
you close your eyes and your ears and all the sounds

// by nikolaos-laonikos psimikakis-chalkokondylis

you close your eyes and your ears and all the sounds

This term I had many experiences, both inside and outside the school, all of which greatly contributed to the way I approached the last item of the folio, the vocal piece.

After having discussions about the differences between handwriting music and composing directly on the computer and the advantages and disadvantages of the two methods of composition with both my teacher and Graham Fitkin (who helped organise the competition that the other composition, "*Superfluidity*", was written for), I decided to step away from the computer for a while (with respect to composing music) and start composing entirely on manuscript paper.

This, of course, had a direct effect on the way I wrote the vocal piece. It is firstly evident in the free lines, as well as the frequent time-signature changes, which take place to accommodate the entries of the vocal line (and thus emphasize the meters of the verses). In fact, whenever the soprano is not singing, the piece is (almost entirely) in 4/4, making it easier to conduct and keep together; when the soprano line comes in it disturbs this regularity, since the vocal lines were given more importance than the rest of the ensemble, thus whenever the soprano is singing, the rest of the ensemble follows the voice not the other way around. It was also a lot easier for me to invent a symbol or to write notational instructions, as well as graphic lines (especially for the cello part), all of which would have been very difficult to do on the computer, and might have made me avoid writing them due to my inability to notate them on the computer.

I wrote this piece for soprano with soprano saxophone, cello and accordion (and optional electric guitar). I chose the particular instruments due to the fact that I had such available players, and that they are all very different instruments. I have three acoustic instruments, a woodwind that is made of metal (and mainly a jazz instrument), a string non-fretted instrument with a very big range, and a keyboard/reed instrument which is like the piano apart from the fact that there is no pedal to sustain the notes, but due to the fact that it is a reed instrument you can have crescendos and diminuendos, as well as an electric fretted string instrument which is mainly used in rock/jazz ensembles (and recently in the 20th century it has found its way into contemporary classical music too, but it still is an instrument not frequently written for).

It is very interesting how, in writing this last piece, I had to go back to the very first composition of the folio for this year, the monody for solo clarinet. The reason for that is that the vocal piece deals with a singing line and accompaniment (which in the particular case also consists of lines, playing around the voice but "formed" around the cello line, as explained below).

Text:

...	<u>απλώς</u>
<i>you close your eyes yes and your ears and all the sounds look blurry and thoughts like torrents collapse and push you down rain and pull from the ground when you awake in a dream a touch brings the ebb you choose safety and return to wonder what happens when you close your eyes and your ears and all the sounds</i>	<i>Μερικές φορές, κλείνεις τα μάτια και τ'αυτιά σου και όλα γύρω σου ακούγονται θολά μα ζαφνικά παλίρροια σκέψεων κι εσύ βουλιάζεις και όταν πια δεν αγγίζεις την επιφάνεια όταν έχεις ξυπνήσει σε όνειρο ένα άγγιγμα φέρνει την άμπωτη κι εσύ, αφελής, διαλέγεις να σωθείς κι αναρωτιέσαι τι γίνεται όταν μερικές φορές, κλείνεις τα μάτια και τ'αυτιά σου.</i>

The text is based on a poem I wrote back in 2006. The original poem was written in Greek, and I really wanted to set it to music. However, the school's booklet asks us to set text in English. Since I had made my mind that I will use the particular poem, I had to translate it into English in order to use it in the piece.

However, as I translated it into English, a lot of the underlying feeling of the poem as well as some of the imagery was lost, due to bad rhythms and meters that occurred in the English words that were used in place of the Greek ones, along with some words that have a different “weight” in Greek than they do in English. Thus, the English translation of the poem was very visibly a translation of a poem in another language, and not a proper poem on its own, and also didn't reflect the original poem as accurately as I wanted it to.

Thus, since I was the one who had written the original poem, I decided to kind of re-write the poem in a context as close to the original as possible, but this time in English. The resulting poem is of course very similar to the original, but as expected there are many differences. Some of the most important ones are that the original poem is a single sentence (it starts with a capital and ends with a period) whereas the English transcription of it starts with lowercase letters and continues like that until the end, where no period exists. The Greek poem has a title (translating literally into English as “simply”), whereas the English transcription doesn't. The English transcription builds up to a climax and then resolves, while the Greek one stays motionless throughout. All these differences, and others, have contributed to how I approached the composition of the music to which I set the text.

The reason I chose to set a text of my own and not a text by another poet is because, having written the poem myself, I know the underlying ideas and structures of the poem, I know what choices I made in terms of wording and why, I know why the poem is written as it is and not in a different way. And all these things allowed me to work a lot more in-depth and write music that would be interwoven with the text very organically and naturally. Of course, it's a different kind of composition, that of setting your own text to music than that of setting someone else's text to music, and setting someone else's poem/text to music has its own beauty, in that you try to infer some of the things I mentioned above, and in doing so you show your own personality in the choices you make about understanding the poem, and how you apply those in your composition, and thus you don't necessarily present the poem/text itself with the music you compose, but your interpretation of it.

However, the reason I chose to set my own text was because I wanted to create something entirely my own (which is also one of the reasons why I decided to hand-write the whole project), and I wanted the music to co-exist with the poem so that the responsibility of interpretation falls entirely onto the performers and the listeners. In fact, the only kind of interpretation that I did was interpreting my own self when I wrote the Greek poem, so I could re-write it in English. Thus, the music and poem are both more directly communicative, and the whole creation is more open to interpretation. It would be wrong, therefore, for someone to analyse the English poem irrespectively of the music (or vice versa), as the English poem was written with setting it to music in mind, and the music was written specifically for the English poem.

