

# **THOUGHTS DURING "THE DIFFICULT SECOND TIME". REFLECTIONS ON CONCERT AND NETWORKING ACTIVITIES IN ATHENS, 22.APRIL - 20.MAY 2023.**

**by Carl Bergstroem-Nielsen**

## **WHAT WENT BEFORE**

For the second time the Danish Institute in Athens made it possible for me to spend a month in the city and continue my activity there as a composer and musician of experimental music. While Danish readers may look into my previous reports (Bergstroem-Nielsen 2020 and 2022), let it suffice here to mention that I create scores as frameworks for experimental, improvised music. In 2007 Greek composer Alexis Porfiriadis started giving workshops at various conservatories and universities in Thessaloniki and Athens, using some of my scores among those of other composers which were available on the internet. Over the years a collaboration took place in which I also had pieces by him performed in Denmark and published at the Internet Archive International Improvised Music Archive (Porfiriadis 2008ff). Participation in the social media Facebook also got me into touch with an additional number of musicians and composers - I could see scores, hear the music and we could write together. My first physical visit to the Greek scene was in 2014 in Thessaloniki during which we discussed the PhD matters and played with the 6daExit group, later came a short journey to a concert 2019 - then a stay planned for 2020, but because of the pandemic it became just a meeting and a saying hello between some of us before I had to travel home after 5 days. Fortunately plans were realised 2022 - and followed up now in 2023.

This years' situation was an instance of "the difficult second time". What to describe in a report of activities resembling previous occasions? While preparing for the concert at the Institute I caught the idea to put the main focus on some music issues I was inspired to think over and developing ideas about. Before proceeding to that, here is a shortlist of significant activities during my stay:

- 5.May, Concert at Danish Institute with WHI ensemble (compositions played, See Video and audio (2023)
- 10.May, Recording with Sea Orchestra (playing as improviser). See Video and audio

(2023)

- 13.May, Concert at P6 (Chimeres), with individual Greek improvisors and WHI (playing as improvisor)
- 15.May, Concert at a private rooftop in Koukaki for an invited audience, with Sea Orchestra (playing as improvisor)
- 17.May, Concert at Attika Odeion Conservatory with Diathlasis vocal ensemble (compositions played, see Video and audio (2023))
- 19.May, Meeting for exchanging with Marina Stavrou (PhD writer and visual artist) about graphic communication and its functions
- Getting to know compositions by colleagues closely at the concerts and their rehearsals. Email discussion in depth with Fani Kosona on a work of hers.

Additionally I have attended a number of rehearsals, involving some instruction/supervision connected to my own compositions. And informal meetings have yielded a bonus of inspiration and renewed contact. Two arrangements at the Institute, Kafedaki and Annual Meeting provided receptions where to meet the other stipendiates, so did also living in the same house and sharing the roof terrace at Maggina, and the Institute concert also was followed by a reception. So a "trans-disciplinary informal symposium-like atmosphere" could be said to exist. There were various meeting situations also outside the Institute, and some regular private appointments. All in all, the totality of activities amount to a weaving together of experiences in a working process greatly facilitated by having more than a short time available.



*Fig. 1. WHI ensemble playing Frameworks at the Danish Institute. From left: Dmitri Papavasileou, Vassiliki Nikolaou, Valia Christopoulou (at the piano), Nikos Panagiotakis, Niki Krasaki, Antonis Pantazis, Margarita Lampou*

## HOW MUSIC MIRRORS (AND CONTRIBUTES TO SHAPING) SOCIAL ROLES

Musicians perform in many groupings - from solo to large orchestras - and interaction between different constellations may take place in different forms and with different speeds. What a listener being present to a concert experiences is not just sound, but humans making it and coordinating each others' contributions. Listeners are also affected by the size of the social formation they hear, whether the feeling is intimacy or something public.

