

Skalkottas Today

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Skalkottas and Dragatakis: (a)-synchronous lives and works?

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Abstract

Nikos Skalkottas (1904-1949) and Dimitris Dragatakis (1914-2001) were two composers having a different family and education background, and a rather reverse musical route. Nevertheless, the years 1944 – 1947 found them co-existing in the back stands of the National Opera’s Orchestra. It was then that Dragatakis met Skalkottas and get to know with this gifted, marginalized though, musician. The depth of their relationship is unknown, and very few evidences exists.

Nevertheless, music can speak up for itself and it is very interesting to find out surprisingly, how Skalkottas’ and Dragatakis’ music interacts. Chamber works are in question here, not only those written during the period in focus, but even music composed by Dragatakis till his appointment with atonality (1961), together with Skalkottas’ few public performances in Athens. Aspects concerning tonality, melodic exploitation, form, rhythmic patterns and timbre are studied and correlated. What seems even more interesting are the elective affinities between works of Skalkottas based on traditional Greek melodies and Dragatakis first “modal” works, as well as the path bridging Dragatakis’ first and Skalkottas’ last atonal pieces. Inquires like the above mentioned cannot be easily clarified, coming to final conclusions. What is substantial, though, historically, is to bring to light this unknown part of Greek Art Music.

Key-words: Skalkottas, Dragatakis, 12-note method.

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In his article on “The Meaning of time” (1969), Grünbaum writes that time is characterized “by a transiency of the present, which has often been called 'flux' or 'passage'.” And continues: “that the present or now is an attribute of events which is encountered in perceptual awareness.¹” This idea, emphasises on relativeness and personal perception of time,² and matches to the synchronization idea of this paper’s title, so it will be the starting point of my reference to Skalkottas and Dragatakis.

The up today published bibliography on these two very important Greek composers does not indicate the slightest relationship between them. And it seems quite normal. Skalkottas was the charismatic violinist, the pioneering composer with a unique European study background, that finally found himself marginalized in pre-war and occupied Athens. His works though, begun to be studied and appreciated in Athens in the 50’s, when avant-garde music was introduced and strongly supported as part of Cold War cultural antagonism and propaganda (Romanou, 2009, 177). Furthermore, in the last decade of the 20th century Skalkottas has been re-discovered through many premieres, very good interpretations and recordings (Romanou, 2009, 178). No existed influence by him on Greek Art music of his era is credited, since he is rather considered a precursor of modernity, a rather distant prototype of avant-garde when this music entered Greece.

Time is relevant again, and synchronization is falling apart. But what is the perceptual awareness we must take account of?

1. Skalkottas maybe wasn’t that marginalized as believed.
2. His music was probably known to a small circle, enough to create a vibration of modernity, before its promoted entry to Greece.

On the other hand, Dragatakis, a graduated violinist in 1938, having completed his studies on Harmony next to Michalis Vourtsis (1938-1940) and participated in the Greek Resistance (EAM/ National Liberation Front: 1941-1944), but also a Kalomiris close friend,

¹ Grünbaum A. (1969) The Meaning of Time. In: Rescher N. (eds) Essays in Honor of Carl G. Hempel. Synthese Library (Monographs on Epistemology, Logic, Methodology, Philosophy of Science, Sociology of Science and of Knowledge, and on the Mathematical Methods of Social and Behavioral Sciences), vol 24. Springer, Dordrecht.

² On this subject see also: Elias Giannopoulos. (2011) *Aspects of time in the music of 20th century* [Όψεις του χρόνου στη μουσική του 20ού αιώνα]. Διδακτορική Διατριβή. Αθήνα: ΕΚΠΑ.

finds himself at the back stands of the National Opera's Orchestra in the beginning of his 30's (1944). The Orchestra, more than the National Conservatory, turns to be into a place of getting to know with the Greek composers of his time: "I have met everybody, Varvoglis, Lavrangas, Petridis and Skalkottas", says Dragatakis to Thanasis Valvidas (Ēchos & Hi-Fi, 12.1992, p. 50-53) and elsewhere: "because in those [during the Occupation] days, the National Opera was like an Orphanage: people had nowhere else to go, so they spent their time in Union [Σωματείο/Sōmateio] at the upper stage of the Opera" (D. Dragatakis open interview to Spiros Mazis at the Artistic Composers' Residence [Kallitechnikē Estia Sinthetōn/KESY], 16.12.2000).

