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**The theatrical dimension of the performer in the last works of Jani Christou**

Conference ‘Greek music for the opera and other forms of 20th century performing arts’.

Music Library of Greece ‘Lilian Voudouri’, Megaron The Athens Concert Hall, 27th-29th March 2009.

Conference proceedings. The Friends of Music Society, Athens 2009, pages 312-321.

Jani Christou composed his first work *Phoenix Music* in 1948, at a time when he was taking an interest in contemporary trends. Later, however, he followed his own path, creating a personal composing language. Within this independence, he introduced new terms into the vocabulary of music which expressed his composing needs (e.g. *praxis-metapraxis*, *system-anti-system*, *protoperformance* etc.). He designed scores of a predominantly visual character and wrote, among other essays, *A Credo for music* where he stated his views in a plain but complex way and composed works based on a wide philosophical background[[1]](#footnote-1). His last works represent his full composing intentions and are characterised by intense theatricality. More specifically, the works *Anaparastasis III: The Pianist* (1968), *Mysterion* (1966), and *The Strychnine Lady* (1967), studied in this article, are key works in which the composer calls the performer to break free from conventional interpretation, thus satisfying their multi-faceted requirements.

In his work *Anaparastasis III: The Pianist* (1968), Christou has a surprise in store for the audience as he chooses not to appoint the solo role to a real pianist, as one would expect from the title. The composer gives the lead role to an actor, the visual artist Gregoris Semitecolo, who is asked to emphasise the theatrical aspect. The dramatic character of the composition is directly related to the definition of the term ‘*anaparastasis’* (re-enactment): it is a ‘show’, a presentation of an event through recurring stage action that combines, inter alia, music, movement and speech. In other words, it is the replaying of an action which has already taken place in the past that is repeated herein.

Christou's interest in the concept of repetition is evident in many different aspects of his work. As can be seen in his text *Music and protoperformance*, the cyclic process is a kind of ritual in which man has been involved since the beginning of history. More specifically, this process includes the revival of a basic model and occurs in actions carried out periodically by a single person or a group of people, during events which various peoples attribute to the will of ‘destiny’ (e.g. natural disasters and disease), periodic natural phenomena (e.g. the cycle of the moon, the succession of the four seasons), the renewal of cosmogony through the celebration of each new year etc[[2]](#footnote-2). Thus, a desire for an eternal return to our roots is created which Jani Christou acknowledges when dreaming that he has lived many lives and feels nostalgic for an earlier existence with which he needs to re-connect[[3]](#footnote-3). In this way, he confirms that repetition and the cyclic process are motives not only for composition but are also more personal in nature.

In *The Pianist*,the performer stars in a re-enactment governed by the ‘*system - anti-system*’principle. In the context of the ‘*system*’, the soloist is asked to follow certain rules while taking into account that he belongs to a world whose consistency is fragile and unstable, being constantly threatened by external factors and events[[4]](#footnote-4). In contrast, the ‘*anti-system*’, in which he himself is involved, invites him to exceed the limits specified by predefined rules. Dramatic action is the means by which the performer manages to move away from the ‘system’ and thanks to which he conquers the space of the ‘anti-system’. The actions, movements, screaming and silence which reach their climax when the pianist attempts to communicate with the audience at the end of the play indicate the attempt to exceed the limits of the ‘system's’ consistency and to declare the birth of the ‘anti-system’. Thus, the ensemble musicians are invited by the symbolism of *scatter* to abandon the predetermined path and interpret their role freely. Nevertheless, the autonomy indicated by the *scatter* symbolism remains an illusion of independence, as there can be no absolute freedom[[5]](#footnote-5).

Christou lends not only a theatrical but also a psychological aspect to the events taking place during *The Pianist* and describes in detail the actions that need to be taken both by the conductor and the musicians: in principle, the conductor provides every pattern[[6]](#footnote-6) which corresponds to a particular action and then indicates to the musicians exactly the moves they need to make. As well as defining the main characteristics of the patterns, the conductor must also define their psychological attributes, providing the corresponding depiction symbolised by synthetic notation[[7]](#footnote-7). When Christou asks the conductor to talk, shout, play the gran cassa or tam-tam or go beyond the conventional boundaries of directing an ensemble, he does not seek just a sound effect and is not interested in the solely acoustic aspect of these actions. The composer does not expect the maestro to produce only sound or music, but at the same time assigns to him the duty of inspiring a particular theatrical and psychological atmosphere, as his movements, facial expressions and general attitude aim to influence the musicians and help them channel their maximum energy into the interpretation of their role.