Thus it is possible for composers to investigate different designs of such social groupings and their shifts. Moreover, the musicians can interact. Western classical music before 1600 had polyphony (roughly= independent parts, especially as to melodic material) as a normal structural device; it was further cultivated by J.S.Bach in his fugues. Heterophony means that parts are independent to some degree, but resemble each other and this can be found in many music forms. According to Vassilis Chatzimakris who lead a workshop in which I participated 2022 in Athens, traditional Cretian music allows for so-called heterophony in which there can be a main melody, but it may be elaborated freely. Thus, musicians may move at different speeds, playing fewer or more tones and - their parts become more independent.

Dependence and independence is essential in freely improvised music, and my compositions are usually for improvisors. During several decades I have worked with special focus on the interaction aspect; Bergstroem-Nielsen (2003) is one article about this. The PhD Porfiriadis (2016) is an important text on the matter, and there has been a follow-up in the recent article on the background of the Anestis Logothetis Centenary Symposium in Athens (2021).

Collective decisions, and how they can be carried out while playing without conducting or use of verbal means, is one special and demanding form. Fig. 2 shows an excerpt from Frameworks 1 which was performed at the Danish Institute concert.



Fig.2 Excerpt from Bergstrøm-Nielsen: Frameworks 1

A digression to the concept of music material can be made here. Which sounds are brought into play? In short, we are dealing with sound in a much more inclusive way than in tonal

music. Preceding the Attika Odeion concert Fani Kosona and Dmitri Papavasileou held a lecture about experimental music notations and included numerous examples from my recent composition Harmony II. In Fig.3 below the focus is on "needs for expansion". Instead of a traditional drone there is a more complex and vocal structure which is relatively fixed in its main character, but not concerning details.



Fig. 3 Composer, Prof. Fani Kosona pointing out a complex vocal drone-like structure in Harmony II

Back to the issue of social roles in music playing - even if the material is flexible and there is consequently more latitude, precise split-second action may be required, as we saw in Fig.1. However, Frameworks 2 and 10 were played as well at this occasion. In no. 10, some very different group behaviours are outlined, diverse versus homogenous as far as the two first ones are concerned.

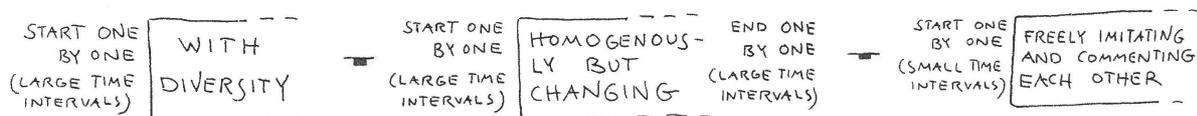


Fig.4. Frameworks 10 with contrasting group characteristics

The theme of social behaviour was taken up compositionally in numerous compositions by Alexis Porfiriadis. "Between the We and the I" from 2018 (see the collection Porfiriadis (2008ff)) presents this programatically in the title. It also came to the foreground in compositions by Konstantina Samakovli and Dmitri Papavasileou, too, quite recently. One composition by Samakovli bears the "UNITY ['I' - 'You' - 'We']" and presents different structures such as for instance small elements mixed together and a coordinated structure

changing its dynamics and speed. This piece is done not with strict conducting, but with some guidance from the composer who was participating herself.

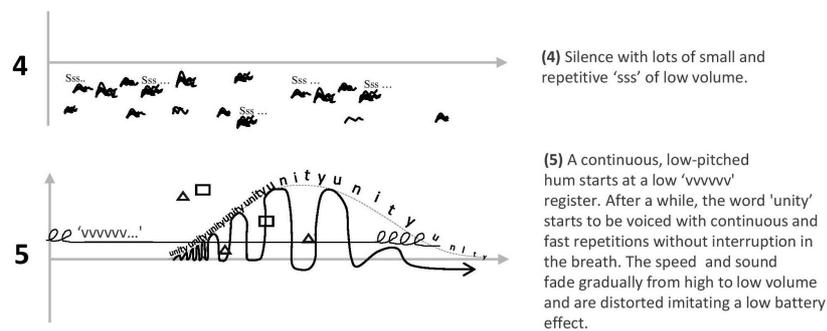


Fig.5 Excerpt from "UNITY ['I' - 'You' - 'We']" by Konstantina Samakovli. Graphics by Sofia Nikolaidou.