Regarding his memories of Skalkottas, Dragatakis testimonies: "Skalkottas was exploring his musical ideas on his violin during the break times, he stopped at some time to play the backgammon and continued the exploration of things he would use in his works (D. Dragatakis open interview Anargioros Deniozos at IEMA, 6.4.1998)." In another occasion he was much more expressive: "He went upstairs to the big hall and played the backgammon. He really enjoyed that!" (KESY, 16.12.2000/Mazēs). This is an unknown description³ of Skalkottas, not only as a devoted composer, but also as a socialized man and an enthusiastic player.

Furthermore, Dragatakis narrates a very interesting story regarding his relationship with Skalkottas. I quote: "**There is a problem with Skalkottas. He learned the 12tone method in Germany and nobody knows if this had been good for him or not. [..]. I was studying fugue⁴ then and I took a theme to him to write me the answer. He looked it over and he brought it back to me the day after. I cannot fix an answer for you, I have mixed it up, he said.** (KESY, 16.12.2000/ Mazēs).

This episode, as well as the anecdotic backgammon Skalkottas' hobby, have to be understood inevitably under a relative time reference, that is according to our knowledge of the mature Dragatakis way of expressing. For those of us that had met him, it is obvious that this phrase had many layers of meaning. The elliptical and allegorical character of Dragatakis oral expression, connected to traditional *paralogi*,⁵ is documented not only in his interviews (on newspapers, radio and tv) and in his recorded public conversations mostly at the end of

³And elsewhere: Skalkottas was testing at his violin and in the meantime, we went to a place nearby to play the backgammon. (Th. Valvidas, Ichos, Hi-Fi, 12.1992, p.)

⁴ Dragatakis was not officially in the class of Counterpoint-Fugue. He may though had started lessons interrupted at 1947 and continued long after (1953).

⁵ Regarding literary genres, see:

https://repository.kallipos.gr/bitstream/11419/6433/1/02_Chapter_2.pdf

his life, but also in his own texts written for some of his works.⁶

The fact that Dragatakis refers to a fugue exercise is of high importance, having in mind that such a reference can be detected just once more in his documented speech.⁷ In fact, this reference reveals an exchange of compositional ideas between the 40-year old Skalkottas and the 30-year old Dragatakis. The latter, probably unsatisfied by the creative solutions of his teacher and mentor, searched for another point of view next to “the much talked Skalkottas”, to use a phrase of Nikolaos Dragatakis, composer’s younger brother (25.1.2002).⁸ It cannot be defined if Dragatakis was searching for another way of bridging Epirus tradition with European music, or if he was looking for a compositional method different from what he had already seen and hear in the National Conservatory and the Opera. Regardless of whether he had heard Skalkottas’ works, it was widely known that he had studied abroad and brought with him the fresh European style, so is very likely that Dragatakis wanted a sense of his knowledge and technique, as he used to say: “You have to get to meet everything, and then to choose exactly what you need in order to be yourself.” (IEMA, 6.4.1998). If he had ever had a series of typical lessons with Skalkottas he would certainly had declared so. The fact that he describes the fugue episode indicates for sure a compositional relationship in between them, even short.

What is evidenced though, are the few known performances of Skalkottas’ works given by Romanou (2009, 165-185), that Dimitris Dragatakis was able to hear in Athens, after his relocation from Epirus (1928) and before leaving for Northern Greece (1947-1949).

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The most likely work of Skalkottas with which Dragatakis came to see and hear seems to be Sonatina n.1, for violin and piano, and specifically its 2nd Part Andantino, a twelve-tone piece, with some tonal references, mostly hidden under his multi-level polyphony, according to Laaris [Λαάρης] (1999, as given in Romanou 2009, 174).

⁶ See: <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.08120>.

⁷ It is about an episode about one of his first pieces (*Little Ballad Mikrē Ballada*) when he presented it to his teacher in harmony (Vourtsēs) or Counterpoint (Zōras) and to Kalomirēs himself.

