

COLLECTION
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Minas Borboudakis
Photonic constructions

CRYSTALLINE SOUNDS AND RHYTHMIC PATTERNS

The music of Minas Borboudakis is a monumental and powerful one; it takes on a kind of elemental violence full of sonic eruptions and pulsating ostinato rhythms whilst at the other extreme remaining a fragile web of silvery, crystalline sounds. His emotionally charged musical language is at turns sweeping and broad, ascetic and fey. The composer was born in 1974 on Crete, and has created an oeuvre of strongly contrasting works for various forces, ranging from a piece for piano solo to a large-scale work for orchestra.

At the heart of his output is his affinity to rhythm; it plays a central role for Borboudakis. Important too is his love of the musical culture of Greek Antiquity. This emerges for example in many of his works with Greek titles, such as *Sigma-Cassiopéia*, *Katharsis*, *Archégonon*, *Tetraktys* or *Krámata*, this affection for the music of earlier times encapsulated too in his employment of the tetrachords employed then, not to forget the ancient Greek modes. As the composer commented early on: "During the last few years two key directions gradually became apparent: one is the music of Ancient Greece that I have infused with micro-intervals; the other is, if one will, a more futuristic direction, one allowing me to continue to explore the physical and metaphysical aspects of the compositional process", Borboudakis adding "on the one hand there is *Archégonon*, and on the other hand there lies *Photonic constructions*."

Photons – particles of light – are not only wave form but also travel through the universe at a speed of 300,000 km/sec; their dual nature has fascinated the composer for some time now. As he puts it: "Light is for us Greeks an area of mystery and of spiritual search." *Photonic constructions*, a commission by the Kassel Music Days, is dedicated to Ensemble Modern and was premiered at the festival in October 2006. In their vibrant colour, many sounds in this three-part work recall electronic sounds, although there is no actual use of this technique. What Borboudakis is not attempting, however, is the imitation of electronic sounds with acoustic means. He says of this: "One takes the soul of the sound and attempts to create something new." He draws here on the principle of repetition (granular synthesis), which "is never the same within time itself", adding how his work with "grains" resembles the very smallest motifs in Beethoven's motivic working out. Rhythmic and strongly motoric sections impinge on freely suspended sonic surfaces, and there emerge pulsating patterns within the ensemble, ones created by the minutiae that determine vibrato passages – this against the backdrop of a kind of concertante, nay, free jazz treatment articulated by the bass clarinet and bass flute in the second section.

In *Meta-soundscapes* for ensemble Borboudakis also demonstrates the aforementioned “futuristic direction”, evident here in exemplary manner by the synthetically inspired sonic landscapes that would seem to emanate from distant planets yet which are produced using traditional instruments. Microtonal fluctuations emerge, these sounds constantly on the move and impinging on the threshold of noise and, indeed, white noise. What is realised here is Heraklit’s philosophical idea of oneness and being, demonstrated by the way a river flows, Borboudakis lending an entire series of works the title *ROAI*. In *Meta-soundscapes*, which were written in summer 2008 to a commission from the Bavarian Radio/Studio Franconia on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the “ars nova ensemble nürnberg”, the “flow of sound in form” occupies a central position. And it is the meticulous and gradual transformation of the sound (known as morphing) which provided the initiative for the American composer Alvin Lucier.

The string quartet *Tetraktys* (2006) was written for the Bavarian State Opera and is formally based on the principle of the sacred quaternity of Pythagoras, whereby the four sections of the piece correspond with the series of numbers 1, 2, 3, 4 – a relationship held to be perfect in antiquity. In a similar way to devices used later in *Photonic constructions*, the idea of wave form plays an important role, and forms a paradigm of sound-noise-sound. Hard and dry sounds are interpolated amongst shimmering flageolet surfaces, or within unison passages or even areas of pure noise. Time and again it is the “crystalline sounds that I really love”, comments Borboudakis. As for overall form, this is a “written out accelerando without any change of tempo”, the work beginning very slowly but ending in rapid passage-work.

The title of another piece, for six solo instruments (piccolo, bass clarinet, percussion, piano, violin, violoncello), helps us understand the principle of construction: *Krámata* means “alloys” in Greek. This ploy allows musical opposites to be created, such as the rhythmically free opening – not in any tempo or metric framework – and the wonderful way in which the changes of time signature are worked out in terms of rhythm, this towards the end of the piece. Interesting too is the contrast between wood and metal, between high registers and low ones. The work dates from 2001/02 and oscillates between pulsating ostinato rhythms by a battery of percussion – which encompasses ancient Greek crotales to the Chinese gong – and passages in which tetrachords form the harmonic base and the melodies comprise micro-intervals.

Any adjuration to Greek Antiquity Borboudakis certainly manages with aplomb in his percussion concerto *Archégonon*, also written in 2002/06. The title relates to a primal cell, the genesis of the birth, the work being fashioned as a “primal gene”, as Borboudakis explains, relating that “because it is a percussion concerto, and rhythm is for the human race a primal thing, I therefore decided to call it just that”. The percussion virtuoso Peter Sadlo, to whom *Archégonon* is dedicated, first encountered Borboudakis’ music in the form of *ChoroChronos II*, for timpani solo, piano, percussion and seven brass instruments, immediately feeling it to be a “musical description of the cosmos” and a “new dimension of the listening experience”. A desire grew in him for further percussion works from the pen of this young Greek composer, Borboudakis for his part entering into a fruitful cooperation with Sadlo, one which produced innovative interpretative possibilities for percussion instruments and many novel facets of the sounds they jointly explored.

A commission by the Südwestrundfunk Stuttgart, *Archégonon* is laid out in four sections, each of which is determined by “one sonic idea”. In the first section for example, a branching melody in the bass is cast as a dry sound surrounded by “splitter sounds” in the high woodwinds; in the second section massive “pillars of chords” emerge, their melodic direction always modal and, salutary perhaps, all too readily destructive; then, in the third section, noise itself is tentatively approached – here, pure sound clothed in unusual colours is the centrepiece; ultimately, the finale contains motifs and themes of the entire concerto, based on rhythms from northern Greece. The percussion soloist introduces each section with a characteristic rhythm and, as the concerto continues, comes into contact with an increasing number of instrumental groups such as the strings, which also act as an autonomous protagonist.

Susanne Schmerda

Translation from the German: Graham Lack