"In the darkness" by Fani Kosona had short structures resembling chords, but employing greater freedom of pitch - singers had to aim for specific pitches, but one did not have to hit the "target" exactly, doing so within a tolerance was considered a correct rendition. This way, it seemed that when this demand was met, then intervals between parts could stand out as different in the different "chords" (clusters). "Le Phénix" by Dimitri Papavasileou used two-part singing untraditionally by loosening the material in a similar way as to the interval between parts, but still demanding a detailed coordination, thus opening up this kind of structure from the traditional functionalities of upper and middle parts. This was performed at the Diathlasis concert, as were also my Harmony II and other pieces. This piece aims at treating the harmony concept in a slightly ironic way, depicting static but subtly changing situations.

## DOES MUSIC HAVE A PHYSICAL IDENTITY?

Participation in several different sessions with Sea Orchestra (Dimitris Talarougas, Vassilios Kokkas, Maria Tzanou, Vassilios Rouvas) provided surprising experiences with their emphasis on audio post-production. This was so even on the background of my experiences with electronic and electroacoustic music, with online playing and with mixing, filtering etc. of recordings.

There were some stimulating hints in our interdisciplinary social and conversational environment at DIA to some contingent aspects of this: Niels Bjørn, urbanist, had touched upon how the auditive dimension of physical environments affect humans, and Martina Stavrou (a Greek PhD student we

met at the DIA reception) researched into emergence processes in artistic creation. Both of these perspectives point into the depth of the sound perception and, more concretely, to details in how the music appears and "presents itself".

What surprised me was the substantial use of reverberation and a contrasting with what had happened acoustically. Further, the use of some occasional small procedures to improve the artistic result, in the form of thinning out in one part in order to achieve more transparency and, conversely, at another spot adding a repetition of a short statement through copy-paste. Regulating loudness levels in individual parts comprised, however, many small regulations, but they were less far-reaching, rather comparable to what a sound technician might do with amplified instruments during a concert.

Being used to thinking along the lines of "simply documenting" and not least our discussion, this posed some questions to me. Heavy reverberation has an immediate charm ... one may think of singing in the bathroom, passing through a viaduct, entering a very large church, etc. At the same time, it can be perceived as a cliché. But again, most music listened to in the world pass through such procedures in studios. And, as we were not all present in the same room at the recording session, what *was* in fact the "natural" way? This viewpoint could be extended to concerts, too - we sit at different positions and do not hear exactly the same thing. Concerning direct changes to what we actually did, I asked out in our chat group where they thought the limit was - what is "just" cosmetics, what is change? One may talk about a "virtual space".

A philosophical talk resulted - "OTO and Carl" (2023). Dimitris stated that there was the ethical aim in the post-production to act empathically, "with respect to the musical idea or the dynamic tension that each spontaneously wanted", and doing so sparingly - "to go with Flow and intervention only with small dots..". He even extended this view to the general condition of modernity in which "for sure the identity is fragmented and the ego is divided". I thought there was a contradiction between the "correction" he wrote he had undertaken and the freely flowing state he described. He then pointed, however, to the cyclic process in the group: "Actually! the improvement is possible through the repetition of the "ritual"... for example the periodic sessions...". Perhaps this is to be understood as a form of meditative "perfection" within the collective creative work, like in the terminology of Eastern philosophies - opposed to the Western concept of "progress". "We operate in different environments every day, having different roles" Dimitris had said. Indeniable, yet thought-provoking.



*Fig.6 Playing with the Sea Orchestra. From left: the present author, Vasillis Rouvas, Marie Tzanou, Vassilios Kokkas, Dimitris Talarougas.*

## **HOW DO CONCERTS BECOME SUCCESSES?**

Two co-inhabitants at Maggina described unanimously after the concert the music as "soothing/relaxing". This is remarkable, as music sound that does not follow tonal patterns may also sometimes be perceived as noisy, strongly irritating etc. Something similar was once again voiced to me by an audience member at the concert with Sea Orchestra: "I'm used to hear opera, but I'm totally for it!".