⁸ Dragatakis brother, Nikolaos (1916-2017) had declared to be at both of his interviews (25.1.2002, 22.12.2006) at M. Kalopana that “in the last row of the second violins was sitting also [as D. Dragatakis did] the notorious Skalkottas, for whom nobody could imagine at that time what a great music he had been writing. Up today, I find it difficult to believe that this quiet man has left behind him such a work”.

The piece, as stated in its title, is written in a monothematic sonata form, row 1 standing as theme. Rows 2 to 5 recall melodic and rhythmic theme motives, being different from row 1. In fact, the last three rows miss notes, while the 5th misses 5, being actually a heptachord. What is really interesting is that, while thematic material is all in violin's voice, recapitulation happens at the upper piano line (O1) while the violin enters in strettto with a variation of the first row (O1'). The equilibration of the two instruments is completed at the CODA, where both violin and piano (lowest voice) exhibit two main theme motifs (one each), on two conjunct pentachords (A-C#, for the violin and C-F, for the piano).

The elliptical use of rows (apart from the two first), as well as the repetition of notes before the complete row is heard, is usual at Skalkottas works, although evidenced here in a rather early 12-note work of his. This element, altogether with the complete absence of techniques like Inversion, Retrograde and Retrograde Inversion emphasizes the musical rather than the theoretical manipulation of the series by Skalkottas. According Mantzourani (*The Life and Twelve-Note Music of Nikos Skalkottas*, 2011, Bristol: Ashgate, 83) this belongs to Skalkottas' idiosyncratic type of sets. Probable reason for this use of the twelve-note row is Schonberg himself, urging his students to find their own way through dodecaphonic music (Leonard Stein, *Style and Idea. Selected Writings of A. Schoenberg*, σ. 386). In accordance with previous remarks on *Sonatina*, is the comment of Zervos (2001, 39-40) : "Skalkottas starts, like his teacher, his first 12-note works in 1928, using 1 row and very soon he adds more, depending on the size of the piece" [...] "if for Schoenberg row is the very beginning of every thematic and structural parameter, for Skalkottas, applies the opposite". (trans. Bu M. Kalopana).

Vertical resonances respond to chords often Diminished, and some relationships of Functional Harmony can be detected. F# is the main tonal center of Exhibition coming back at Recapitulation, but resolving in a final F with major seventh. In Development a coming back tonal center is B chord in various versions (minor, major, Diminished etc.) with many more chords belonging to "expanded" harmony. Must be clarified that chords come up basically from the piano part, existing though in specific meters also in the violin line (m. 23-31). The 12-note melodic line is almost totally atonal. Passing tonal centers at the melody usually co-exist with different centres on the chord section, creating a bitonality effect.

Furthermore, techniques like harmonic sequences (n. 1-4 and 5-8), as well as symmetrical (arch) chord structures (n. 8-9) and vast repetitions of chord couples (m. 12-17, 20, 29-31, 32-37) connect Skalkottian music both to neo-classicism (sequences) and to

eclecticism (regarding Bartokian characteristics). Mutatis mutandis, between twelve-note rows (melodic line) and accompaniment applies what Koutsobina remarks for *Tender Melody* (AK 65, Skalkotta's penultimate work): "The melodic line is paired with an ostinato chordal accompaniment at the piano part, during the whole work" (p. 48).

Rhythm displays impressive vitality and even complexity, mostly regarding chords and less the solo melodic line. Jazz type syncopation, is widely used here by Skalkottas. Repeated rhythmic motifs of dotted semiquavers, mostly on vertical structures, do not just function like a basso ostinato, but are of fundamental importance, as they apply a dialogue with the melodic line, exchanging elements and promoting the elaboration.

In fact, *Sonatina n.1* according to Eva Mantzourani (2011, 4)⁹ belongs to Skalkottas's Berlin period (1921-1933) and specifically in his "Schoenberg years (11.1927-6.1931)" during which his compositional characteristics concern "a gradual development of his idiosyncratic twelve-note technique".¹⁰ When he meets Dragatakis at the national Opera's Orchestra Skalkottas is between the Middle (1940-45) and Final (1945-1949) Athenian years (1933-49). According Mantzourani, in his Middle Athenian years Skalkottas reaches the limits of development in his 'free' dodecaphonic technique, and his Final years he works on another version of his dodecaphonic technique, that is '**tonal serialism**'. Giorgos Sakallieros (Musicology, 12, 2012, 194) characterises many works of Skalkotta's Athenian period (*Little Suites for violin and cello, 1946, 1949, Concerto for two violins and orchestra, 1944-45, Duo for violin and cello, 1947*) as "twelve-note works where folk-style elements are incorporated."

