

MUSICAL MODERNISM IN GREECE IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: A CASE OF EXILE, EMIGRATION AND ISOLATION

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Abstract: *Greek musical life in the first five decades of the 20th century was dominated by the influence of the national school and its main representative, the composer Manolis Kalomiris. The social and political circumstances during those years affected cultural development. The country underwent major changes in all aspects and society was constantly in transition. As a result, innovation and new ideas found it difficult or impossible to flourish. The prevailing sentimental and national approach seems to ignore or deprecate the few composers and musicians who want to experiment with modernist and avant-garde approaches that they have mostly encountered abroad. Therefore, their choices seem limited, with most of them choosing either to isolate themselves in an inner self-exile or to emigrate elsewhere.*

In this paper we will focus on those Greek musicians who represented modernist trends during that crucial first half of the century, their work, and its reception in the musical world. Furthermore, we will try and place this avant-garde movement in the history and space of the Greek world and comment on the causes and aftermath of their isolation. Exile will be treated in a sense of the inner “silence” of those composers who proclaimed and supported modernist musical idioms, leading them either to emigration or to isolation from current musical life, at least as the composers they would have liked to be, transforming them mainly into composers who “wrote for their own drawer.”

The history of art music in Greece spans over two hundred years and runs all through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, beginning in the Ionian islands and spreading throughout mainland Greece as the country was forming its current boundaries, which stabilized during the first half of the previous century.¹ However, in this article I am not going to give a retrospective historical view of

1 For more information on the history of Greek music see Καίτη Ρωμανού, *Έντεχνη Ελληνική Μουσική στους νεότερους χρόνους* (Greek Art Music in modern times; Athens: Κουλτούρα, 2006); Giorgos Sakallieros, *Dimitri Mitropoulos and his works in the 1920s: the introduction of musical modernism in Greece* (Athens: Hellenic Music Centre, 2016), 11–78.

the past but will focus on the brief yet extremely interesting modernist or even avant-garde period of the first half of the twentieth century, which ran in parallel – though mostly in the background – with another, more expanded and celebrated movement, namely that of the national school.

The need for music that would express the national element was discussed by more than a few, even though sparingly and not in a systematic and intensive way. In 1908 Manolis Kalomiris took a firm step towards the establishment of a national movement by indicating the substantial material needed for this to happen. This occurred in June 1908 when a young Kalomiris was invited to perform some of his works in front of the Athenian public at the Athens Conservatoire's main concert hall. Kalomiris was already famous for his writings in the journal *Νουμάς* (*Noumas*),² a periodical that was in favour of the *demotic* (common) language movement. The language issue has always been a major dividing topic within the society's framework, setting those who believed in a more liberal society apart from those who believed that Greece should be a conservative protectorate of an elitist society run by a foreign royal family, and having as stakeholders some established patrons and, of course, the Church establishments. This constant societal clash was fought at several levels, with language – and subsequently music – among them. Conservatives favoured *katharevousa*, a hybrid idiom that involved a sense of archaism along with a vocabulary that could refer to a glorious past, which in their ears and eyes sounded more noble. The more liberal layers of society used the *demotic* language, a written form of the everyday people's language. This antagonism had a clear impact on society, with advanced thinkers and the newly established bourgeoisie clashing directly with the more conservative layers, which brought turmoil to the established institutions. Therefore, the Kalomiris concert was a perfect opportunity to make a statement by aligning musical and ideological beliefs. Instead of the usual programme notes for the works that were to be performed, Kalomiris, a man of action and not only of words, wrote and published a manifesto summarizing his beliefs regarding a truly national Greek musical idiom.³ The road towards the establishment of a national school movement was open, and it was meant to be completed after Kalomiris moved permanently to Athens in 1910, when he was appointed a piano professor at the Athens Conservatoire. He went on to prevail in the Greek musical scene till 1962, the year of his death.

Following the establishment of the National School a good many composers

2 About the background of this historical journal see Γ. Χ. Καλογιάννης, *Ο Νουμάς και η εποχή του 1903–1931* (*Noumas and its time, 1903–1931*; Athens: Επικαιρότητα, 1984), 145–46, 153–54, 180–84.