Each musician plays a role which is an integral part of the ensemble and is asked to work together with his peers. At the same time, as part of a group consisting of several members, each musician is invited to contribute to the work with their own personal intensity and to develop a personal expressive language which is autonomous and independent from that of the others. The composer's instructions are clear. Christou explains to the musicians that although they are members of a group caught up in the same pattern, they are nevertheless on their own. He asks them to take no notice of the others and in fact to perform with individual abandon, contributing as much of their own individual inventiveness as possible within the limits set by the specifications of the pattern[[8]](#footnote-8).

The actions of the pianist, who is required to follow the above-mentioned rules and play his unusual role, depict the composer's strong theatrical intentions. One of the most dramatic scenes of the work is that which the composer calls an ‘attempt at communication with the piano’ and reveals his theatrical intentions: the soloist furiously smashes down the lid of the piano, kneels and begins a dialogue with the instrument. He speaks to the piano, crawls under the piano, caresses it, kisses it, licks it, giggles hysterically, rolls into positions of pleading and does whatever possible to express his ‘terrifying situation’, bringing to mind a character from ancient Greek tragedy. The end of the action finds him in front of the audience making a last attempt to communicate, which proves futile and makes the ending overwhelming.

While composing the *Mysterion* (1966) Christou was inspired by the tradition of his birthplace[[9]](#footnote-9) and more specifically by the *Egyptian* *Book of the Dead*[[10]](#footnote-10). In nine stages the composer presents the revival of a mystery that takes place in Tebot-Netoru-S, the eighth division of the Underworld through which Afou-Ra passes at the eighth hour of the night. The *Mysterion* was written between 1965 and 1966, but basically came into existence in a dream in 1962, when the composer dreamt of a situation and a direction which are identical to that described in the *Egyptian* *Book of the Dead*, whose existence he was unaware of at that time. In fact, when he re-read his personal notes in October 1965, he was himself surprised by this analogy[[11]](#footnote-11).

The *Egyptian* *Book of the Dead* gives instructions regarding the attitude one is to have in the realm of the Underworld. It also provides specific information about the rituals that must be performed in order to ensure eternal life for the dead, which recall the way in which Isis restored Osiris's[[12]](#footnote-12) life[[13]](#footnote-13). According to Egyptian tradition, the Underworld comprises twelve divisions through which the Sun passes during the night in the Barque of Millions of Years in order to revive its dwellers. As the Sun leaves one division to enter the next, the door is sealed and the light is lost. The souls of the screaming dead who are plunged into darkness have only one hope: to be able to board the mythical ship in order to move on to the next division[[14]](#footnote-14). Those who remember and speak the appropriate words of power achieve their goal, while the rest remain stranded in the darkness. The Sun continues its journey through the night and manages to be saved from various risks that would have been fatal if it had not known the words of power itself. It completes its journey towards the daylight, until the night comes. Then it returns to the first division of the Underworld to take the same circular course again and this is repeated continuously.

Especially in the last years of his work, Christou created compositions that are not only based on music but mainly works that embrace various forms of art[[15]](#footnote-15). Among other things, he emphasised costumes and masks which contribute an atmosphere of initiation into a work of another dimension. In terms of design, he was inspired by straight lines and wide forms covering the musicians' bodies and faces, which manages to deliver the mysticism characterising his entire work. Christou chose the mask as he is well aware of its symbolic role in primitive cultures. The mask is not only a means of disguise which helps one to hide or protect the self from evil spirits, but it is also a basic technique associated with the entry into the magical world of spirits, as visualised by each people respectively. In many different corners of the world, the mask symbolises the ancestors and it is believed that whoever wears it, incarnates them[[16]](#footnote-16). Therefore, covering one's face is one of the most feasible and at the same time vivid ways to portray the souls of the dead which appear in *Mysterion*.



Sketch from Mysterion

Christou uses movement as a medium, which contributes to the development of the play and intensifies the dramatic character inspired by the music, direction and general atmosphere of the composition by giving specific instructions to the musicians about the way in which they are to move. In *Mysterion*, the three choruses of the play give themselves up to ritual dancing and in most passages of great dramatic intensity the composer assigns an autonomous role to each musical ensemble which is part of a larger group of performers.

