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THREE DAYS OF CONTEMPORARY MUSIC, ATHENS
JUNE 7-9, 1977

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Quite unexpectedly and at very short notice, I found myself the guest of the Secretariat General for Press and Information for 'Three Days of Contemporary Music', from June 7 to 9, part of a series of 'pre-(Athens) Festival Events', the main festival running from July to September. The exemplary organisation and publicity was the responsibility of the Hellenic Association for Contemporary Music. The three concerts embodied two interwoven strands: one of nationality, Greek and German groups being presented — in fact the HACM collaborated with the Athens Goethe Institute in the preparation of programmes and organisation partly in celebration of the latter's 25th anniversary; the other the relation of acoustic and electro-acoustic musics.

The brunt of the technical production was shouldered by the Gunther Becker Live Electronic Music Ensemble from Düsseldorf. Professor Becker worked for many years in Greece and has developed an obvious special feeling for the country and its people; he has for some years now directed the electronic music teaching at the Robert Schumann Institute in Düsseldorf. The Ensemble consisted of seven performers on this occasion, from several nationalities and consisting of both professional players and advanced students: Nikos Athinaios (keyboards), Francisco Estevez and Raimund Jülich (synthesizers), Albert Gohlke (cello), Karl-Josef Kels (percussion), Michelle Lee (flute) and Emilio Mendoza

(guitar). They were accompanied by two technicians who also effectively performed the synthesizers: Michael Feller and Hans Shlosser. The long apprentice-style training common in many areas of German higher education, which allows for many changes of university or institute over a period of as much as six years for a first degree, means that the transition from student to professional performer can be much smoother. On the other hand, the absence of grants, forcing students to work throughout this period, will be disruptive if employment within the music profession is not available for short periods (as now — even in Germany!). The Ensemble were joined by Greek soloists, the Athens College Children's Choir and four conductors.

The concerts all took place in the Herodus Atticus Theatre which seats about five thousand people and has been in use since ancient times, sitting just under the Acropolis. The acoustics are, I am told, not so good as at the more famous theatre at Epidaurus, and the four-channel works might just as well have been remixed to two, as the four speaker groups were spread across the stage and not around the auditorium. The theatre is the focal point of the Athens Festival and of the Hellenic Weeks of Contemporary Music of which there have now been five. Last year it was the setting for the Xenakis Week, the composer's tumultuous welcome back to his homeland, during which nearly every one of his works was performed to completely packed houses. Perhaps there was a hint of disappointment that other Greek composers did not have quite this pulling power: the 'three Days' averaged about half full, a mere 2,500 people for concerts of contemporary and electronic music (And very few left in the interval).

The Becker Ensemble had at its disposal a considerable amount of equipment: six EMS synthesizers (VCS3 or AKS), two ARP 2600s, two ARP Odysseys (with keyboard), various keyboards and sequencers (ARP and EMS), three TEAC four-track tape decks and at least three Revoxes, as well, of course, as mixing and amplification equipment. The technicians and performers had to combat the heat (the machinery just is not built for 90 degrees or more!) and the usually badly expressed demands of the composer in his score. Nonetheless few composers seemed to use this array to anything near its full potential.

The very first piece performed turned out to be one of the most interesting of those compositions involving tape: and significantly it was by one of the German composers who wasn't a member of the Ensemble. Johannes Fritsch's *Run-Tits-75-77* combines a pre-recorded tape with synthesizer sounds. The ARP 2600 includes an 'envelope follower', this outputs a voltage proportional to the amplitude (loudness) of any input signal. In this case the pre-recorded tape is both heard over loudspeakers and is 'followed' in the synthesizer, this device then controls 'live' other generators in the machine which therefore accompanies the tape. In much tape music one must be wary of too extensive a use of purely electronic, periodic waves, intrinsically less interesting than concrete materials electronically manipulated. In the search to make purely electronic sources more varied, voltage control has produced some possibilities after an initial phase of cliché so easily produced on, say, the VCS3 synthesizer. Fritsch's piece, some of which was computer synthesized on a PDP11 at San Diego and remixed in the Feedback Studio in Cologne, has a terrific vitality, due to its fast changing densities and timbres: a tangled web of jungle-like magnitude with a remote predecessor in Stockhausen's *Hymnen*. The only other work by a German non-member was also in the first concert and also a tape, but of a much more limited scope: Klaus Hashagen's *Rotation for Synthetic Sounds*, apparently using some simple voltage control techniques and elementary sequencer programming. Unlike the Fritsch work it fell into all the traps of boring predictability. A simple rhythm is phased with itself while various timbre changes are heard. 'The filters,' the composer explains, 'are also an important part of the composition. The gradual opening and closing of the filters of a synthesizer is linked with the control by a keyboard with a low frequency oscillator. The result is a continuous change of timbre.' Such notes are at best irrelevant (for a good composition), at worst explain ironically the banality and triteness of the ensuing piece.