3 Μανώλης Καλομοίρης, *Η Ζωή μου και η Τέχνη μου* (*My Life and my Art*; Athens: Νεφέλη, 1988), 145–147.

followed this trend and produced musical works embodying the Kalomirian ideals, which were after all an amalgamation of national theories closely related to Herderian theories and ideas developed in Europe over the previous centuries. Although opera could be identified as the genre that most directly enhances and supports national reality with straightforward ethnic connotations through the use of popular language, an element which makes direct connections with what is perceived as national, symphonic and chamber music language should not be underestimated. In any case, it is not my intention to insist on the national school issue too much. The main reason for discussing all of the above was to establish a clear picture of the Greek music framework during the first decades of the twentieth century and actually juxtapose this paradigm with the one that comes next, on which I am going to focus from here forward, that of modernism during the same period.

It has been widely established by musicological research that early modernism in Greece has two main representatives in the local musical scene. One is Dimitris Mitropoulos (1896–1960) and the other is Nikos Skalkottas (1904–1949), both of whom composed music that escaped the general idiom of the national school – even in the case of the *36 Greek Dances* by Nikos Skalkottas – and paved its own, lonely path, one determined by isolation from active performance, especially for Skalkottas, but also of exile and emigration for both of them.

Dimitris Mitropoulos is widely respected as one of those great titans of the art of conducting during the twentieth century, who had a great career in the United States, directing orchestras such as the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic, in both of which he held permanent positions. With his constant belief that great composers lived among us and that their music should be performed as frequently as possible, Mitropoulos was a fervent supporter of modernism and its trends. Therefore, he introduced to the American audience composers like Paul Hindemith, Ernest Krenek, David Diamond, and others, both Americans and Europeans.

However, Mitropoulos had another facet that American audiences did not really have a chance to discover during the twenty-odd years that he spent there, that of the composer, a career that he decided to abandon in favour of his conducting adventures and not due to lack of talent. Mitropoulos' endeavours in conducting and composition began during his Athens Conservatoire years, when he conducted his own work *Ταφή* (Burial) with the Athens Conservatoire Orchestra. Although his first compositional attempts reflect an impressionistic and quasi-modernist world, Mitropoulos embarked on a full-blown modernist journey some time later, after a stay in Brussels and Berlin from 1920 to 1924, where he made

the acquaintance, both physically and aesthetically, with those in the forefront of this movement and the atmosphere in which it was being developed. During his Berlin years he composed his *Ελληνική Σονάτα* (Greek Sonata), a pianistic work that raised a storm of mostly negative criticism when it was performed in Athens in 1926. At that time, Mitropoulos was considered one of the most talented Greek musicians. Two years earlier, Manolis Kalomiris, at that time director of the Hellenic Conservatoire, had visited him in Berlin, where he was already embarking on a career, and asked him to return to Athens to take over the Hellenic Conservatoire's orchestra.⁴ He agreed to return but it soon became obvious that Athens was not ready for Mitropoulos. His *alma mater*, the Athens Conservatoire, and the musical nomenclature all viewed Mitropoulos unfavourably after his decision to accept the position of principal conductor at a rival institution. In the years to come, Mitropoulos eventually took over the Athens Conservatoire Orchestra, since this was the only available symphony orchestra left in Athens after most of the overambitious orchestral projects that appeared had a short span of life. Although he was generally acclaimed by audiences as a conductor and pianist, his compositional efforts were met with scepticism, a phenomenon that would expand to some of his programme choices for his concerts with the symphony orchestra.

On 2 November 1926 Mitropoulos performed his *Greek Sonata* before an Athenian audience that seemed unable to understand this multi-layered composition. As Georgios Nikolopoulos, who signed his critical notes with the pen name *Don Basile*, commented: “Λυπούμεθα όμως μη δυνάμενοι να επεκτείνωμεν τους επαίνους μας και επί της μουσικής αξίας της τόσο θορυβώδους σονάτας, ήκιστα Ελληνικής [...] και εμφανιζούσης τας τόσον αναρμόστους κατά την εθνικήν ιδεολογίαν μας, νεωτεριστικὰς τάσεις των αρμονικῶν σκληροτήτων και της ασυναρτησίας του σχήματος” (‘We are very sorry that we cannot expand our gratitude [i.e., because the critic admires Mitropoulos’ piano playing] to the musical value of this noisy sonata, allegedly ‘Greek’ [...] representing for our national ideology the most inappropriate, neoteristic, and forward tendencies of these stiff harmonies and the obscurity of the whole’).⁵ Actually, this was one of the more moderate texts written about the piece.

