

The Incorporation of Irregular Meters in the Elementary Level Piano Repertoire by 20th Century Greek Composers

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Abstract: *Greek composers have created piano sets of elementary level since the first decades of the 20th century. They include a great number of piano pieces that follow the western compositional techniques of classical harmony or of somehow more contemporary sonorities. These are piano collections and cover a variety of musical elements and musical knowledge. In particular, the use of irregular meters can be very attractive to the students as well as to the piano instructor. This paper will present the use of irregular meters in the currently available elementary and early intermediate level piano repertoire by 20th century Greek composers. The task is to give as many examples as possible of randomly chosen piano pieces, which make use of irregular meters. The aim is to reveal the creator's means for incorporating irregular meters in the rhythmic structure of their piano pieces.*

Key-words: *20th century Greek Composers; irregular rhythms; piano instruction; elementary level*

1. Introduction

Greek composers created piano works for students of elementary and intermediate level during the first half of the 20th century and during the last decades of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century. This fact has affected decisively their compositional styles. Their piano repertoire seems varied and covers a variety of musical elements and knowledge of musicianship for this level. Some books have a specific logic and methodology that the creators have followed in composing simple piano pieces for educational purposes. The rest seem like piano collections that can be very attractive for the piano teacher instructing both elementary and early intermediate pupils. It follows the western compositional techniques of classical harmony or of more contemporary sonorities. Their pedagogical value depends on the interpretive and technical challenges they create to a piano student. However, the stylistic issue for each piece of this piano literature is not always unambiguously clarified by its date of edition or of creation. This is strongly connected to the composer's musical background.

Rhythmic complexity in the 20th century music is a significant challenge, which originates in the 19th century. Yet, in the 20th century as the harmonic system was transformed and even dissolved completely, the impact of harmonic forces on rhythm has correspondingly weakened. This turned composers' interest to quest for more rhythmic complexity, which consequently demanded more counting skills from performers. (Lyke et al, 2011:310) On the other hand, piano music written by Greek composers during the first half of the 20th century is strongly influenced by the echo of the national histories of music ideals. Thereby, folk rhythm and folk melodies were taken as starting points in combining folk music with art music's search for innovation. By using the words of the critic, P. Hayworth, who commented on Skalkottas' music, he maintained that Skalkottas' music carries the fusion of the song coming from South with the artistic form of the North. (Papaioannou, 1997:55) Based on this notion 20th century Greek composers carry a mixture of musical elements. The aim of this article is to reveal each composer's means for incorporating irregular meters in their elementary level piano pieces, by giving as many examples as possible from the relevant piano repertoire.

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2. Material and Methods

20th century Greek composers have incorporated irregular meters like 5/4 or 5/8, 7/4 or 7/8 and 9/8. They have composed at least one piano piece for educational purposes incorporating such meters. This may be considered as folk music influence offering them the opportunity to experiment with different metrical options. While educators of western European musical systems introduce such “odd” meters at a later stage of their piano instruction, 20th century Greek composers incorporate them at the beginners’ stage or the early elementary level. An explanation for this contradiction is that pupils in Greece have experienced traditional music and folk dances as early as their infants and thereby they seem more familiar with irregular meters so as to be able to perform them without much difficulty. This issue was stressed some decades ago by the three great music educators Zoltan Kodaly (1882-1967), Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865-1950) and Carl Orff (1895-1982). They stated that aspects like singing, ear-training and rhythmic responses can be achieved through the use of physical motion. They maintained that coordinated movements deliver a kinesthetic understanding of rhythms before the cognitive understanding of note values is attempted and thereby the feel of the rhythm turns to a physical sensation which the students internalizes and later reproduces on the piano. (Klingenstein, 2008:192).

This idea has pervaded most of the 20th century Greek composers’ piano works. They used a folk or popular tune, which was originally written on an irregular meter, by improvising on it or arranging it, whereas others created new simple folk-type melodies. Particular reference should be appointed to the case of Yiannis Constantinidis (1903-1984), who based his piano literature on original folk tunes from specific Greek folk song collections. Nevertheless, not all Greek composers were influenced directly by Greek folk songs. Some of them chose to incorporate folk musical elements without using folk songs themselves. Some others created piano pieces with some folk flavor, while others followed more contemporary compositional trends. The following section examines different styles of incorporation of some irregular meters with detailed reference to and research based on specific piano scores, endeavoring to cover a broad range of this piano literature, which is valuable for piano instruction.

