

Béla Bartók and Nikos Skalkottas

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Before speaking about similarities between Béla Bartók's and Nikos Skalkottas' music, here is some helpful information on this Greek composer and on the situation in Greece during his life and during the first stages of his work's revival and evaluation.

Nikos Skalkottas was born in 1904 in a small town north of Athens where he was taught the violin by an uncle. In 1914 he entered the unique –at the time– and recently founded music conservatory in Greece, the Conservatory of Athens. He graduated in 1920 with the highest distinctions.¹ A scholarship offered him the possibility to continue his violin studies in the Berliner Musikhochschule with Willy Hess. He enrolled in this class from 1921 to 1924, but being strongly inclined to composition, he took lessons with Philip Jarnach and Kurt Weill (1923- 1926) and in October 1927 he was accepted in Schoenberg's Meisterschule of the Akademie der Künste, where he was enrolled until September 1930,² but was in contact with Schoenberg and his class beyond this date.

Though successful as a young composer, his works being often performed in contemporary music concerts and well accepted, he faced serious economic problems. In August of 1930 Skalkottas came to Athens where he stayed five months trying to find another scholarship. He conducted in Athens his Concerto for wind instruments and attended performances of some of his chamber works.³ He returned to Berlin with no scholarship and with very bitter impressions of the Athenian musical life, that were however published in the periodical *Musike Zoe* [*Musical Life*] for which he performed as a correspondent from Berlin in 1931. Skalkottas speaks about «chauvinistic criticism», about wind instruments playing a semitone below the strings, and about the impossibility of the unique at the time Athenian symphony orchestra to

¹ Dimitri Mitropoulos graduated the year before with an equally outstanding piano diploma.

² Information from <http://www.schoenberg.at/>, where the following letter is also presented: «Herrn Nikolaus Skalkottas habe ich nach vorheriger Prüfung in die mir unterstellte Meisterschule aufgenommen, und bitte um seine Zulassung zur Immatrikulation. Berlin, den 8ten November 1927, Arnold Schönberg.».

³ His Sonatinas nos 1 and 2 for violin and piano and his string quartets nos 1 and 2.

improve, because its musicians are very badly paid and have no interest in their work.⁴

It is in those articles sent from Berlin, that Skalkottas expresses his admiration for Béla Bartók. In one instance he writes about a performance of the two *Rhapsodies* for violin and orchestra: «Those two rhapsodies by Béla Bartók are folkloristic works, full with rhythm and superbly orchestrated. After Schoenberg, Bartók is without any doubt the most interesting and serious musician of our times.»⁵ In another article, commenting on Kodály's *Summer evening*, he regrets that Kodály was no more following Bartók, who «uses Hungarian folk songs with new harmonies, contemporary forms and pure artistic freshness. Maybe he [Kodály] was not able to find a way out in this direction, as did Bartók.»⁶

Though Skalkottas' criticism on Kodály is erroneous, since *Summer evening* was composed as early as 1906, it becomes obvious from his writings that he was fairly well acquainted with the music of the two Hungarian composers, but especially of Bartók. In fact, the composer Yiannis Constantinides (1903-1984), a very close friend of Skalkottas during his Berlin years, recalls a Bartók week in Berlin, in 1923, with the composer performing on the piano in some of his chamber music concerts.⁷ He also remembers having heard Bartók playing his 1st piano concerto, which might be at the first world performance of the work, given in Frankfurt in July 1, 1927.⁸ Constantinides says also that Skalkottas was playing more often the piano than the violin when he turned to composition, and that his ability with this instrument was exceptional.

1931, the year the two Skalkottas articles were published, marks a dramatic turn in his life. Schoenberg was absent from Berlin from October 1931 to May 1932;

⁴ Nikos Skalkottas, «He Musikokritike» [«Music criticism»], *Musike Zoe* [*Musical Life*], 6 (31 March 1931), pp. 124-126.

⁵ «Musike kinesis tou Berolinou» [«Musical life of Berlin»], *Musike Zoe* [*Musical Life*], 7 (30 April 1931), p. 163.

⁶ «Musike kinesis tou Berolinou» [«Musical life of Berlin»], *Musike Zoe* [*Musical Life*], 5 (28 February 1931) p. 112

⁷ He also mentioned performances of his quartets by the Waldbauer Quartet. See, Giorgos Sakallieros, *Yiannis Constantinides...*, (Unpublished PhD. dissertation. University of Athens 2005), p. 19.