Mitropoulos was not discouraged by this reception, and went on to compose his twelve-tone *Ostinata a tre parti* for violin and piano in 1926. On 5 June 1927 he presented to the public what were probably his most modernist pieces composed

4 Άρης Γαρουφαλής, Χάρης Ξανθουδάκης (eds.), Ο Δημήτρης Μητρόπουλος και το Ωδείο Αθηνών: το χρονικό και τα τεκμήρια (Dimitris Mitropoulos and the Athens Conservatoire: chronicle and documentations; Corfu: Ιόνιο Πανεπιστήμιο, 2011), 32–33.

5 Don Basile (Γεώργιος Νικολόπουλος), “Εναρξίς της νέας περιόδου” (New Season Opening), in Νέα Ημέρα, 11 November 1926.

up to that point, in a single concert: his *Ostinata*, the *Passacaglia*, *intermezzo* and *fugue for piano*, and ten of the fourteen *Inventions* for voice and piano with poetry by Constantine P. Cavafy.⁶ Most of the critics showed no sympathy for Mitropoulos' compositions, with several polemic articles appearing in the press. One of the most influential music critics of the time, Sophia Spanoudi, wrote: “Είναι αυτή μουσική άραγε ή μια σοφή στην ξηρότητά της παράταξις λογαριθμωv; [...] Ιδιαίτέρως η σειρά των δέκα τραγουδιών του Καβάφη – αλήθεια, δεν μπορούσε ο Μητρόπουλος να επιτύχη τίποτε αντισταθμικότερο, αντιμουσικότερο, αντιποιητικότερο σ' όλη την Ελληνική φιλολογία- καταντά εντελώς απαράδεκτη για λόγους απολύτως καλλιτεχνικής ηθικής. [...] Στο προηγούμενο άρθρο μου στη Νέα Εστία μιλούσα για την ανήθικη μουσική. Να ένα δείγμα της από τα χαρακτηριστικότερα” (“Then, is this music or just a series of logarithms intelligent in their dryness? [...] Especially the series of the ten Cavafy *Inventions* – really, Mitropoulos could not have chosen something uglier, more anti-musical and antipoetic in the whole output of the Greek philology – which are totally unacceptable for reasons of artistic ethics [...] In my previous article in *Nea Hestia* I was talking about unethical music. This is the most characteristic example of it’).⁷ The previous article mentioned by Spanoudi was titled Η σύγχρονη ανηθικότης της Τέχνης και ο πιανίστ Αρθούρ Ρουμπινστάιν (“The modern immorality of Art and the pianist Arthur Rubinstein”)⁸ where she commented on the pianist's concert in Athens about a month before Mitropoulos' concert and launched a direct attack on the modernist movement. She wrote: “Για τον οποίον η Μουσική δεν είναι (sic) πλέον ‘η υψηλή, η ουράνια θεότης’ που δοξάζει ο ποιητής, αλλά μια έξαλλη Μαινάς που μας καλεί στην τέλεσι Σαββατικών οργίων” (“for [Rubinstein] Music is no longer “the highest, the divine” that the poet exclaims, but a frenzied Maenad [i.e. a Dionysian female follower] inviting us to Sabbatical Orgies’); and she continued: “Ανήθικη μουσική είναι [sic] εκείνη, που προσπαθεί με κάθε μέσον να καταλύση τους νόμους του καλλιτεχνικούς σύμπαντος, που αγωνίζεται να γκρεμίση κάθε απολύτως ωραίοv ιδανικός, χωρίς νάχη κανεν' άλλο ν' αναστηλώση στη θέσι του [...] Γι' αυτό η σημερινή Τέχνη είναι ανήθικη. Γιατί ζητεί να καταλύση τον ηθικόν νόμον του μουσικού Σύμπαντος” (“Unethical music is that which is trying, using any means available, to destroy any laws of the artistic universe, which is fighting to demolish everything that is absolutely beautiful, without having something equally beautiful to replace it with. [...] That is the

6 Sakallieros, *Dimitri Mitropoulos*, 119–146, 164–185, 187–207.

7 Σοφία Σπανούδη, “Αρνητικά τάσεις μιας νέας Σχολής” (Negative tendencies of a new School), in *Νέα Εστία* 6, 1/6 (1 July 1927), 376–78.