3. Results and Discussions

The first three excerpts incorporate the time signature of 5/8. However, the rhythmic structure of Figure 1 and Figure 2 correspond to the theme of *Erotokritos* folk song from the island of Crete, well-known in Greece, presented by Rika Deligiannaki (1936) and Manos Skarvelis (1959), respectively. Whereas Figure 3 is based on the Greek folk tune of *Little Swallow flied away* (sung every 1st of March) as presented by Constantinos Lygnos (1950) on the piano.



Fig. 1. R. Deligiannaki (1997) *Pianefkolo* “*Erotokritos*” - bars 1-8

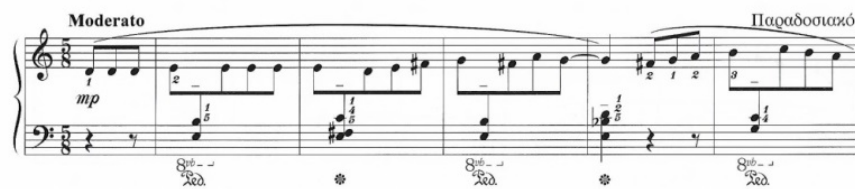


Fig. 2. M. Skarvelis (1997) *Alphavitari gia Piano "Folk"*- bars 1-6



Fig. 3. C. Lygnos (2011) *Three Simple Melodies "The Little Swallow"*- bars 6-20

The following example in Figure 4 is based on the Greek folk song of Tsakonia Region and it is called *Tsakonikos (pentasimos)* folk dance. It is in the time signature of 5/8, following the rhythmic structure of its original folk tune (dance). Constantinidis has kept the exact rhythmical structure of the folk song, developing it in a contrapuntal compositional style. (Bampali, 2016)



Fig. 4. Y. Constantinidis (1949-1951) 44 *Piano Pieces for Children on Greek Folk Dances, XI*- bars 1-7

The examples in Figure 5, by Alexandros Kalogeras (1961), in Figure 6, by Georgios Kasassoglou (1908-1984), in Figure 7, by Georgios Arvanitakis (1917-2002) and in Figure 8, by Yiannis Papaioannou (1910-1989) are written on the irregular meter of 7/8 with the rhythmic structure of *Kalamatianos* folk dance (3+2+2), the most famous traditional dance in

Greece. Both hands in these three examples follow the specific rhythmic structure of *Kalamatianos* folk dance (3+2+2), creating a rhythmic ostinato as accompaniment.



Fig. 5. A. Kalogeras (1996) *Mikri Erodie "In a Folk Tune"*- bars 1-4



Fig. 6. G. Kasassoglou 7 *Griechische Tanze IV*- bars 1-4



Fig. 7. G. Arvanitakis (2002) *Childrens' Sketches "7/8"*- bars 1-10

In Figure 8 Papaioannou has kept the rhythmic structure of *Kalamatianos* dance (7/8) as well as the simplicity of a folk-type piece. However, the tune is not a folk song itself, but it carries some folk elements, while the sound of this piano piece follows the western modal harmony.





Fig. 8. Y. Papaioannou (1959) *14 Childrens' Portraits. Suite for Piano- VI- bars 1-8*

Some other Greek composers and educators have created new pieces based on irregular meters, following a non-folk-type rhythmical structure and character. Manolis Kalomiris (1883-1962) has approached the irregular meter of 7/4 (*eptasimos*) differently. This is within the sequence of two bars: one bar uses the time signature of 4/4 and the next bar uses the time signature of 3/4. (Fytika, 2007:56) This way is not related to any folk music rhythmical structure, despite that the tune carries a folk color.



Fig. 9. M. Kalomiris *Chant du Soir- bars 1-6*

Another example is the piece in Figure 10, by Lygnos, where the rhythmic structure of the piece is not related to any folk song, but it seems like a simple study based on open chords, introducing the irregular rhythm of 5/8 to the student combined with musicianship skills.





Fig. 10. C. Lygnos (1998) *Preludes and Dances "Five Eights"*- bars 1-7

Of similar type is the simple study 'Jazz Etude', by Manos Skarvelis, in his book 'Alphavitari gia piano'. It is written in the irregular rhythm of 5/8 but its rhythmic structure is not influenced by folk music. It can be interpreted with syncopated rhythmic tension, i.e. with the expected, though unrealized, ordinary accent combined with the heard off-beat accent, according to its jazz rhythmic style. However, it can also be interpreted as compound meter. In this case, the student may, at first, count on five beats while, later, when performing it faster, the student will count the first two quavers in almost one beat and the last three quavers in a second beat, sounding almost as a triplet (2+3/4). Therefore, it seems that the piece carries performance rhythmic conventions and irregularity.