⁸ Malcolm Gillies, ed., *The Bartók Companion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p.558.

Skalkottas was in constant search of work to pay for his as well as his wife's and daughter's living.⁹ Work in cinemas and night clubs was too frustrating, but also all the more difficult to find and the situation was getting really bad. Among the few opportunities to present himself as a composer in Berlin, in this period, one should mention a concert on December 15 of 1931, introduced by Curt Sachs in a radio program entitled «Griechische Stunde», in which Skalkottas accompanied on the piano the Greek singers Margarita Perra and Costas Mylonas in his own arrangements of 4 Greek songs. It seems that it was then that he conceived and started the composition of his *36 Greek Dances* for orchestra.¹⁰

In March 1933 Skalkottas came to Athens, leaving behind all his belongings, including more than 60 works, in the hope to find the means to pay for his debts in Berlin. (Eventually, his works were lost and only a few found after the war.) Political and personal conditions trapped him in Athens, where musical life was dominated by a belated National School of Romantic orientation. At his arrival, two and, later, three orchestras shared the same poorly paid musicians and the same low quality. Skalkottas worked during the day as a violinist in all three orchestras and did several other jobs, such as copying music, and transcribing Greek folk dances and songs recorded for a well organized folk music archive. At night he was composing, completing more than 60 works, including the sets of *32 Piano Pieces* and *36 Greek Folk Dances* for orchestra, counted as one work each.

When Nikos Skalkottas died in his 45th year in 1949, Greece was ravaged by a civil war that completed the destruction of the Second World War.

Still, early in the 1950s the new music created in Darmstadt etc. was fast and effectively propagated in Athens.

In 1961 a Society of Nikos Skalkottas friends was founded in Athens, that received his archive from his family and undertook to publish and study his work.

In the 1960s Athens was overflowed with avant-garde music. Serialism and all its derivatives were introduced as a new musical faith, a «must» for all composers respectful of themselves. What was important for the economic situation of the time, this was music generously supported by institutions such as Goethe Institute, United

⁹ Skalkottas married the violinist Matla Temko, of Lithuanian origin. A daughter was born in 1927. The couple divorced in 1931.

¹⁰Skalkottas was in contact with Schoenberg from May 1932 that his teacher returned, to March 1933 that he left for Athens (Schoenberg himself left in May for the USA.)

States Information Service, Ford Foundation etc. Concerts were organized, lessons were given, scholarships were granted, works were commissioned...A prosperity unprecedented in the cultural history of modern Greece!

It did not take long before serialism was transformed in Athens more than elsewhere into an academically established revolution. And I say «more than elsewhere» because this new music was easily digested by musicians with no deep roots in Western tradition.¹¹

The discovery of Skalkottas' work was well connected to this avant garde music admiration because he was a Schoenberg student and because the person who was in charge of his archive (Yannis Papaioannou), was also a leading figure in several organizations of contemporary music, such as a workshop of Contemporary Music in the Goethe Institute of Athens (1962), the Greek branch of the International Society for Contemporary Music (1964) and a Greek League of Contemporary music (1965).

The image of Nikos Skalkottas presented, was that of an avant-garde composer of his time, whose forced return to the stagnant and suppressing environment of Athens in 1933 *obliged* him to write tonal music and music inspired by Greek folk dances and songs.

The first catalogue of his works, compiled by Yannis Papaioannou, sorted his music in good and less good, in twelve-tone or atonal, and in tonal or folkloristic.¹² Cold war politics partitioned Skalkottas' work exactly like Bartók's.¹³

In Skalkottas' homeland, on the other side of the iron curtain from Bartók's homeland, his *good* music was analyzed by the detection of the series and his creativity was evaluated by the number of series he used in each work, as this was measuring the degree of his independence from his teacher.

¹¹ In his Harvard lectures Bartók spoke about his surprise when he realized that major and minor scales are absent for the most part in the most genuine folk melodies of Hungary [See, «Harvard Lectures», *Béla Bartók Essays*, Benjamin Suchoff, ed., (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), p.363]. But, to all Greeks the absence, for the most part, of those scales in Greek folk music has always been, and still is, common knowledge.

¹² All subsequent catalogues have kept this original classification.

¹³ On the « partitioning » of Bartók's work during the Cold War, speaks Richard Taruskin in « Nationalism », § 15, *The New Grove II*.

Recently, a younger generation of performers and researchers unaffected by Cold War cultural dichotomy, is gradually drawing up a less biased picture of the composer.

