

A STIMULATING IDEA—ONCE TO BE REALISED

by Costis Zouliatis

Even though he remains a great stranger, Jani Christou (1926-1970) numbers among the major figures of the twentieth-century musical avant-garde. While only some in the music world are familiar with his work today, Christou moved on a greatly promising trajectory in the 1950s and 1960s, without sharing the renown and prestige accorded to the likes of Xenakis, Penderecki and Henze. His work is characterised by a rare unity and consistency, not only regarding his innovatory notation and the pioneering means he introduced to the sonic world, but also in terms of his own philosophical universe, which inspires and runs through his compositions: myth, the transcendent, the primordial, ritual, panic, hysteria... His oeuvre constitutes a kernel of contemplation and spiritual action, which could truly inspire people today in diverse ways, and not just in terms of music or even art.

Born at Heliopolis of Cairo, a sacred place as old as time, Christou was raised in Alexandria and began composing at an early age. After World War II he went to Cambridge to study philosophy at a time when Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, C. D. Broad and other great philosophers were lecturing there. As for his advanced music education, he studied composition and counterpoint with Hans F. Redlich, a prominent musicologist and scholar of Alban Berg, and orchestration with film music composer Angelo Francesco Lavagnino and Vito Frazzi. During the 1950s he travelled widely in Europe, culminating with a short period in Zurich, where, alongside his brother, Evey Christou, he was exposed to the teachings and ideas of C. G. Jung. His compositional output within this decade unveils a riveting mastery in dealing with “the modern orchestra of post-Stravinskian derivation”: *Phoenix Music, Symphony No. 1, Latin Liturgy, Six T. S. Eliot Songs, Symphony No.2.*

Christou entered the 1960s delivering explosive orchestral pieces: *Toccata for Piano & Orchestra*, where the piano is regarded rather as a percussion instrument; *Patterns & Permutations*, into which he first integrated the use of “patterns”, his own invention in terms of structural components, derived directly from a philosophical viewpoint concerning the renewal of patterns in life and nature, as well as the ritualistic mythical element in man’s understanding of patterns. And then the imposing oratorios: *Tongues of Fire*, a harrowing yet still redemptive ritual of the Pentecost; and *Mysterion*, on Ancient Egyptian texts from the Book of the Dead.

His later works stem from a radical epiphany in his approach to musical praxis. Christou abolished the conventional musical system of notes and staves, introducing his own graphic notation with symbols and signs that could indicate not only musical instructions but also gestures, movements and psychological states. The scores resemble storyboards or comic books. *The Strychnine Lady* signifies the composer’s opening up to other art forms, such as theatre and performance art, and to the integral involvement of psychological factors; a call to the primitive, to the irrational. Jung is present here; the piece incorporates a storyline borrowed from a medieval alchemical tale, as well as one of Christou’s dreams about a lady “who supplies strychnine and unusual experiences”. *Praxis* and *metaprxaxis* are introduced, thereby providing a cohesive concept that concentrates the core essence of his works. The bipolar terms, which could be interpreted as “action” and “transcendence”, also define specific actions and characteristic gestures within a work, while determining the overall frame of meaning for the work and its aims.

In the late 1960s, Christou began working intensively on a realisation of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, envisaged as a large-scale opera that would incorporate psychodramatic episodes, electronics, visual effects, instrumentalists, performers and dancers. In this spirit, he started producing a body of nearly forty *Anaparastasis* (which can be translated as “re-enactment”) pieces that *Oresteia* would embody, of which he completed only two: *I–astronkatithanikteronomighirin* and *III–The Pianist*. In the meantime, a transatlantic call brought forth another orchestral firework: *Enantiotropia*, a ferocious interpretation of Heraclitus’ play of the opposites, “a music of confrontation”.

But the ambitiously otherworldly opera was never to be completed; on his birthday, Christou was killed in a car accident. He was only 44 years old and one of the most promising and provocative composers of his generation.