Dragatakis, had probably heard, seen and maybe studied this piece (1903-31 or later). He also seems to have talked with Skalkottas about compositional techniques (5.1944-5.1947). So, under Skalkottas old and newer influence, Dragatakis writes and very soon publishes a piece for violin and piano, probably before leaving Athens in 1947.

This small work is well known among Greek musicians and audience, is probable his mostly performed work till now, recorded many times and having met various transcriptions both by the composer and others. I am talking about *Nanourisma/Berceuse*. Its well-known *cantabile* theme seems a young expression of Dragatakis mature period (1980-2001). How would though be ever possible for the student of Kalomoirēs to write a piece, with such a personal use of Greek tradition, if he had never come up to Skalkottas?

⁹ Mantzourani, Eva. *The Life and Twelve-Note Music of Nikos Skalkottas*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2011.

¹⁰ Relevant works according Mantzourani are considered: the First and Second Sonatinas for violin and piano, the First Quartet to the First Piano Concerto and the Octet.

Before answering directly, let's have a close look at the work. It is a character piece in monothematic sonata's form, having a double coda, both at the end of development and recapitulation. The main theme is exposed on violin, but its development begins in piano, both at the upper and lower voices and continues in the solo instrument. At the coda of development there is an exchange of a theme's motif in both piano hands, while violin elaborates another theme's motive. In Recapitulation, after violin's re-exposition on the three first meters of the theme, starts a final dialogue between violin and piano based on the second theme's motive. In fact, even in Exposition the beginning theme's motive is firstly heard by the piano, like a prelude, before theme's exposition at violin (m. 8). As a whole, the main theme's idea runs in piano all through piece like an *idée fixe* unifying the whole.

Main tonality is D minor, rather seen as the d mode of Greek traditional Music or Dorian with a B flat when descending. D mode as a tonal reference predominates Exposition and Recapitulation. Development is predictably on the tonality A, seen altogether as a pentatonic minor scale, and minor melodic or harmonic. Here, every chord succession can be explained by principles of Functional Harmony. What is important though are suspended and passing notes, as well as repeated motives, that create a harmonic fluidity and a sense of balancing tonality. While in *Sonatina*, the violin's line does not usually correspond with piano chords creating a bitonal effect, in *Berceuse* the solo melody interferes to chords, transforming their essence. It seems that Dragatakis finds it difficult to leave out of tonality, and uses a moving chromatism to elaborate his harmonic connections.

Dragatakis exposes mainly two simple rhythmic motives, one as echo of the basic theme's idea (dotted crotchet-quaver and quaver-double semiquaver), and a long repetition of quaver couples that function like baroque's ostinato¹¹ and can even have a traditional origin (*isokratēma* accompaniment, *ison* or drone singing)¹² in polyphonic traditional Epirus songs.

¹¹ Schnapper, Laure. "Ostinato." Grove Music Online. 2001; Accessed 26 Nov. 2019. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000020547>.

¹² "Epirus (as elsewhere in the Balkans) has a diaphonic style with a choral drone in three parts employing microintervals (see [Albania, §II, 1](#)). It is described by the singers themselves as 'Albanian' (with a narrow tonal range in the second part) or 'pastoral Vlach' (with the second part falsetto). Here, as elsewhere, it imitates the sound of Byzantine bells. Its origin and antiquity are not known and there is no proof of an archaic or monogenetic origin. The rhythm is regular or in a metre of five beats, and also occurs with seven syllables in the old Albanian area of settlement around Parnassos (Arahova)." Romanou, Katy, Thomas J. Mathiesen, Alexander Lingas, Nikos Maliaras, Achilleus Chaldaiakis, John Plemmenos, Pyrros Bamichas, Kostas Kardamis, Sofia Kontossi, Myrto Economides, Dafni Tragaki, Ioannis Tsagkarakis, Kostas Chardas, Manolis Seiragakis, Sotirios Chianis, and Rudolph M. Brandl. "Greece." Grove Music Online. 28 Mar. 2019; Accessed 26 Nov. 2019. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-3000000167>.

