

## **NICOLAS ASTRINIDIS (1921-2010): COMPOSITIONAL LANGUAGES IN HIS 'DEUX PIÈCES EN STYLE GREC' FOR VIOLIN AND PIANO**

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**SUMMARY.** The representatives of the Greek National School followed various stylistic trends according to their background, studies and aesthetical preferences. Thus, elements derived from classicism, romanticism, impressionism or even modernism are utilized in combination with Byzantine and Greek folk music timbre in the entire oeuvre of these composers. The diverse compositional approaches not only revolve around the in principle incompatibilities between all the above mentioned musical entities, but furthermore drastically differ from each other due to the individual ways of handling and balancing the synthesization of aesthetically "diverging" characteristics. Nicolas Astrinidis came in contact with many cultures. He can be characterized as an integrated musician since his artistic skills reached the highest level in piano performing, orchestra conducting and composing. Furthermore, his collaboration as a performer with some of the most important soloists of his generation provided him with a profound knowledge of instrumental techniques. Here, the compositional languages in his '*Deux Pièces en Style Grec*' for violin and piano (composed in 1947) are analyzed. These pieces illustrate an inventive synthesization of Western music compositional techniques and aesthetic approaches with the Greek folk music timbre.

**Keywords:** Nicolas Astrinidis; Western music; romanticism; impressionism; modernism; Byzantine music; Greek folk music; Greek National School; piano; violin

### **The Composer Nicolas Astrinidis; a Brief Biography**

Nicolas Astrinidis (1921-2010) was a multidimensional music personality. He was a composer, pianist, conductor and pedagogue. As a child he grew up in a multicultural environment in Bessarabia (Ackerman) since his father was Greek and his mother Russo-Romanian. As an adult he came in contact with

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many cultures; he studied music in Bucharest (Romania), he made his first but important career steps in Cairo (Egypt), he completed his music studies in Paris (France), he made an international career both as a pianist and composer and when he became forty-four years old he moved to Thessaloniki (Greece) where he spent the rest of his life being focused mostly on composition and teaching. As a composer he is one of the last representatives of the Greek National School. His oeuvre synthesizes in an imaginative way elements from romanticism, impressionism and Greek folk music (as well as Byzantine music) with modern compositional techniques. His works are characterized by inspiration, ingenuity, and profound knowledge of instrumental techniques and felicitous use of expressive means.

### **The Greek National School; issues and potentials**

When talking about synthesizing Byzantine or Greek folk music with romanticism, impressionism and modern compositional techniques, we should always have in mind that the above fields are seemingly incompatible. On the one hand, Byzantine music (Greek Orthodox Church sacred vocal music) is actually monophonic with a rudimentary form of accompaniment based on pedal tones (called “isokratis”); Greek folk music is in a similar way mainly monophonic, but with an enriched (when compared to Byzantine music) type of accompaniment which is based on simple harmonies. Both Byzantine and Greek folk music feature the same scales, which do not resemble at all the western music ones, since they are a special form of modes constructed on non-equal temperaments. Furthermore, the structure of both Byzantine and Greek folk music bears virtually no resemblance to western music forms (such as sonata, rondo, etc.). On the other hand, romanticism, impressionism and modernism each have a clear aesthetic context and theoretical background characterized by individualities regarding the harmonic texture, structural preferences, melodic treatment, instrumental writing and vocal techniques.

### **The ‘*Deux Pièces en Style Grec*’; an Overall Outlook**

Nicolas Astrinidis - due to his background and deep as well as broad knowledge on music- assimilated the qualities of these individual music genres not as contradicted and incompatible entities, but as optimal realizations for diverse types of music expression. This is the hypostasis of his highly successful symbiotic usage of these elements under the perspective of an innovative effort for expanding the expressive potentials of the Greek National School.

