

Featured Composer Kokoras « SF/InciP

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: B♭ Clarinet (Cl), Violin (Vln), and Violoncello (Vc). The score is annotated with various performance techniques and sound effects, including:

- B♭ Clarinet:**
 - Right after stop, move the lips at the edge of the mouthpiece and blow a focused air stream. Sounds like a succession of clock sounds.
 - clack reed (f)
 - blip reed (p)
 - noise reed (mf p)
 - press down the reed and blow with strain. sounds like noise from pressure cooker.
- Violin:**
 - scratch the cluster of strings with the highlighted angle.
 - case scratch [lowest string] (p)
 - arco clang
 - ferrule click
 - scratch arco
 - ferrule clang
 - very soft and slow bowing
 - scratch arco
 - scratchy arco
 - squeeze the horns between the II & III strings and the wooden part of the bow produce a scratchy crackly sound.
- Violoncello:**
 - scratchy arco

The score includes dynamic markings such as *f*, *p*, *mp*, and *pp*, and a tempo marking of 7/8.

Panayiotis Kokoras in conversation with ScoreFollower

SF: You have written extensively about a historical shift of musical texture towards what you have termed as Holophonic. Could you elaborate what this means and how it functions in your own work?

PK: Holophony as a musical texture signifies my intention to determine a rather general aesthetical frame for my music and maybe others. It is aimed to give a term of a likely musical evolution, cf.: Monophony, Polyphony, Homophony. The word Holophony is derived from the Greek word *holos*, which means 'whole/entire', and the word *phone*, which means 'sound/voice'. In other words, each independent phone (sound) contributes to the synthesis of the *holos* (whole). It is best perceived as the synthesis of simultaneous sound streams into a coherent whole with internal components and focal points. Holophonic music is the music whose texture is formed by the fusion of several sound entities, which lose their identity and independence in order to contribute to the synthesis of a whole. A Holophonic musical texture is not consisting of parts and cannot be partitioned, it exists as wholeness. Using Music Information Retrieval tools I have developed a model for functional sound classification, some sort of sound scale paradigm. This model can be applied for specific structural uses such as fusion or separation in sound texture and similarity relationships in sequential gestures.

SF: You use many novel playing techniques in your works, can you describe the process that you go through and how do you explore the possibilities of an instrument?

PK: For me, there is no "playing techniques", let alone novel. There are just sound possibilities; pure potentiality (*dunamis* as it is used by Aristotle) waiting for me to observe it. Every time I compose a new piece, it is like I

encounter the instrument(s) for the first time. I ask myself what is the sound this instrument is supposed to produce or how should I play it? When performing sound, there is no single answer to the above questions, but all the possibilities are equally open. There are as many answers as each composition demands. The default sound of each instrument, which usually is the homogeneous, rich and stable sound, is not excluded from the pallet. However, it is simply a sound among the numerous ones an instrument can produce. Personally, I rarely use it, just because it doesn't sound as good to me. Since 2003, I have initiated the Ensemble Holophony Project, which has helped me to work in close collaboration with numerous performers and share with them my fascination in instrumental sound. Besides, in my studio I have an ever-increasing collection of sound objects and instruments from baritone saxophone and double bass to sopranino recorder and electric guitar. Almost every day I like to practice one of them. I feel great when I hold and play a musical instrument; it is some sort of ritual. Me the instrument and the sound become one and then it is like you don't hear the sound, you are the sound.

SF: Your works exhibit a multitude of diverse musical ideas which most often are described by evocative section titles. What role do these titles play in your music?

PK: I think expressions like Allegro, Presto, Moderato or titles like Sonata would mean very little in a sound based composition. The form of a piece is often conceived or defined by a sound. It could be a short and noise sound like "grunt" or a longer sound like a "teapot boiler". As a matter of fact, in my piece "Hiss and Roar" the subtitle is "Sound Theatre Act I: teapot boiler" and the whole form is based on a single recording of me preparing my tea. Also, the title might imply a specific to the composition soundscape, an everyday experience, onomatopoeia words, or more abstract ideas. On another level sound also bears meaning and I often use the extra-musical connotations of sound to enrich the sonic experience.

