

“ABSTRACT PROGRAMMATIC MUSIC”: PERFORMING THEODORE ANTONIOU’S PIANO WORKS

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1. Antoniou’s definition of “Abstract Programmatic Music”

Theodore Antoniou is one of the most significant and internationally acclaimed living Greek composers. Currently aged 83, he is a professor emeritus of the Boston University as well as the president of the Greek Composers’ Union. Antoniou has had a long international career as a composer, conductor, and professor.

I feel honored to be in very close collaboration with the composer himself. I often visit him in Athens, where he resides, and spend a lot of time playing his works and having discussions with him. In the presence of the composer, I made the world-première recording of his complete piano works, which has been released by *Naxos, Grand Piano* series.¹

In an attempt to best describe his music, from the beginning of the 60s, Antoniou invented the neologism “abstract programmatic music.” The term sounds contradictory, as music is normally divided between “programmatic” and “absolute” (“abstract”)—depending on whether it employs an extra-musical narrative or not. “abstract programmatic music” is not a term that can be found in any music dictionary; it is only defined verbally by the composer as follows:

Abstract Programmatic Music introduces an abstract underlying scenario, an abstract idea, which controls and defines the four traditional parameters: pitch, volume, duration and timbre. This idea could be, for instance, the possible combinations of the movement of sound in a certain space or a dialogue among people etc. The concept can be similarly illustrated by the role of a narrative in Programmatic Music. In my music, though, the extra parameter, the extra idea, is abstract.²

According to the composer, what led to his conception of abstract programmatic music is his work for the theater and Ancient Greek drama. Antoniou is a very prolific composer with an output of more than 450 works of different genres, including operas, theater music, choral works, symphonic works, concertos, chamber music, and solo instrumental pieces.³ Approximately 150 of Antoniou’s works are related to the theater. According to Antoniou:

There is always a hidden plot behind the music I compose; no matter if it is for piano solo or any other combination of instruments, theatre is always in my head.⁴

In relation to the role of the theater in Antoniou’s musical conception, Wolf-Ebenhard von Lewinski states that:

¹ For more information please visit: https://www.naxos.com/catalogue/item.asp?item_code=GP779

² Personal workshop with Theodore Antoniou, 23.6.2016

³ Theodore Antoniou, work catalogue, Philippos Nakas Music House, Athens, 2014

⁴ Personal workshop with Theodore Antoniou, 23.6.2016

Antoniou thinks automatically in dramatic categories, at the very least in the sense of an imaginary theatre. In any case, what Antoniou was writing which could be classified as ‘Absolute Music’ secretly had an underlying idea, if not a kind of plot related to the music.⁵

Antoniou does not include any published program to support a specific extra-musical narrative. This is the key difference with the established concept of program music, as introduced by Liszt. As a result, my approach is very different than in the case of pillars of piano programmatic music such as Liszt’s *Mephisto Waltz No.1* or Ravel’s *Gaspard de la Nuit*. My main research question is how Antoniou’s unique conception of abstract programmatic music is embodied in the interpretation of his piano works. I am aware that composers are not always objective about their own music, so I try to keep my critical independence.

In the current presentation I will demonstrate Antoniou’s concept of abstract programmatic music through his pieces *Syllables* and *Entrata*.

2. *Syllables* (1965): A musical utilization of properties of speech

In his definition of abstract programmatic music, Antoniou mentions an “abstract underlying idea” that is apparent in *Syllables*. The work consists of six very short pieces, each one offering a musical analogue of a verbal device.

The first piece of *Syllables* is called *Parechesis*. It is an Ancient Greek word meaning “alliteration” and indicates the frequent repetition of a specific syllable in rhetoric. In his musical text, Antoniou repeats a specific chord, which is fixed at the middle register of the piano. To me, these chords create the effect of uncontrollable screams, which repeat a particular syllable in an obsessive way. The soft chords that follow represent the reaction, a sudden gesture of thoughtfulness and introversion. (*Performance of Parechesis*)

I Parechesis (Alteration)

The musical score for 'I Parechesis (Alteration)' is presented in two systems. The first system, marked 'Adagio', contains five measures. The dynamics are *ff*, *pp*, *f*, *p*, and *m.p.*. The notes are primarily chords in the middle register. There are five 'Red.' markings below the first system. The second system contains six measures, with dynamics *p*, *pp*, *p*, *mf*, *f*, and *ff*. It includes a 'Tempo' marking at the end and four 'Red.' markings below. The piece concludes with a *p* dynamic.