The continuum of ‘silent action’, a key element of the fourth part, is an idea that the composer develops not only in *Mysterion*, but also later in *Epicycle* (1968). This continuum is illustrated by a pattern that includes interconnected circles and consists of various events, such as a social event attended by a jazz music ensemble. Here the role of the continuum is to indicate a reduction to each performer. This is not a simple reduction in the intensity of events, however, but a periodic reduction in the intensity of the performers' senses which depends on the evolution of events taking place and have neither beginning nor end.

The performer's actions in *Mysterion* are based on the use of words of power from the *Egyptian* *Book of the Dead*. The words of power are components with similar properties to musical notes or musical motifs, since each one represents a sound and therefore has the same effect and function. As seen above, they are various words which the souls must remember in order to go from one division of the Underworld to the other, as well as the names of doors, gates, objects and people which the person came across in their lifetime. For example, the musicians are invited to pronounce the name of the door that leads into the eighth division of the Underworld, the names of the celebrated gods, the names of those who destroy, the names of circles, the names of secret gates and those who protect them and the name of the final door.

The particular interest of the words of power in terms of composition lies in that on the one hand they are the words which open the way to the next division of the Underworld and which have psychoplastic qualities on the other. The meaning of a word of power which comes from the *Egyptian* *Book of the Dead* and is used before a modern audience - whether German-, Greek-speaking or any other origin - cannot have any impact either on the listener or on the performer since no-one is able to understand it. In fact, it is a magical formula in an unknown language. Nevertheless*,* as Christou himself writes, it is not always necessary to understand words in order to be affected by them. It is not, for instance, necessary to understand what a rioting crowd is saying in order to be affected by the shouting[[17]](#footnote-17).

It is worth examining where this particular interest of Jani Christou in words of power originates from. As is obvious from a study of his records, in October 1966 the composer read Cyril Connolly's article ‘Spare the rod and spoil the couch’[[18]](#footnote-18) in the Sunday Times, in which the author comments on the book *Psychoanalysis Observed*[[19]](#footnote-19) and, more specifically, on the chapter by Geoffrey Gorer referring to the properties of the words of power. This writing is directly connected with the presence of words of power in the work of Christou as it distracts him and becomes an object of study.

Connolly is interested in the abuse of words of power, which the author condemns. This particular type of abuse is interesting to Connolly because, thanks to the words of power, even ‘dabblers in psychoanalysis are enabled to belittle their opponents or to cut great men or great artists down to size’, namely to exercise significant influence on the receiver. According to the author, words of power are significant in various schools of magic and esotericism and part of the vocabulary of psychoanalysis and general psychiatry of his time inherited some of their characteristics[[20]](#footnote-20). In fact, his contemporary analysts also testify that when they use a term corresponding to the words of power during a session, they acquire control of the person in front of them and explain that they are able to guide them to an in-depth understanding of their personality and a sense of personal security[[21]](#footnote-21).

On the same subject, Freud explains that words have multiple properties: inter alia, they can be used as praise and alternatively as curses, expressing invocation on the one hand or scattering on the other[[22]](#footnote-22). Freud became particularly interested in the words of power when he incidentally read one of the studies[[23]](#footnote-23) by the linguistics researcher Carl Abel, who said that the Egyptian language has a large number of words with two meanings, one of which means exactly the opposite of the other. For example, one could mention the case in which the word ‘powerful’ also means ‘powerless’, or the word ‘light’ which could also mean ‘darkness’[[24]](#footnote-24). Rivkah Schärf-Kluger, a psychoanalyst at Jung Institute who specialised in the Old Testament and Assyro-Babylonian culture, emphasised that in the Old Testament there are words and phrases which have properties similar to those of the words of power. In this case, names are not just sounds but they have a special function as they are real and thus similar in nature to what they determine, as for example the elements which are named in *Genesis* and thus feature in a ritual of creation[[25]](#footnote-25).

Jani Christou deals with the same ritual not only in his study of the words of power but also in his work *The Strychnine* *Lady* (1967). The composer addresses the cycle of creation and is mainly interested in the stage of decomposition. Christou’s interest in the cyclic process, in terms of both the composition and his existential quests, is already evident from his first composition *Phoenix Music* (1948), to which he applied a structure corresponding to the cycle of ‘birth - evolution - death - re-birth’[[26]](#footnote-26). The title of his first work was inspired by the Egyptian myth of the Phoenix, the mythical bird that lived in the deserts of Arabia, which flew to Egypt and died reaching on its destination, only to be reborn from its ashes. The goal of the journey was his rebirth, one of the stages of the circle of life according to the Egyptian tradition.