Skalkottas was a free spirit and his musical perception was penetrating. Even under the spell of Schoenberg's personality, he was observing his music's «aggressiveness and problematic sonority»;¹⁴ he was enjoying Stravinsky's «humorous pleasure and his ironic playing with both classic and modern composers»¹⁵ and, as already said, he was admiring Bartók's treatment of folk music and the inspiration he got from it. His music shows evidence of all three influences, as well as Kurt Weill's and other contemporary composers. Equally evident is his deep knowledge of western traditional literature, the study of which constituted in fact Schoenberg's composition lessons.¹⁶

It is now certain that Skalkottas did not share his teacher's opinion on «*synthetic* national music, bred like horses or plants»,¹⁷ and that the possibility to follow Bartók's direction occupied his thought during the Berlin years (It should be stressed that Skalkottas' relation to folk music was genuine, as in his childhood he lived in an environment where folk music was everyday music).

The similarity of much of his music to Bartók's is not exemplified only in the numerous cases where folk or folkish themes, rhythms and modes are used, but also in a character of purity, truth and sentimental immediacy through restraint and concision, or at times, of a strongly anti-romantic earthly strength; a character that might be associated with the understanding of the elemental nature of Eastern European folk music.

¹⁴ «Prote synaulia tes I.G.N.M.» [«First concert of the ISCM»], *Musike Zoe*, [*Musical Life*] 5 (28 February 1931), p.113.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ In Peter Grandenwitz, *Arnold Schönberg und seine Meisterschüler, Berlin 1925-1933* (Wienn: Zsolnay, 1998) it becomes clear that Schoenberg did not teach composition with the twelve-tone method in his master class. It seems, though, that Kurt Weill, who taught privately, was analysing in his lessons contemporary works, especially Schoenberg's. See, Nina-Maria Jaklitsch, *Zwischen Nationalschule und Moderne: Die Komponisten Kalomiris und Skalkottas...* (Unpublished PhD. dissertation. Universität Wien, 2000), p. 183.

¹⁷ Arnold Schoenberg, «Folk-music and Art-music» [c.1926], *Style and Idea, Selected writings of Arnold Schoenberg*, Leonard Stein ed. (New York: St Martin Press, 1975), pp.167-169. The passage on horses and plants runs as follows: «How, then, does one produce “synthetic” national music, how does one breed it? As one breeds horses, or plants –by intermingling or grafting native and foreign products...» (p.168).

Examples where this character is prominent exist in all Skalkottas' works, regardless of the method employed for their composition. Indeed, there is no period in Skalkottas' life in which he composed exclusively serial music, whereas, his application of the method is extremely free. He was never trapped or abandoned to its headship. He wrote in 1931: «Aim of the inventor of the twelve-tone method is to create a system similar to that of the seven-tone method, namely, a system capable to control and accumulate all modern musical material in a solid modern system. The principal points of the system are a) the exclusion of octaves, as far as possible, b) the transparency of writing and c) taking advantage of the immense horizon of polyphonic and harmonic treatment». He repeats several times that the twelve-tone method «is not a medical recipe», commenting that such a reproach could be also justified regarding the seven-tone method.¹⁸

Skalkottas' treatment of the method is closer to Alban Berg's; he uses many series, and builds his forms on tonal and modal schemes. But his music differs from Alban Berg's in its strong anti-romantic feeling.

Skalkottas' First Piano Concerto, one of the few works preserved from his Berlin years, is a perfect example of the fact that his application of the twelve-tone method did not interfere with neither the technique nor the character of the music, both of which are much closer to Bartók's than Schoenberg's (or Berg's, concerning the character).

Regarding the technique, in this twelve-tone composition of 1931 the 27 years old composer works with motives recognizable in their variations such as inversions, chromatic extensions or diatonic contractions and treats them symmetrically. Regarding the character, the music is unveiled and unaffected. It expresses a forceful love for life and genial feelings. Following are two examples from the concerto's first movement: A robust manly Greek folk dance, with its powerful non aggressive stepping on the sunny earth [example 1], and a nostalgic pastoral melody [example 2].

¹⁸ «Musike kinesis tou Berolinou» [«Musical life of Berlin»], *Musike Zoe*, [Musical Life] 6, (31 March 1931), p.138.