Example 2.1: *Syllables*, *I Parechesis*, bars 1-11

⁵ Wolf-Eberhard von Lewinski, ‘Abstrakte Programmusik von heute: Der griechische komponist Theodore Antoniou’ [‘Abstract program music of today: The Greek composer Theodore Antoniou’], *Musica* (Germany) Vol. 9 (January-February 1973), 25

The second piece is named *Anagramme*. The “anagram” here is formed by the fact that the same pitches are rearranged in different positions, within groups of quick passages. Antoniou, not being a skilled pianist himself, writes all the notes in one staff, providing no fingerings. To achieve an efficient performance, I came up with an arrangement and re-distribution of the notes between the two hands. (*Performance of Anagramme*)

II Anagramme

The musical score for 'II Anagramme' is written in 2/4 time with a tempo marking of 'Allegro (so schnell wie möglich)'. It consists of two staves. The top staff begins with a dynamic marking of *f* and contains several groups of notes, some with fingerings 6, 7, 8, and 9. The bottom staff begins with a dynamic marking of *sf* and contains several groups of notes, some with fingerings 7, 8, and 9. Both staves feature dynamic markings of *sf* and *Red.** throughout the piece.

Example 2.2: *Syllables, II Anagramme*, opening

The third piece is titled *Paragogen* and is taken from the Greek word *Παράγωγα*, meaning “derivatives.” This piece is based on harmonics, which are “derived” from chords that precede them. The idea of abrupt gestures and screams is once more present here. (*Performance of Paragogen*)

III Paragogen

The musical score for 'III Paragogen' is written in 2/4 time with a tempo marking of 'Adagio'. It consists of two staves. The top staff begins with a dynamic marking of *ff* and contains several groups of notes, some with dynamic markings of *m.g.* and *m.d.*. The bottom staff begins with a dynamic marking of *ppp* and contains several groups of notes, some with dynamic markings of *ff* and *ppp*. Both staves feature dynamic markings of *ff* and *ppp* throughout the piece.

Example 2.3: *Syllables, III Paragogen*, opening

Next, we have *Epenthesis*, which means the addition of a sound to the body of a word. Antoniou utilizes this idea of “addition” and “alteration of sound” in his piece by adding a piece of paper on the strings, thus altering the instrument’s timbre. Antoniou’s use of this technique is reminiscent of George Crumb’s *Makrokosmos*. (*Performance of Epenthesis*)

IV Epenthesis

The musical score for 'IV Epenthesis' is written in 2/4 time with a tempo marking of 'Vivace ♩ = 180'. It consists of two staves. The top staff begins with a dynamic marking of *ff* and contains several groups of notes, some with dynamic markings of *ff* and *tr*. The bottom staff begins with a dynamic marking of *ff* and contains several groups of notes, some with dynamic markings of *ff* and *tr*. Both staves feature dynamic markings of *ff* and *tr* throughout the piece.

Example 2.4: *Syllables, IV Epenthesis*, opening

The title of the fifth piece, *Aphairesis*, means both “abstraction” and “subtraction.” The piece has a sparse texture and a meditative atmosphere. Here, I aim to bring out the theatrical sense of meditation and of a protagonist who barely produces any spoken sound. (*Performance of Aphairesis*)

V Aphäresis

Adagio

mf

1. Touch string with fingernail
2. Pluck with finger
3. Press Key silently
4. Gliss. across the strings

1. Saite mit dem Fingernagel berühren
2. mit dem Finger zupfen
3. stumm niederdrücken
4. gliss. über die Saiten

The musical score for V Aphäresis is in 2/4 time and Adagio. It features a sparse texture with a meditative atmosphere. The score includes performance instructions such as 'Touch string with fingernail', 'Pluck with finger', 'Press Key silently', and 'Gliss. across the strings'. Dynamics range from *mf* to *f*. The score is written for piano and bass staves.