8 Σοφία Σπανούδη, “Η σύγχρονη ανηθικότης της Τέχνης και ο πιανίστ Αρθούρ Ρουμπινστάιν” (The modern Immorality of Art and the Pianist Arthur Rubinstein), in *Νέα Εστία* 4, 1/4 (1 July 1927), 243–44.

reason why today's Art is unethical.⁹ Because today's Art is trying to destroy the ethical law of the musical Universe').¹⁰ The words of Spanoudi more or less reflect the general disapproval by the Greek musical environment of what was described as *modernism*.

Mitropoulos' compositional output gradually deteriorated in the years to come, while he was focusing more and more on his conducting duties. One cannot be certain if this had more to do with the negative attitude of his surroundings in Athens or with his continuously growing obligations as a conductor. The fact is that in the years to come he did not compose as systematically as in the 1920s, and he came to the point of abandoning composition altogether during the 1930s. But the event that probably led him to take the road to exile came in 1933 when he was named *adjunct member* of the Academy of Athens. This was an honour on behalf of the Academy for Mitropoulos, but also the straw that broke the camel's back for some conservative members of the composers' circles in Greece. Six of them decided to publish a letter that they had sent to the Academy in which they stated: "Δεν θέλομεν να μειώσωμεν την γενικής μουσικήν αξίαν του κ. Μητρόπουλου, όστις και ως πιανίστας και ως διευθυντής ορχήστρας είναι άξιος τιμής, νομίζομεν όμως ότι ούτος ως συνθέτης δεν έχει να παρουσιάσει ουδεμίας αξίαν λόγου, τόσο ποιοτικώς όσο και ποσοτικώς, δημιουργικήν εργασία, ήτις δύναται να δικαιολογήσει οπωσδήποτε την εκλογήν του εις θέσιν απονεμομένην υπό της Ακαδημίας μόνος εις συνθέτας μουσικούς" ('We don't really want to diminish Mr Mitropoulos' musical talent as a conductor and pianist, but we believe that as a composer he has never, both in terms of value and quantity, presented any substantial, compositional work that makes him suitable for the role of "adjunct member" of the Academy, a position designed primarily for composers').¹¹ One of the six who signed this letter was none other than Manolis Kalomiris, who would later become a full member of the Academy of Athens. Mitropoulos decided to increase his appearances in Europe and the United States, and in January 1938 he officially became the Artistic Director and Principal Conductor of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra, leaving Greece for good. From then on, he would return only occasionally to meet with friends and family and later to conduct on only a few occasions during the 1950s.

The case of Nikos Skalkottas is rather different, since he never abandoned his compositional endeavours and was quite productive, even though most of his

9 Spanoudi actually refers not only to modernist music, but also to modernist art in general.

10 Γιάννης Μπελώνης, "Η στάση της κριτικής στην Ελλάδα έναντι του συνθετικού έργου του Δημήτρη Μητρόπουλου" (Greek critics' attitude towards the compositional output of Dimitris Mitropoulos), in Δημήτρης Μητρόπουλος (1896–1960): πενήντα χρόνια μετά, ed. Ιωάννης Φούλιας et al. (Athens: Edition Orpheus, 2011), 166.

11 William R. Trotter, *The Priest of Music*, trans. Alexis Kalofolias (Athens: Potamos, 2000), 129–30.

works were written for his desk drawer. Skalkottas graduated with a violin diploma at the age of sixteen from the Athens Conservatoire, with the highest award, that of the Gold Medal “Ifigeneia and Andreas Syngros.” Furthermore, he was recommended by the head of the Athens Conservatoire Andreas Nazos and received the Averof Scholarship in order to continue his studies abroad, and more specifically in Germany.