The soloist of *The Strychnine* *Lady* stars in the cyclic process: distanced from the other musicians, she remains unaffected by conditions that could affect her psychology and attitude, focuses on herself and features in a process of self-destruction. In *The Strychnine* *Lady*, various symbols from the composer's dreams connected with his personal concerns are associated with events which appear unrelated and which create a work which Christou compares to a ritual. The composition includes, inter alia, theatrical acts of the performers, the recitation of an alchemical text by smoking actors, mutterings that turn into screams and a woman's advertisement promising strychnine and unusual experiences.

Christou notes that the logic of the play coincides with the logic of dreams, where different situations are confused one with another without any apparent reason - the logic here being that of a dream in which states melt in other states for no apparent outward reason - and notes how musicians are invited to participate in a non-descriptive work that has common elements with ‘mortification’[[27]](#footnote-27). This is an indirect reference to one of the sources that inspired him to compose *The* *Strychnine Lady*: a quote from Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* referring to the story of Gabricus, as described in the alchemical writing *Rosarium Philosophorum*[[28]](#footnote-28). According to this passage, Beya hugs Gabricus so tightly and with so much love that she absorbs him into her body and splits him into many invisible pieces. So while they are two separate entities at first, they become one after this process.

The composition consists of musical and para-musical events which do not coincide since each of them can be performed independently from the other. Essentially, there is no communication between them, just as in the case of the performers who participate in each event. Each of them appears to be a stranger in a crowd, playing with the crowd, but not communicating nor seeking to communicate with the others. The only connecting bonds between them are the common signs to which all respond[[29]](#footnote-29).

In *The* *Strychnine Lady* the musico-theatrical action takes the form of a happening. Some of the actors interpret their roles seated among the audience and intervene without the public being aware at first that they are part of the play. The woman who shouts ‘I protest!’ as soon as one of the actors communicates the alleged changes in the concert programme upsets the audience who are unaware that the situation in which they are protagonists is in fact part of the play, i.e. part of the happening. As an echo of this seemingly outside intervention comes a female voice from the audience in the middle of the composition when the listener has finally become familiar with the special nature of the work, stating that ‘Johnny plays his violin very well... he is not like the others...’.

It should be pointed out that at the time of the hippie movement boom, the journalist John Davies referred to Jani Christou combining his work with the happenings: ‘It seems that the hippies are not the only ones who make happenings, if we consider that by definition a happening involves spontaneous expression[[30]](#footnote-30)’. Of course, this is not the only time the Press deals with the composer as a personality which strays from the conventional environment of ‘serious music’. Following the presentation of *Toccata* for piano and orchestra (composed in 1962) at the English Bach Festival in 1971, one of the journalists of *The Times* noted that as far as the percussion was concerned, Christou's composing approaches progressive instrumental rock and the music of Santana[[31]](#footnote-31).

Admittedly, the work of Jani Christou lies far from the conventional boundaries of musical interpretation and - especially in his last compositions - it uses various art forms to serve his multifaceted intentions. As we saw in *Mysterion*, *Anaparastasis III: The Pianist* and *The* *Strychnine Lady*, the composer's readings, his personal quest, concerns and dreams are sources and also triggers for creation and improvisation and combine with screams and silence to create theatrical tension and ceremonial atmosphere. Christou's art is inspired by the past as it connects with the tradition of primitive cultures and Egyptian and Greek cultural heritage, but at the same time it is aligned with current trends and includes contemporary forms of artistic expression that reach their peak through happenings. The composer has based his work on philosophical pursuits which generate musico-philosophical concepts and offer the ability to approach his art in a different and personal way. The words of power are elements which add multiple properties to the musical work and psychology, history and mythology are helpful in extending the area in which the composer moves and in opening up interesting prospects for the further study of the work of Jani Christou today[[32]](#footnote-32).