His *'Deux Pièces en Style Grec'* (*'Two pieces in Greek style'*) for violin and piano -although not based on original Greek folk melodies- imitate the archaic simplicity and melodic clarity of Greek folk music. Moreover, the adoption, inventive adaptation and imaginative utilization of modern compositional techniques along with romantic and impressionistic elements result in an attractive musical achievement regarding the harmonic context, thematic treatment and development, contrapuntal activity and instrumental writing. In general terms, we could note the resemblance to the Byzantine music scales at the melodic level, use of "isokratis"-like pedal tones at the harmonic level, impressionistic-like chord progressions, Greek folk dance rhythmical patterns, romantic expressional approach and mood, utilization of modality as well as an expanded form of tonality, usage of pentatonic scales, contrapuntal "dialogues" between the violin and the piano, thematic treatment mastery and instrumental writing artistry. The piano and violin parts have supplementary and of equal importance roles in these pieces. We should underline a paradox at this point; the Greek temper of the pieces is more than obvious and dominates, although the aesthetically contradicted Western music compositional techniques and Greek folk music elements coexist.

In the end, we should mention that here both the violinist and pianist should have a very high level of performing skills along with artistic maturity in order to achieve the desirable result for the above pieces.

### **The 1<sup>st</sup> Piece from *'Deux Pièces en Style Grec'***

In the opening part (duration ca. 1'58") of the 1<sup>st</sup> piece Nicolas Astrinidis combined an "isokratis"-like pedal tone on a G#, a micrograph of a chaconne-like Variations form based on impressionistic-inspired chord progressions, Greek-folk-music-originated scales and almost romantic mood with contrapuntal dialogues between the instruments. The "isokratis" type of accompaniment in Byzantine music results in an almost stationary harmonic foundation for the melody. Here, this foundation refers to the harmonic progressions, which bear close connection with impressionism. The harmonic progressions not only function as an accompaniment for the melodic as well as contrapuntal evolution and development, but additionally follow a chaconne-like Variations form. The scales used in this piece are similar to the Byzantine music modes. Specifically, the melodic interval of an augmented 2<sup>nd</sup> (which is very common in both Byzantine and Greek folk music) is widely used. Moreover, we should mention that the principal melody in the opening of this piece is limited to the range of one octave and is characterized by simplicity, bringing to mind the vocal hypostasis of Byzantine music in this way.

## Ex. 1

Opening of the 1<sup>st</sup> piece

The middle part gradually unfolds from calmness to intension. In the beginning, some thematic material which is derived from the opening part in combination with some new motivic ideas are employed, while directly afterwards a *stretto*-like explosion of instrumental writing, *tempo* changes (*accelerando*), dynamics alterations (*crescendo*) and harmonic progressions based on 3<sup>rd</sup> intervals lead to the peaceful conclusion.

The conclusion of this piece, although not being identical to the opening, could be characterized as a form of an altered recapitulation, since it bears close connection with it; it is based on the same thematic material (harmonic progressions, motives and mood) and features similar instrumental techniques.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Piece from 'Deux Pièces en Style Grec'

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> piece Nicolas Astrinidis combined pentatonic scales, modality, a 7/8 rhythmical pattern (this is actually derived from the most popular Greek dance called "Kalamatianos"), surprising harmonic progressions and key changes, imaginative thematic treatment and varicoloured expressive means, which are formed in conjunction with the dance-inspired character of the piece. This piece is more energetic and luminous than the 1<sup>st</sup> one.

## Ex. 2

Opening of the 2<sup>nd</sup> piece

In detail, in the opening, the piano part performs an accompanimental pattern which is based on the G-A-B-D-E pentatonic scale (the G is omitted).

The violin part performs the melody which is based on the A Aeolian mode. The motivic material derived from the accompanimental scheme and the melodic part is utilized either unchanged or in transfigured forms and constitutes the basis for constructing this piece. At this point, we could underline a parallelism between the two pieces; the 1<sup>st</sup> one is based on a chaconne-like type of chord progressions reminding of a harmonic *ostinato*-like accompaniment, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> one is based on a repeated motivic pattern bringing to mind a melodic *ostinato*-like accompaniment.

In the middle part of the piece the mood is ethereal; the dynamics range from **ppp** to **p** and the violin part employs the harmonics technique. The thematic material here is identical to the one of the opening part, but the character is completely different. We could also mention the contrapuntal dialogues between the two parts.

By the end of the middle part a *crescendo* along with an enrichment of the instrumental writing leads to the conclusion of the piece. At this section, we notice the utilization of an inversed form of the principal motivic material in conjunction with fast passages on the violin. The *tempo* follows an *accelerando*, but the principal rhythmical articulation (apart from the fast passages) remains unchanged.

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