He arrived in Berlin in October 1921 to enroll at the Hochschule für Musik at the violin class of Willy Hess.¹² His compositional output during those first years is quite uncertain, and it seems that Skalkottas was not fully determined that he wanted to be a composer. According to Papaioannou, it was during the winter of 1923/24 that Skalkottas decided that his destiny was to become a composer. In that year he probably wrote a quartet and a string trio, always according to Papaioannou, which are now unfortunately lost but are mentioned in several sources.¹³ Although he decided not to pursue a career as a violin soloist, he continued playing and earning a living from this activity for the rest of his life, deciding as well to enroll in compositional lessons with Philip Jarnach and probably also Kurt Weill. As he mentioned in a letter to Nelly Askitopoulou, “I would be grateful if you could say this to all my compatriots: Composition is my only ideal and my only ideal is to learn to compose. Not like the Greek composers, for God’s sake, who are all good amateurs! Yes, Nelly, believe me that I don’t say this last thing out of wickedness or egoism, – it is the bitter truth!”¹⁴

It was when he embarked on studies and joined the Schoenberg circles in 1927 that Skalkottas developed into a truly modernist composer. He developed a personal dodecaphonic technique that was set to become uniquely different. According to Eva Mantzourani, “Skalkottas’ *Little Suite* for violin and orchestra was broadcast by the Frankfurt Radio Station on 22 January 1931 as part of a concert that also featured Schoenberg’s *Eight Songs* op. 6 and Zillig’s *Serenade*. The work was favourably received by none other than Theodor Adorno, who introduced the concert, and whose analysis of the piece reinforced the fact that Skalkottas was not using Schoenberg’s strict twelve-tone technique but his own variation of it, as is clearly seen in other works surviving from this period.”¹⁵ After Schoenberg’s departure in 1933, Skalkottas – who was in a difficult financial and emotional state – decided to return to Greece, although this was not an easy decision. Nevertheless, lack of financial means and the rise of the Nazi regime were two issues that he could not ignore.

12 Γιάννης Γ. Παπαϊωάννου, Νίκος Σκαλκώτας (Nikos Skalkottas), vol. Α' (Athens: Παπαρηγορίου – Νάκας, 1997), 66–69.

13 Παπαϊωάννου, Νίκος Σκαλκώτας, 69–71.

14 Eva Mantzourani, *The Life and Twelve-Note Music of Nikos Skalkottas* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 29–30.

15 *Ibid.*, 37.

One should understand how difficult it was for a composer like Skalkottas to leave the Berlin circles, where he was at least praised by people like Adorno and his works were even broadcast once in a while on the radio or in sporadic performances, and return to Greece where an established elite was in control, as was obvious in the case of Mitropoulos as well. However, since we now have a better overview of how things unfolded at the cultural sector in Germany over the Nazi years, one could say that returning to his homeland was somehow a correct decision for Skalkottas given the way things went during the later years of the 1930s and, of course, the tragic years of the Second World War. Probably the best decision for him would have been to go to the United States, as Schoenberg did, but of course these conclusions are drawn with the wisdom of hindsight.

Skalkottas compromised by taking up posts in the Athenian orchestras, playing at the back chairs of the first and the second violins. He was scarcely acknowledged as a composer by his colleagues, and only a few of his tonal works – a genre he never abandoned – were performed; some of his *36 Greek Dances* were the most valued when, once in a while, a conductor decided to include some of them in an orchestral programme. The fact that a work such as the *Greek Dances* was sometimes performed actually reveals the state of recognition and inclusion of the Greek musical world. This work was seen as the most accessible music of the composer, and many believed that it was actually a work falling within the national school idiom of the time. Of course, Skalkottas wrote the *Dances* either using tunes and themes from Greek tradition or invented them to resemble such tunes, but his compositional style – albeit tonal – was not close to the traditional norms of those composers who were declaring themselves followers of the national compositional doctrine. More importantly though, Skalkottas was not a composer who would state his thoughts and opinions on how one could write “Greek music.” He simply continued composing, using materials that he found interesting and creatively stimulating for his needs, not taking into consideration if these were derived from tradition or from the realm of absolute music, and thus he developed his own personal style that is today recognizable and widely acclaimed. Therefore, Skalkottas did not stop composing, using both the personal twelve-tone technique that he had developed in Germany and also the tonal music language that he knew well, but also a freer atonal musical language. By 1939, he completed works as diverse as the *36 Greek Dances* (1936), his *Piano Concerto no. 3 for piano and ten wind instruments* (1939) and the *Eight Variations on a Greek folk theme* (1938), each of them belonging to a different musical genre, thus demonstrating the diverse musical ideas of Skalkottas. The self-exile and isolation of the composer was a state of mind, and although Skalkottas composed fervently, he did not have the illusion that his work