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1. This article is based on a part of my PhD thesis entitled *Esthétique et principes compositionnels dans l’œuvre de Jani Christou* (University of Paris VIII, December 2008). For more information please visit www.varvaragyra.com . [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mircea Eliade. *Le sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 94-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jani Christou. *Dream*. Athens, August 25-26th, 1968 (manuscript). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jani Christou. *Anaparastasis III: The Pianist* for soloist, conductor, instrumental ensemble and continuum (London: J. & W. Chester, 1971). Composer’s Notes, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jani Christou. *v.s.*, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Cf.* Anna-Martine Lucciano. *Jani Christou:* The Works and Temperament of a Greek Composer (Athens: Bibliosynergatiki, 1987), p. 104, annotation (by Giorgos Leotsakos). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Since 1960 Christou has been using 3 kinds of music notation: synthetic, proportionate and measured. *Cf.* *Enantiodromia* (London: J. & W. Chester, 1971). Composer’s Notes, p. 7-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jani Christou. *Anaparastasis III: The Pianist* for soloist, conductor, instrumental ensemble and continuum (London: J. & W. Chester, 1971). Composer’s Notes, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The composer was born in Heliopolis (Cairo) in 1926. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Cf.* *Livre des morts des anciens Égyptiens* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1967). Introduction, translation, commentaries by Paul Barguet. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Cf.* Jani Christou. *Dream*. July 28-29th, 1962. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This specific god is called ‘Osiris’ in Greek. His Egyptian name is ‘Ousir’ or ‘Asir’ and in his notes, written in English, Jani Christou refers to him as ‘Ra’. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Esther Harding. *Les mystères de la femme: interprétation psychologique de l’âme féminine d’après les mythes, les légendes et les rêves* (Paris: Payot, 1976), p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It is interesting to note the correlation between what is described in the *Mysterion* and the rituals of the Eleusinian Mysteries which inspired the Egyptians to perform ceremonies in Alexandria, considered the only place where it was feasible for the world of the living to meet the underworld. *Cf.* Carl Kerenyi. “Eleusis, Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter”, in *Archetypal Images in Greek Religion*, vol. 4 (New York: Bollingen Series LXV 4, 1967), p. 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Cf.* Jani Christou. *A music of confrontation* (1968). Source: Anna-Martine Lucciano. *Jani Christou,* *The Works and Temperament of a Greek Composer* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press, 2000), p. 145-146. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Mircea Eliade. *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase* (Paris: Payot, 1968), 143. *Cf.* Joseph Campbell. *The Masks of God vol. IV: Creative Mythology* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), p. 570. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Jani Christou. *Mysterion*. 1966 (typed text). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cyril Connolly. “Spare the rod and spoil the couch”, The Sunday Times, October 9th, 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Charles Rycroft etc. *Psychoanalysis Observed* (Aylesbury: Pelican Books, 1968). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Anthony Storr. “The Concept of Cure”, The Sunday Times*,* October 9th, 1966. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Geoffrey Gorer. “Psychoanalysis in the world” in *Psychoanalysis Observed* (Aylesbury: Pelican Books, 1968), p. 29-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Sigmund Freud. *Gesammelte Werke*. Achter Band: Werke aus den Jahren 1909-1913 (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1990), p. 165-176. *Cf*. Geoffrey Gorer. *v.s.*, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Carl Abel. *Über den Gegensinn der Urworte* (Leipzig: Verlag von Wilhelm Friedrich, 1884). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Sigmund Freud. *v.s.*, p. 170. Carl Abel. *v.s.*, p. 4*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Rivkah Schärf-Kluger. *Satan in the Old Testament* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Cf.* Piero Guarino. “Compositeurs d’Égypte: Jani Christou”, *Rythme - Revue du Conservatoire d’Alexandrie*, October 1954, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Extract of a letter from Jani Christou to Rhoda Lee Rhea, February 10th, 1967. Source: Anna-Martine Lucciano. *Jani Christou:* The Works and Temperament of a Greek Composer (Athens: Bibliosynergatiki, 1987),p.175. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Rosarium Philosophorum*. Secunda pars alchimiae de lapide philosophico vero modo preparando, continens exactam eius scientiae progressionem. Cum figuris rei perfectionem ostendentibus, Francofurti (Francfort) 1550. Source: Carl Gustav Jung. *Psychologie und Alchemie* (Olten und Freiburg im Breisgau: Walter-Verlag, 1972), p. 432. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Jani Christou. *Thoughts*. March 1967 (manuscript). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. John Davies. “Setting for a happening”, Star(Johannesburg), January 20th, 1969. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. William Mann. “English Bach Festival, Oxford Town Hall”, The Times*,* April 24th, 1971, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. This article, as well as my PhD thesis, was drawn up with the help of the following people: Mrs. Sandra Christou, Chester Music, Novello & Co Ltd, Première Music Group, Mrs. Anne Brossier, Mr. Iordanis Arzoglou, Mrs. Marina Gyra. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)