The music in its total grows out of the instrumentation and the poem. More specifically, the whole ensemble is in a way mimicking what the accordion is doing in the piece after the climax. I took one element of the accordion's music (that of sustaining various notes and having other notes play around it, like in measure 41, for example), put it under a magnifying glass, and magnified it to the ensemble I had. This creates something similar to what a "fractal" would be in maths, although I would like to avoid complex mathematical terms that are irrelevant to the music. However, the only common thing between fractals and this piece is that the text presents a single moment, and the actual translation of the "moment", since time is infinite and thus indivisible, is one over infinity. Thus the notion of moment is indefinite. In the music, I've tried to set a kind of motionless, tranquil feeling (representing this "infinity" in the text), the music being more or less still. Although as the English translation has a climax it was almost impossible to not accommodate it to the music, this climax created a kind of centre around which the rest of the composition developed.

As I said above, the process of "re-writing" the poem also took place in the process of composing the music. More precisely, I wrote the music up to the 5th verse of the poem, and then I re-wrote that section of the music to write the end. After I finished re-writing the first "half" of the music (i.e. the music before the climax), I continued it to compose the climax, and then I wove it into the re-written part to finish the piece. However, in re-writing it, I turned the pages upside-down, and loosely re-wrote the music as it was, but with the instrumentation changed. My teacher had shown me this kind of "imperfect" inversion in the beginning of the year, and I really liked the simplicity and abstractness of this kind of inversion, as opposed to the complexity and rationality of a serialist inversion, for example. This act of physically inverting and copying down the music on different instruments creates many interesting musical results.

For example, when I chose to re-write the inverted music, I decided to include the electric guitar part, despite the fact that it is optional. This way, three things were achieved: firstly, there was an equal amount of staves above and below the cello line (ignoring the vocal line), thus the cello line was the only line which was actually re-written (i.e. the material on the cello in the re-writing is the same as the material on the cello in the original, but inverted) with the rest of the staves being re-written in different staves. This creates a kind of compositional helix in terms of form, as far as the instruments and their material are concerned. Secondly, when the second half of the piece (i.e. the re-written part) is played, the audience hears bits of music here and there which had definitely been played before, albeit in a different register, from a different instrument. So there are elements of rhythm, textures, contours, dynamics, that the audience has heard before, in a completely different context (with the cello providing a more clear group of material and elements that are more audibly recognised from the beginning of the piece). Lastly, because the electric guitar part is optional, if the electric guitar is playing, then there will be a group of elements that appears in the beginning, and then re-appears at the accordion's right hand, and a group of

measures 3-5 of the first system

Musical score for measures 3-5 of the first system. The staves are: Sop. Sax, El. Guitar, Cello, Acc. R.H., and Acc. L.H. The score includes handwritten annotations such as *sol D*, *mf*, *p*, and *5*. Measure numbers m.3, m.4, and m.5 are marked in green. A curved arrow points from this system towards the right.

measures 3-5 of the first system inverted

Musical score for measures 3-5 of the first system inverted. The staves are: Sop. Sax, El. Guitar, Cello, Acc. R.H., and Acc. L.H. The score includes handwritten annotations such as *mf*, *p*, *5*, and *sol D*. Measure numbers m.67 and m.68 are marked in green. A curved arrow points from this system towards the left.

instruments during "re-writing"

original instruments

measures 67-69 of the last system

Musical score for measures 67-69 of the last system. The staves are: Sop. Sax, El. Guitar, Cello, Acc. R.H., and Acc. L.H. The score includes handwritten annotations such as *sol D*, *mf*, *p*, and *5*. Measure numbers m.67, m.68, and m.69 are marked in green. A curved arrow points from this system towards the left.

elements that appears in the beginning of the accordion's right hand which reappears on the guitar part later on. However, if there is no guitar in a performance of the piece, then this will create an interesting effect to the active listener, and that is that there will be a group of elements in the beginning that didn't appear later in the piece, and also that later on in the piece there is a group of elements that has never appeared before in the piece.

This is no better demonstrated than the example I quote below with a few notes attached to it.

I tried to make it as easy as possible for the singer to sing this by “preparing” some of the notes she is about to sing through other instruments. The melodic lines came about on a series of pitches I had extracted from Samuel Adler's book on orchestration¹. I played around with those pitches on my guitar (I preferred the guitar as opposed to the piano because when I see a piano keyboard, I instantly think in terms of keys and tonal centres, while on the guitar all I can see is intervals, and thus I can get away from my unconscious trying to play around what it is familiar with, and try and do something different).

The harmony is very loosely based on the multiphonics that the saxophonist showed me he is capable of performing easily. In particular, I took some of the multiphonics and “multiplied” them, much in the way Boulez multiplied chords to set the harmony in his *Le Marteau de Sans Maitre*. I then took some of these chords and used them very freely in the piece (like in the cluster chords in the beginning of the piece, or whenever the saxophone plays the multiphonics).

Traditionally, when a poem doesn't have a title, the first line of the poem is used as its title, or the title of the song, has it been set to music. I chose to use the last line of the poem, because the last line of the poem is essentially the first line of the poem and the beginning of the second one, and it is the line that defines that whole poem as an instant (since it ends as it started).

1 Adler, Samuel. “The Study of Orchestration”, 3rd Edition, W.W. Norton & Company Inc, New York. 2002