would be accepted by Athenian audiences and the wider musical world. There were only a few occasions when his avant-garde music was performed in public, mainly chamber music works or ballet music for chamber ensemble, and when this occurred the reception was not enthusiastic. Skalkottas' untimely death in 1949 of an untreated hernia meant that the modernist wave, although it did not have such a substantial impact on the Greek musical world of those times, lost its other major figure after Mitropoulos' compositional detachment and eventual silence.

The music of Nikos Skalkottas has nonetheless found a place in the repertoire in recent years, mainly following the decision of the Swedish company BIS to record the available compositional output of Skalkottas.¹⁶ This interest in Skalkottas rose even higher in 2019, the seventieth anniversary of his death, which was proclaimed a "Skalkottas Year" by many Greek musical institutions (among them the Music Library of Greece "Lilian Voudouri" of the Friends of Music Society that has recently acquired the Skalkottas archive, Megaron–The Athens Concert Hall, the State Orchestra of Athens, the Greek Composers Union, the Hellenic Musicological Society, The Athens Conservatoire, and others).¹⁷ However, it is not only Greek musical institutions that seem to be interested in Skalkottas. For instance, during the 2018–19 concert series of the Pierre Boulez Saal, a concert circle that has been dealing with the European idea and its close relation to Greece, Skalkottas' music was the centre-piece of various events. More specifically, Daniel Barenboim – who conceived the idea – said: "We would like to present Skalkottas to you as a major exponent of European culture and, with our musical focus over the next few months, make a small contribution to supporting and appreciating this wonderfully diverse heritage."¹⁸

In conclusion, the modernist idiom obviously did not become mainstream in Greece during the first half of the twentieth century. Most composers were oriented towards the national ideals expressed through the doctrines of the national school. However, the modernist idiom was represented by two of the most gifted musicians around: Dimitris Mitropoulos and Nikos Skalkottas. As is evident from the narration above, both of them suffered on a compositional level due to their choices that sounded "extreme" at that time. Mitropoulos, on one hand, left the country, choosing the way to a self-exile. Probably the report by the six composers played a substantial role in this choice, although he had already more or less abandoned his compositional efforts and was looking into the possibility of leaving small Greece for a better future. In any case, he felt that Greece was no longer

16 "BIS Records, Nikos Skalkottas", <https://bis.se/composer/skalkottas-nikos/> (last accessed 18 April 2019).

17 "Έτος Νίκου Σκαλκώτα", <https://mmb.org.gr/el/2019-etos-skalkota-1> (last accessed 18 April 2019).

18 "Boulez Saal, Nikos Skalkottas," <https://boulezsaal.de/skalkottas> (last accessed 18 April 2019).

the place for his further artistic development. Skalkottas, on the other hand, felt demolished when he realized that he had to return to Greece after his time in Germany. He believed that the Athenian environment would have been a tombstone on his creativity. This was actually not true, since he continued composing in an intense way. He was right of course in his prediction that he would not get much attention or many performances, and that he would not have enough opportunities for his music to be heard, especially his most forward-thinking compositions. This led him to a state of isolation, an idiosyncratic self-exile from everyday life and his surroundings and his confinement in an inner state of mind. These two cases actually determined the modernist idiom, which became an exiled idiom for some time, until new composers, especially during the Cold War years, emerged and the avant-garde movement finally received attention from the musical public. Greece, after the end of the Second World War and especially after going through the purgatory of the Civil War, developed further in musical matters from the 1950s onwards, embracing modernism on many occasions, mainly as a result of its attachment to the West but also because of the curiosity and creativity of composers such as Janni Christou, Giannis A. Papaioannou, Giorgos Sicilianos, and others, finally aligning with current European musical trends. Mitropoulos with his composer self and especially Skalkottas were obviously born at the wrong time. However, they both marked an era, adding a modernist facet that is now recognized as such, though paying the price of exiling themselves either literally (as in the case of Mitropoulos) or metaphorically (as in the case of Skalkottas).