This technique is not alien even in Skalkottas Sonatina. The difference here is that Dragatakis rhythmic motif in accompaniment is altogether a melodic one (minor descending third), and is repeated unchanged till the very end of the piece. The use of alternating basic meters (2/4, 3/4, 4/4) should also be mentioned.

Last but not least, themes characteristics. Dragatakis makes a theme that last 14 whole meters, rather big within a piece of 44 meters. On the contrary, in Development, theme is elaborated twice within 15 (11+4) bars and Recapitulation contains just the 5 first meters of the theme. **Looking closer at the theme, in all its three entrances, it is obvious that each time contains all of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale. In fact, in its first appearance (O1), one can see a frequent repetition of the former six tones and a delay of the latter six. The characteristic of repetition of tones inside the row, before all notes are heard, is also present in Skalkottas' s Sonatina.** In *Berceuse* It is obvious that Dragatakis needs fourteen whole meters to appear the row for the first time, and just four and seven to re-enter it in Development. It seems that it is the first time that Dragatakis is using the technique, obtaining gradually the ability to manipulate the row. The gradually achieved competence is confirmed by the fact that in each coming row, repeats are less. What's more, in row 3 the first eight notes are exposed without no repetition! Rows coming out of theme (O1) and its elaboration (O2, O3) are shown on the presentation. Not surprisingly, the F sharp /G flat note, that missed rows 2 and 3 comes to full light under a trill (m. 31-32/Development's CODA) that creates a cadence to D mode.

My so far study on Dragatakis works has bring to light his techniques from 1970 onwards, characterized by plurality of styles, in the sense of eclecticism and kaleidoscopic transformation. Dragatakis did never really aborted tonality (mostly as a pentatonic, but even modal and diatonic reference) but never did either excluded chromaticism and atonality in his works. The ways in which he applies atonality have so far been connected to chromatic groups of notes (transforming sets) and rarely to 12-note rows. The apocalypses though I came before, analyzing his young *Berceuse* respectively to Skalkottas's *Sonatina*, obliges me to make two furthermore crucial concluding remarks:

1. Dragatakis did not come into contact for the first time with innovative techniques after the WWII.
2. Dragatakis ability to incorporate in his musical language every musical style was ought to the **free** use of the 12-note row. And this knowledge seems, according to the elements exhibited, that has come directly from Skalkottas.

Generalizing, a reconsideration has to be done both for Dragatakis importance and Skalkottas influence in Greek Art Music of their time-being. Considering the latter altogether with Mitropoulos as ancestors of music modernity in Greece, we shall name Dragatakis as the silent bridge to the generation of the post war avant-gardism. Even if the well-known modernist teacher had been Papaioannou (1910-1989)¹³, Dragatakis seems to have stand also as teacher that acted without words, just music. Thus, and in addition to many biographical similarities with Skalkottas (marriage in 1946, two kids in Greece, Connection to Greek Resistance,¹⁴ composing all day long after work, smokers rather heavy, sudden death) that may be coincident, but still are too many, I conclude that Skalkottas and Dragatakis lives have been far more believed synchronized not just between them, but also regarding to Greek Art Music History.

As a closing remark, Skalkottas played a good backgammon for sure, but Dragatakis also knew with whom to play.

¹³ Papaioannou names its compositional periods as follows: 1932-38/ forward impressionism, 1939-43/towards folklore and National School of Music, 1944-52/use of byzantine music elements, 1953-62/turn to new techniques: atonality, 12 tone, modes, 1963-65/serialism and post-serialism, 1966-1989/technique completely personal (Lexicon of Greek Music, v. 4, p. 614).

¹⁴ Skalkottas spent some weeks in prison, falsely accused of being a member of the Greek Resistance, “an experience which he endured with stoic fortitude, although it crucially affected his health”, as his biographer, John Thornley evidences. On the other hand, Dragatakis being an active member of the Greek Resistance (EAM) was never openly accused and never imprisoned, despite the fact that he was keeping hiding himself almost until the end of the civil war, being often unseent from the Opera’s Orchestra and disappeared from Athens during the period 1947-1949. Nevertheless, he had been considered a leftist for the rest of his life, facing various consequences.