Sandwiched between these two works was a live electronic work, *Crisis* by the Greek member of the Becker group, Nikos Athinaios, for piano and electronic modulation. Here there appeared to be insufficient integration of the modulated sound with the structural aspects of the composition, resulting in a colouristic mess, made worse by the use of complex modulation of the piano (i.e. with square waves etc.) the products of which were noisy and unclear and meshed very badly with the live sound. Two other Greek works in the concert, Michael Grigoriou's *Piano Quintet* and Dimitris Terzakis's *Sonata in C*, looked in very different ways at aspects of the 'new tonality'. Grigoriou uses a collage of tonal (or, more accurately, consonant) passages with those the composer describes as 'more abstract,' i.e. presumably atonal or dissonant. But this equation, now quite common in discussion of contemporary music, is very dubious. 'Tonality' is as abstract a phenomenon as any 'atonality'. Nevertheless the seams of the collage were well concealed in this polished work.

The most impressive work in the first concert was the last item, Jani Christou's *Anaparastasis 3: The Pianist*. We have heard more of Christou's work here than that of most other Greek composers due largely to the English Bach Festival. He was killed tragically young in a car accident in 1970. Having a voracious appetite for multiple projects, he left so much unfinished: for instance,

fragments of a score of *The Oresteia* which was to completely integrate the text with a tape, but also the ambitious plan always referred to simply as *The Project*. At one level this involved the creation of a huge arts complex on one of the Greek islands, incorporating workshops, halls, hotels and open air theatres, as well as provisions for street theatre, all of which had been arranged to some degree of detail at the time of his death, but remain unrealised to this day. At another level, the composer had planned in outline a series of 130 works, which can loosely be described as multi-media, for performance in such ideal circumstances. Only four, however, are performable. 'Anaparastasis' means 'recreation', and the scores are relatively open. About them John G. Papaioannou has written 'In these works, not only a new form of collaboration between the Arts is achieved, but also a new form of communication with the public e.g. performances in streets in open nature etc.' I hope that such ideas really do generate the actual performances promised: the enthusiasm and energy is undoubtedly available in Greece both in audiences and among performers. This particular score concerns, to summarise in terms that sound trite where the music does not, the agony of a pianist attempting to relate to his instrument, to overcome some kind of agony at being confronted with apparently insurmountable obstacles to performance. Scored for actor, instruments, vocal group, tapes and lights, the dramatic line is simple, steadily building to a terrifying climax. There are four levels of activity: an electronic tape continuum, increasing in density as the three stereo layers are added; the amplified instrumental parts, acting as punctuation and nervous twittering; the vocal group (a large number of children and students) whose crude gut reactions, from quiet whisperings to screams, are at the core of the drama; and the actor ('The Pianist') himself, played by a painter friend of the composer, Gregory Semitecolo, almost silent yet communicating through the density of the sounds. True, such theatre works date slightly (this piece was written between 1968 and 69) and may have a special appeal in Greece. It took at least three days to penetrate through to me why Greek composers and audiences alike were so at home with crowd sounds: they've had them for thousands of years! The vocal group was both inside and outside the drama, and the basic idea of 'hubris', as the pianist appeared to fall before the gods' anger at his egotistical pride, gave the work an added associative dimension.

Day two reversed the emphasis of the first concert and contained works by composers in the Becker Ensemble. Two works featured the (English) flautist Michelle Lee: Raimund Jülich's *Werkstück I* for flute and electronics and Francisco Estevez' *Phonson* for flute, guitar, piano, electric organ and electronics. The former was the more successful of the two, but still suffered from a failure to

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integrate the live and the modulated sound and to produce a coherent form. The latter piece is built from periodic rhythms percussively produced on the instruments and by the instruments and other sources on tape. Here too, I thought there was a complete failure to integrate instrument with instrument, and instruments with tape, and to make the whole something more than just a series of non-evolving sections: it had none of the interest of other types of repetitive music where this is a structural principle.

