications that suggest the limits of the asymmetrical phrases and thus help bring out the form. In the second study, "(pour le timbre...)", the composer uses broadened techniques such as prepared piano and the performer playing directly on strings. The study consists of three sections, of which the two external are atonal, while the middle section uses a twelve-tone row (the same as in the first study). In the third study, "(Pour l'harmonie...)", the use of different intervals is the basis for organising the three consecutive sections and, by extension, the form. In the first section whole tones predominate, in the second chromatic movements, and in the third, intervals of fourth, third and seventh. The fourth study, "(...et pour la melodie)", starts with no pause and is brief. The basic elements of the study are two: a pedal comprising the intervals (in vertical form) of minor or major seventh, and a melodic line consisting of 'dissonant' intervals in long values. By gradually adding further notes that are accompanied by the transition of dynamics from pp to ffff, the pedal is transformed into a cluster while the melody disappears only to appear again at the end of the study with three notes that are played pianissimo. The fifth study, "(...pour la dynamique)", uses the entire range of dynamics, from pppp with pedal una corda to ffff, and is in ABA form. The sections of the study are determined to a large extent by the organisation of the pitches. A is characterised by chromatic movements of the notes, while in B a twelve-tone series is used (the same as in the first study). The last three studies deal with form in three different ways. The sixth, "(Pour la forme I...). Thème et variations", consists of a theme and three variations. It stands out thanks to the relatively traditional treatment of the material, especially in terms of rhythm (periodic appearance of strong and weak beats) and form. The seventh study, "(...pour la forme II). Thèmes juxtaposés sériels", is organised on the basis of a twelve-tone series and, rhythmically, on the basis of the Fibonacci series. The melodic element (the horizontal dimension) and the harmonic element (the vertical dimension) come to a sort of conflict during which the one develops while the other slowly diminishes. The eighth study "(...pour la forme III). Thèmes juxtaposés libres", is characterised to a great extent by ostinatos and chromatic passages. Three borrowed melodies arise from this texture: one from Stravinsky's Petrushka, one from Messiaen's L' Ange aux parfums and the tune from the Greek march "I'm me, a speedy Evzone". The work concludes with a brief coda of continuous demisemiquavers. The mechanical rhythm is combined with a large crescendo that leads to the final climax (Christopoulou 2009, 178-208).

The experimentation on avant-garde compositional techniques is a basic feature of the second creative period of Sicilianos. This cycle is completed with four works, three of which explore the possibilities of tuba and percussion: tuba in Study, op. 35, for tuba solo (1974) and percussion, *Paysages*, op. 36, for percussion and orchestra (1975), and *Schemata*, op. 39, for six percussion players (1976). In the fourth work, *Antiphona*, op. 40, for brass, timpani and strings (1976), Sicilianos explored the movement of sound masses. In *Schemata* the composer went a step further, completing what he had started in the unfinished ninth study of *Etudes Compositionneles*. In *Schemata* he uses open form and improvisation. The fourth movement exists in two versions: the first is improvisatory and contains musical material and instructions by the composer, while the second is written out as a possible realisation of the first. The composer invites the performers to chose between the two versions, adding that he would recommend the first one (Sicilianos 1976, 17).

Antiphona were premiered by the Athens State Orchestra led by Choo Hoey in July 1976, ten years since the orchestra had last presented a work by Sicilianos employing avant-garde techniques. (In 1970 Athens State Orchestra had premiered *Eight Children's Miniatures*, op. 23a (1965), for orchestra, a work that deliberately avoids avant-garde techniques) (Christopoulou 2009, 215). As mentioned above, the premiere of *Variations on Four Rhythmical Patterns* in 1966 aroused conflict and also caused theoretical discussion about the future of new music. On the contrary, *Antiphona*, while it met with some negative reactions, it was generally received as a successful solution in keeping the right balance between the influence of contemporary developments and the need to develop a personal musical language. By that time Sicilianos was regarded as a composer that had reached a stage of maturity in his

creative life and he was recognised as one of the most important figures in the art music postwar Greece (Giatras 1976, Lavdas 1976, Romanou 1976). This change in the reception of Sicilianos's work was part of a more general change in how Greek art music was received in Greece. The differences between the various agents of musical life were not as sharp as before, while interest in contemporary Greek music and in its role in modern Greece had started declining. Greek art music had entered a more introvert period, in which issues of aesthetics, ideology and national identity did not arouse enough interest to stimulate a public dialogue.

Gradually Sicilianos moved on to the third period of his creative life and developed a apparently simpler and more melodic musical idiom, often in dialogue with traditional forms such as the sonata, the concerto and the symphony. While he tried to shape a more personal idiom, and while his works remained as elaborate as before, at the same time he distanced himself from the international avant garde and realized his need to re-approach the audience. This intention, that in an essay of his is described as "musical expression that seeks to be understood by the public at large, if possible from the first listening" (Sicilianos 1991, 7), is often considered a feature of a postmodernist attitude, as are techniques that Sicilianos used in the last stage of his second creative period, like indeterminacy, collage, quotation, open form, eclecticism and, ultimately, the positioning of the meaning in the listener (Kramer 2002, 16-17). However, the luck of detachment and irony in the handling of his material and the persistent sense of history and of a dialectical relationship with the past (Kramer 2002, 18), place Sicilianos firmly within the tradition of modernism.

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PROGRAMME NOTES

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