Example 2.5: Syllables, V *Aphairesis*

The concluding piece is called *Synchysis*, meaning “confusion.” The title refers to the mixing of a characteristic tonal tune which appears amidst atonal motifs, which originate from the previous movements. The sense of agitation and dramatic tension is clear in *Synchysis*. It seems to describe a psychological state of inner conflict in the protagonist’s soul. (*Performance of Synchysis*)

VI Synchysis (Konfusion)

Presto ♩ = 132

The musical score for VI Synchysis (Konfusion) is in 2/4 time and Presto. It features a complex, agitated texture with a sense of inner conflict. The score includes performance instructions such as 'Touch string with fingernail', 'Pluck with finger', 'Press Key silently', and 'Gliss. across the strings'. Dynamics range from *ff* to *mp*. The score is written for piano and bass staves.

Example 2.6: Syllables, VI *Synchysis*, opening

3. The notion of abstract programmatic music expressed in *Entrata* (1983)

The notion of abstract programmatic music is revealed from a different angle in Antoniou’s *Entrata* (meaning “entrance”). I feel that the Ancient Greek myth of Prometheus is a very fitting plot to think about while performing *Entrata*, which is a very dramatic piece. In *Entrata*, Antoniou uses the main theme from his dramatic Cantata *Prometheus*, composed in the same year (1983). The theme is a lamenting hymn to Prometheus, the Titan subjected to everlasting punishment for stealing fire from the Olympian Gods and donating it to humanity. In Antoniou’s *Prometheus*, the lyrics come from the poem *Prometheus Bound* by the Ancient Greek tragic poet Aeschylus. In *Entrata*, the theme is used in a simple form and then it undergoes variations with embellishments. This gives the sense of a spoken impromptu and the imitation of the rhythm of speech. (*Performance of Entrata*, bars 75-84)

Example 3.1: *Entrata*, bars 75-84

Antoniou's dramatic piano music often reaches intense climaxes. I would like to play an example of such a characteristic climax in *Entrata*. This excerpt sounds very similar to a place in Janni Christou's work for music theater, *Prometheus Bound*, where chains are hit on Prometheus's wrists. In the case of Antoniou's *Entrata*, the metallic sound of clusters at the edges of the keyboard brings to my mind the aforementioned hitting of the chains. (*Performance of Entrata*, bars 32-36)

Example 3.2: *Entrata*, bars 31-36

As mentioned before, Antoniou often describes events in an abstract way in his music. Quoting Antoniou:

Now we are sitting and talking nicely and peacefully. But imagine what would happen if suddenly an earthquake burst out. People would run here and there in panic. A total chaos would dominate the scene. I describe this in my music.⁶

These words remind me of the following passage in *Entrata*. (*Performance of Entrata*, bars 16-18)

⁶ Personal workshop with Theodore Antoniou, 23.6.2016

Example 3.3: *Entrata*, bars 16-18

Along with the concept of abstract events, another element of abstract programmatic music is the representation of movement in space, as mentioned before. Antoniou represents the movements of dancers in his piano works quite often. *Entrata* incorporates the characteristic rhythm of 9/8 in the form of the Greek traditional *Zeibekiko* dance. The *Zeibekiko* is danced in an improvisational way, which is represented in Antoniou's texture: the left hand remains stable, like an ostinato, describing the dancer's steps. At the same time, the right hand has an improvisational

character and consists of motives of circular movements, representing the spinning of the dancer's upper body. (*Performance of Entrata, bars 47-65*)

Example 3.4: *Entrata*, bars 47-49

Example 3.5: *Entrata*, bars 63-64

The gesture of the palm hitting the keys, which is used in this excerpt (bar 64), is an imitation of a typical move in the *Zeibekiko* dance when the dancer hits the floor with his palm in despair.

My presentation concludes with my performance of Antoniou's *Entrata* in its entirety. (*Performance of Entrata*)

Thank you for your attention.

References

- Personal workshop with Theodore Antoniou, 23.6.2016
- Antoniou, Theodore. Work catalogue. Philippos Nakas Music House, Athens, 2014
- von Lewinski, Wolf-Eberhard. Abstrakte Programmusik von heute: Der griechische komponist Theodore Antoniou' ['Abstract program music of today: The Greek composer Theodore Antoniou']. *Musica* (Germany) Vol. 9 (January-February 1973), 25