Example 1

Musical score for Example 1, featuring the following instruments and parts:

- Flutes:** Part 1 (treble clef) and Part 2 (bass clef). Both parts are marked *pp* (pianissimo) starting in the third measure.
- Bassoon 1:** Part 1 (bass clef) and Part 2 (bass clef). Both parts are marked *pp* (pianissimo) starting in the third measure.
- Bassoon 2:** Part 1 (bass clef) and Part 2 (bass clef). Both parts are marked *pp* (pianissimo) starting in the first measure.
- Horn in F:** Part 1 (treble clef) and Part 2 (bass clef). Both parts are marked *pp* (pianissimo) starting in the third measure.
- Trumpet in C:** Part 1 (treble clef) and Part 2 (bass clef). Both parts are marked *pp* (pianissimo) starting in the third measure.
- Trombone & Bass tuba:** Part 1 (bass clef) and Part 2 (bass clef). Both parts are marked *pp* (pianissimo) starting in the first measure.
- Piano:** Part 1 (bass clef) and Part 2 (bass clef). Both parts are marked *mf* (mezzo-forte) starting in the first measure.
- Strings:** Part 1 (treble clef) and Part 2 (bass clef). Both parts are marked *pp* (pianissimo) starting in the first measure.

The score is written in 2/2 time and features a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music is characterized by a steady, rhythmic accompaniment in the piano and strings, with melodic lines in the woodwinds and brass instruments.

Fl.

Bsn. 1

Bsn. 2

Hn.

C Tpt.

Tbn. & Btuba

Pno.

Strings

Detailed description: This is a page of a musical score, labeled '2' at the top. It features seven staves for different instruments. The Flute (Fl.) and Bsn. 1 parts are mostly silent, with a few notes at the beginning. Bsn. 2 plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Horn (Hn.) and C Trumpet (C Tpt.) parts are also mostly silent. The Trombone and Euphonium (Tbn. & Btuba) part plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. The Piano (Pno.) part has a complex rhythmic pattern with many notes and rests. The Strings part plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes.

7

Fl.

Bsn. 1

Bsn. 2

Hn.

C Tpt.

Tbn. & Btuba

Pno.

Strings

The image shows a page of a musical score for measures 7 and 8. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format. The instruments listed on the left are Flute (Fl.), Bsn. 1, Bsn. 2, Horn (Hn.), C Trumpet (C Tpt.), Tbn. & Btuba, Piano (Pno.), and Strings. The woodwind and string parts for measures 7 and 8 consist of whole rests. The piano part is more active, featuring a complex accompaniment with sixteenth and thirty-second notes, including triplets and slurs. The piano part is written in a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is not explicitly shown but appears to be 4/4 based on the note values. The page number '7' is written above the first staff.

Example 2

The image displays a musical score for Example 2, consisting of two systems of music. The first system, starting at measure 138, features a Flutes part (top staff) and a Piano part (bottom staff). The Piano part begins with a *mf* dynamic and includes several triplet markings. The second system, starting at measure 141, features a Flute part (top staff) and a Piano part (bottom staff). The Flute part includes the instruction *hervor* and *mf* dynamic. The Piano part includes a *f* dynamic marking. The score is written in 3/4 time and includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

In Skalkottas' Violin Sonata, written in 1925, the similarities to Bartok's music are easier to expose convincingly: A remarkably "Bartókian" modal theme, combining whole tone and octatonic segments [example 3], is exposed right in the beginning and becomes a fundamental idea in all four movements.

Example 3

Allegro furioso (quasi Presto)

It takes a scherzando character in the third movement [example 4].

Example 4

Allegro ritmato

In the fourth movement, inverted, it becomes the second segment of a fugal theme where intervals of a second prevail [example 5]. Symmetry, (perceived both horizontally and vertically, both in the overall form and in the construction and developmental treatment of its themes¹⁹), plays an important role in this fugue. At the peak of a dynamic crescendo, the fugal theme appears inverted and the fundamental modal theme is markedly displayed.

¹⁹ The theme's first segment is indicative

Example 5

Musical score for Example 5, consisting of four staves of music in treble clef with a common time signature. The first staff starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second staff has measures 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15, with dynamics *mp* and *p*. The third staff starts at measure 10 with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The fourth staff starts at measure 15.

This dense but transparent fugal finale is preceded and followed by a short *adagio quasi recitativo*, where the interval of a third is prominent. Its resemblance to Bartok's *parlando* or night-music passages, is noteworthy [example 6].

example 6

Musical score for Example 6, titled "Adagio quasi Recitativo". It features three staves of music in treble clef with a 6/8 time signature. The first staff starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second staff starts at measure 3 with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The third staff starts at measure 5 with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The score includes triplets and various articulations.