The *Project Files*, on which »Once to be realised« is based, remain one of the great mysteries that the untimely loss of Jani Christou left behind. And the enigma lies not in the incomplete nature of the individual drafts, but in the substantive puzzle of deciphering their content, asserting their actual nature. A body of nearly seventy pages with 130 numbered *Projects* that were transcribed by hand, sometime in 1969—mere months before the composer's passing; all of them in textual form, varying from just one to fifteen lines, without any musical instructions to elucidate their sonic interpretation. A clear yet encoded list of draft ideas to be realised, a collation of brief, concentrated scenarios to serve rather as an index—in fact, an index without corresponding content, unable to speak for itself. Since no preliminary rough drafts or other associated sketches have survived, it seems impossible now to pronounce with some certainty what every single “project” stands for.

A meticulous reading, however, reveals that a significant part of the *Projects* had already been realised in a certain form by Christou himself (e.g. *Anaparastasis I, Epicycle*), yet some of the numbers were probably planned to be re-edited or re-presented in a different version; and some others were planned to be premiered in the months ahead (e.g. *Anaparastasis III*). Some others were just incipient scripts to be integrated later into other works (e.g. *Oresteia*, the updated version of *Epicycle*), while some were just brief reminders for the composer to complete a side task (an appendix, a paper, a tape etc.); some only suggested a non-musical event, e.g. a lecture; some prove to be subsidiary concepts belonging to a wider structure, some others shape a description of this structure which concentrates on the lesser concepts. To avoid the risk of over-interpretation, we should consider the *Projects* as Post-it notes on the composer's fridge, a to-do list of miscellaneous tasks for a fiercely busy artist.

And one should not rule out the possibility that the *Projects* amounted to a draft planning of various events to be realised on the island of Chios. There, at the bay of Kato Fana, Christou envisioned a ground-breaking international festival of contemporary music and mixed-media performances taking place annually, to which performers from all over the world, local villagers, tourists and a committed ensemble performing his works would have been invited. But this too was fated to be just another project in vain.

A stimulating idea; a term which Christou would note on his manuscripts, marking every worthy conceptual idea to be further elaborated, become a performative piece, form a philosophical paper or even give substantial meaning to an innovative musical component. *A stimulating idea*; this describes what the *Projects* could stand for today, exempt from a futile duty to decipher their content. This term also describes the spirit in which the six composers involved here have tackled these condensed, oracle-like scripts. Not as in a mission to complete what was left unfinished, but rather as in a creative struggle to assemble all the directions that an inspirational starting point could generate. That is also what maestro Rupert Huber was the first to do with two of the *Projects*, a couple of decades ago, endeavouring to give them shape from a composer's point of view.

Returning to the question of what Christou aimed for, one should point out the contradictions that seem to emerge from the composer's stance; contradictions that reveal a radical, always restless figure who “never wanted to fit in”. Someone who was preparing a large-scale opera to tour around the world, but at the same time was manifesting “a personal revolt against musical form”; someone who set out to initiate a music festival, but called all art festivals of his time “cultural hangovers”, dismissing even contemporary music festivals as “stuffy cultural experiences of certain patterns”; a genuinely unconventional artist who firmly renounced the term “musical theatre”, rejecting the interference of any director, while he crafted mesmerising patchworks of music, theatre, psychodrama and performance art.

What is witnessed in every single instantiation of his praxis—be it a musical work, a theoretical piece, a conceptual invention, or any component of his perspective of music, of art, of history, of the world—attests that Christou’s life’s work is an anguished gesture to break the barriers of every notion that restricts Man’s thought and action, to broaden the purpose and the importance of art, sometimes even by rejecting aspects of it: “The meaning of music must be enlarged. We need to break down the barriers, not just as exhibitionists.”

And so, we should deem the initial influence that comes from these stimulating ciphers as “a ritual of communication, a ritual in which not only sounds but actions as well as gestures may be used, occasionally in a seemingly disassociated manner, but always with a deeper irrational wisdom, as in dreams”.

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