Two Greek works shared the first half with these: Michael Adamis's *Paramythi* for four-track tape, clarinet, violin, cello, percussion, reciter and live electronics and Nikos Mamangakis's *Music for Piano and Small Orchestra*. With the exception of the Christou, which, incidentally, he had conducted the previous night, Adamis's composition was the first Greek work to show any real degree of integration of instrumental and electronic sounds. The recitation, however, dominated the work, which the composer described as being concerned with 'a projected journey, beyond myth, along the fundamental ideas of Freedom, Creation, Love' from the story Jonathan Livingstone *Seagull* by Richard Bach. The Mamangakis work, which had opened the concert, exists in several versions. The solo piano part, written first, may be accompanied by a small ensemble (leaders of the orchestral sections) or by a larger orchestra, with a children's choir as an optional extra in the last section, which this performance omitted. This was a very fluid work, full of invention and life; the complex piano part was played by John G. Papaioannou, who is also Secretary General of the HACM and a leading musicologist.

Becker's own *Odyssee 77*, a very substantial film/tape work, filled the second half. He has used two new EMS gadgets in its making: the video synthesizer 'Spectron' (similar in some principles to other EMS systems, with shape generators, colour controls etc.) and the 'Vocoder', analysis/synthesis device (which can superimpose recognisable speech patterns on any source material — from noise or other electronic waves to a full orchestra — by first analysing a vocal input into 22 frequency bands, each of which is 'envelope followed', and produces a control voltage which is then used to control the 'material'). Much credit should go to Becker for avoiding the almost inevitable clichés which such a device might create in his manipulation of some of some of Homer's text, to which he adds some live synthesizer sound. Although I understand the film and tape were not properly co-ordinated in this performance, I must admit that the film caught my imagination to a greater extent.

The final concert consisted entirely of works by Greek composers, with the Becker Ensemble and Greek soloists performing. Haris Xanthoudakis's *ViolonCelloStimmen* for cello, percussion, synthesizer and three four-track tape decks did, I believe, have technical problems both in rehearsal and performance, but the extensive equipment required, amounting to a complex four-channel tape delay system, produced results far less impressive than the layout suggested. This may be a confusion between criticising technical failure and poor composition. Vangelis Katsoulis's " " op.20, for instruments, tapes and electronics is an extension of two older tape works. The instruments have an almost accompanying function and add very little material of substance, concluding with a simple instrumental duo. Yannis Vlachopoulos's *Adiexodos* ('Impasse') for piano, two percussionists, tape, contact microphones and four synthesizers was the only Greek work apart from the Christou to have been performed abroad, at the ISCM meeting in Bonn earlier this year.¹ Here again the proliferation of technical means has not led to any greater expressive content. The most substantial work in this last concert was Stephanos Vassiliadis's *Aima* ('Blood'), a second version for tapes, chorus, dancers, films and lights. This work had no formal start or finish, beginning with a quiet tape drone during the interval and ending after the last member of the audience had left. This is a collaborative work with the visual artist Thanassis Rentzis. Vassiliadis founded and still directs the Athens College Children's Choir and was a personal friend of and collaborator with Christou in his last years. This work does owe something to the *Anaparastasis* series in its use of mixed and integrated media. It is a vast collage — too long in its central section — using the word 'blood' in many context and languages, spoken by people whose ages range from two to over 90. The dancers stage various interaction rites, mostly pretty aggressive. The tape again acts as a matrix, sometimes at the forefront sometimes in an accompanying manner, against which the action (moving from stage to audience) occurs. The children come on slowly playing recorders and drone instruments (small bells and rattles), and as the work moves to a conclusion they flow out into the audience. The many ramifications of the composer's meanings can immediately be felt.

In conclusion, then, this was a festival which demonstrated the great vitality of Greek composers and audiences. The HACM, incidentally, runs an open studio in Athens, in which, for a very small fee, any composer may work with the Synthi 100 and associated equipment. The Becker Ensemble deserves credit for its technical expertise, but showed too that extensive equipment does not necessarily make for good composition. But perhaps I speak too soon: as the recent '28 German Composers' exhibition run by the Goethe Institute in London in June clearly showed, the musical strength of Germany — indeed that of any country — is almost inevitably built on a foundation of great activity, much of which may not be of a high standard. Is there such a foundation in this country? Suffice it to say that such a festival along the lines of the 'Three

Days of Contemporary Music' — to be held at, say, the open air theatre in Regents Park — is a dream to contemplate seriously.²

NOTES:

¹Hugh Davies will discuss some aspects of the 1977 ISCM Festival from his personal viewpoint as a participating composer in the next issue of *Contact*.

²For a previous review of contemporary Greek music in this journal, see David Jones, 'Greek Month in London, November 1975', *Contact* 13 (Spring 1976), pp.36-37, which also discusses some recordings, including electronic music.