SF: Can you walk us through your compositional process? How do your ideas originate and does your working process change with the medium?

PK: Regardless if I compose for acoustic instrument(s), fixed media or mixed media I compose the same way, and it does sound the same way. Sometimes it is hard to say if a work is an electroacoustic work alone, with instruments or instrumental. The sound is the only form-bearing musical element. In my composition vocabulary, there is no melody, harmony, pitch, rhythm, form, tempo, dynamics, theme, or motive. Instead, I reconsider and re-evaluate those musical elements with gestures, figures, textures, articulations, postures, symbolisms, and degrees of energy often grouped into a single composite sonic entity. The notion of the thematic idea seeks solutions in sound objects with a distinctive atmosphere, motion, mood, context, and color. Everything starts with a single sound; that is vibrations that travel through the air, in which we cannot hear the sound but its effects. We perceive it as images, memories translated into words, anticipations, events, everyday objects or even smells. It is also sensed as vibrations on our tympanic membrane, nerves, deep tissue, bones and even cells. Therefore, it is important to understand first the significance of a single sound only, and then its relationship with two or more sounds. This is somewhat different from the 'note-based music', whereas most of the time a note alone has no meaning, but only in relationship with others.

SF: In your project "Sense", you have tried to construct a musical experience beyond traditional aural means by exploring the tactile quality of sound. How do you see this idea advancing a musical tradition primarily grounded in hearing?

PK: The tactility of sound has always been part of the experience. The ultimate listening experience takes place when one is both the performer and the listener. For instance, when a classical guitar player plays the guitar besides the strings, the whole body of the guitar vibrates as well. These vibrations are also sensed via the body of the performer in the form of vibrotactile stimuli. As the performer plays the guitar, he or she feels the vibrations through the chest, foot, fingers and sometimes through the jaw or zygomatic bone when one leans his or her head on the top of the guitar side. Most of the instrumental players will have a similar experience, depending on the acoustic and physical characteristics of the instrument. What a performer experiences during his or her recital is something totally different from what the audience experience because the only channel of communication between the sound of the instrument and the audience is the ears. In other words, they are missing all the tactility of the sound, which is not possible to transmit via air. So, how can one provide the same level of experience to the listener? Sense is a long-term project that I keep working on it. It explores the tactility of sound deployed to lead the listener beyond the actual sound itself and to fill in the missing ingredients of a full sound experience. It is a holistic listening experience, where the audible listening experience is combined with the feel of tactile ultra and infrasound. Besides, in Sense, I investigate different compositional strategies to inform the listener's brain using all the sensory paths that enable us to feel the sound. For instance, a soft resonant midrange drone could be combined with soft accelerating tactile vibrations or a highly rhythmical audible phrase could be combined with air-born ultrasound tactile sensation of centrifugal motion that might be the structural vehicle to move the piece to the next section. In order to test and explore the above compositional paradigms, I have developed a simple interface with emphasis to tactile properties of the sound. This interface integrates into a customized chair with various types of tactile linear actuators and transducers.

SF: Your works often involve a fixed electronics component. How do you navigate the blending of the instrumental and electronic material, and what is the role each plays in a performance setting?

PK: Regardless if I use acoustic instruments and/or electronics, there is no difference in the way I approach the work. I cannot separate the electronic part from the instrumental one and vice versa. I do not see the electronic sound as another instrument but rather as an extension of the instrumental sounds or the other way around. The fixed electronics is a fascinating way to make music. It allows me to have the depth, precision and detail I like. It also allows the performer to contribute with his/her interpretation and, because of its potential depth and sophistication the audience might enjoy the piece from a different perspective every time it is played.

SF: For many years New Music has been developing in a vast simultaneity of styles. Do you see any recent trends in the works of other composers that you find particularly compelling or troublesome?

PK: It seems right that since the second half of the twentieth century we enjoy a tremendous amount of stylistic diversity. Even though it is still too close to draw the line, I can certainly find works I like and works I do not like very much or not at all. In any case, I appreciate compositions that have something personal and original to say independent of the stylistic proclivities of each composer. I think composers should compose independent of trends and affiliations and should look rather deep inside than around them.

More info @ panayiotiskokoras.com

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