As we know, public criticism may utter evaluations anywhere between the extremes of very positive and very negative, probably mirroring what audience people may also think or feel. As artists, we may feel confused about "how we can do our best in the best way", so as to avoid undue artistic compromises, but still approach audiences in the good and friendly manner they deserve.

These remarks, and the subsequent conversation with Marina Stavrou, prompted the idea coming to me that the *general atmosphere* is crucial - how well one feels about coming to the concert. The art perception/reception situation is a thing just as sensitive as the art creation one. Audience members like to be fascinated - but also to be in good company, even if they come alone to an arrangement, and cultural events allow perfectly for that. The presence of other, even unknown people, being in good spirit and looking approachable, is stimulating, contagious. Exactly *what* triggers a person is subjective and situations are not predictable. - At the other end of the scale: outside Attika Odeion Conservatory there is a graffiti stating "WHY SO SERIOUS", hardly a fair evaluation, but an instance of music being based on classical music being met with a prejudice. It might point to the value of humour.

Like all human encounters things can go well or wrong or in-between, but one more phenomenon seems to be important in the development of a good atmosphere: the *critical mass*. This may have more than just a persuasive effect, rather a seductive one in a good sense: the good atmosphere injects a positive feeling, which leads to more positive interaction with the others and/or the art experience, etc.

There are of course no definite answers to how to achieve the right atmosphere and critical mass, but it might be worth thinking about.



Fig.7 Diathlasis vocal ensemble during the Attika Odeion concert

## LITERATURE, COMPOSITIONS, RECORDINGS AND OTHER SOURCES REFERRED TO

Bergstroem-Nielsen, Carl (2002): Frameworks. A collection of pieces for improvising, variable ensemble  
<https://edition-s.dk/music/carl-bergstrom-nielsen/frameworks>

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[https://intuitivemusic.dk/intuitive/cbn\\_comp.htm](https://intuitivemusic.dk/intuitive/cbn_comp.htm)

Bergstroem-Nielsen (2020): Stipendiatrapport, Det Danske Institut,  
<https://www.diathens.gr/ophold/stipendiatrapporter>

Bergstroem-Nielsen (2022A): Stipendiatrapport, Det Danske Institut,  
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"OTO and Carl" (2023): Chat texts and pictures from Messenger (Facebook), May 2023.

Papavasileou, Dmitri (2023): Composition: Le Phénix, manuscript

Porfiriadis, Alexis (2008ff): Compositions annotated by Bergstroem-Nielsen, Carl, International Improvised Music Archive with annotations at <http://intuitivemusic.dk/iima/ap.htm>

Porfiriadis, A. (2016) Collective thoughts: a collaborative approach to preparation and performance of open form compositions for groups. PhD thesis. Bath Spa University.  
<http://researchspace.bathspa.ac.uk/9316/>

Porfiriadis, Alexis (2021): Composer/Performer. From individuality to collectivity: investigating individual and collective processes in preparing and performing open form graphic scores in the 21st century. Symposium 7-8 Dec at Music Department of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens.  
Article in publication.

Samakovli, Konstantina (2022): Composition UNITY ['I' - 'You' - 'We'], 2022, manuscript

Video and audio (2023):

*Youtube videos of Bergstroem-Nielsen compositions:*

Frameworks 1 (WHI Ensemble) <https://youtu.be/Hs5H8RdrxCY>

Frameworks 2 (WHI Ensemble) <https://youtu.be/dd09xo9vBaI>

Frameworks 10 (WHI Ensemble) <https://youtu.be/z-0dBmMMPEc>

Harmony I (Diathlasis Ensemble) <https://youtu.be/PEXk-t4rZPg>

*Soundcloud recordings of recording session with Sea Orchestra. Mixed and mastered by Dimitris Talarougas, the second one additionally by Ioannis Kalantzis:*

[https://soundcloud.com/orchestraofthesea/20230510\\_2133-d-mix](https://soundcloud.com/orchestraofthesea/20230510_2133-d-mix)

<https://soundcloud.com/orchestraofthesea/6182e1d-20230510-2042jkalantzisrx>

<https://soundcloud.com/orchestraofthesea/home-studio-session-ii-with-carl-wed-10-5-23>

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