Fig. 11. M. Skarvelis (1997) *Alphavitari gia Piano "Jazz Suite"*- bars 1-7

In Figure 12 (by Savvas Zannas, 1952) the five crotchets are played in the time of ten quavers in line, by the right hand, as accompaniment. The rhythmic structure of the theme follows different construction in each bar, with dotted crotchets as the main quality. The indication of accents on the score implies Zanna's intension for structuring the rhythm of 5/4 (or ten quavers 10/8) in the compound meter of 4/4 (3+2+2+3 or 2+3+2+3 or 3+3+2+2 or 2+2+3+3). The location of the natural accents together with the rhythmic structure of the notation in the right hand score in a compound metrical manner results to an unwritten rhythmical convention in the left hand melody.



Fig. 12. S. Zannas (1997) *7+a, II-* bars 1-6

Despite that the irregular meter of 9/8 is broadly used in Greek folk music, very few 20th century Greek composers have incorporated this time signature in their piano pieces for beginners or for elementary or/and intermediate students, even in a non-folk manner. One of them is Deligiannaki, in his piano study no. 12 from the book *Pianeskolo*, presented in Figure 13. The student plays nine quavers in succession in a non-folk type rhythmical structure, where every three quavers are combined into one count, creating a piece in the compound meter of 3/4.



Fig. 13. R. Deligiannaki (1997) *Pianeskolo* no. 12- bars 1-2

Kyriakos Sfetsas (1945) is one of the few composers who incorporated the time signature of 9/8 in his book *In the stream of the sun: The Children's magic world, Book I*, but in a non-folk character. By following the multi-metric writing in most of his piano pieces in this album, Sfetsas chose to combine irregular with regular meters. The following excerpt, Figure 14, is from the "Game with seven notes" and demonstrates a perpetual change of time signatures 1/4, 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, 5/4, 6/4, 7/4, 5/8, 7/8 and 9/8 in one piano piece.



Fig. 14. K. Sfetsas (1981) *In the Stream of the Sun* "Game with Seven Notes"- bars 1-16

Another example of multi-metric writing is the piece "Crazy Dance" by Kalogeras in his book *Mikri Erodie* (Figure 15). The exceptional of this piece is that the composer has

combined all different irregular meters of folk type in one piano piece (7/8, 5/8 & 9/8). Its rhythmical structure seems a challenge for students practicing this piece.



Fig. 15. A. Kalogeras (1996) *Mikri Erodie* "Crazy Dance"- bars 6-13

Theodoros Antoniou (1935-2018) has also used the time signature of 9/8 in his pieces *Rhythmische Tänze*, creating a multi-metric piano piece, as shown in Figure 16 below.



Fig. 16. T. Antoniou (2000) *7 Rhythmische Tänze* no. 3- bars 46-64

Antoniou has used the meters of 2/4, 6/8, 9/8 and 3/8 in a single piano piece. The irregular meter of 9/8 is a compound meter in this piece. However, the melody played by the left hand in bars 55-64 demands rhythmical conventions, like lengthening the value of the dotted notes in bars 55, 57 & 59. The dotted notation in these three bars, combined with the

displacement of accents on these notes, create extra tension and rhythmical irregularity. Similarly, the quavers in bars 56, 58 & 60 may be performed slightly lengthened because of the accents the composer has intensively added on them. On the other hand the crotchets in bar 59 as well as the quavers in bars 58 & 60 may be played slightly shortened. The dynamic indication of *pianissimo* in combination with the repetition of the low pitched C note in the ending bars of the piece implies rhythmical irregularity.

The multi-metric structure of the last three pieces (Figures. 14, 15 & 16) advances their educational value, placing them between elementary and intermediate level. They include rhythmic complexity creating an excellent palate for the piano instructor, representing a generation of musicians who have been, and still are, very active as composers, performers and teachers.

4. Conclusion

The compositional style of the elementary piano pieces by 20th century Greek composers connects them with Romanticism, Neoclassicism and with the European composers of the first half of the 20th century. The incorporation of irregular meters has been determined in the repertoire by Dvořák, Stravinsky, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Obrecht, Bartok, or even by Shostakovich. (Sachs, 1953: 360-380) The rhythmical irregularity of the ‘Jazz etude’, by Skarvelis may remind us of the logic of Stravinsky in the first revised edition of 1929 of the *Rite of Spring*:

“He felt compelled to rebar certain passages in order to clarify rhythmic grouping and accentuation, splitting measures of 5/16 meter into two shorter measures of 2/16 + 3/16”. (Swinkin, 2015: 56)

The incorporation of irregular meters differs in notion between the Greek composers of the first half of the 20th century to those of the last decades of the 20th century and even of the beginning of the 21st century. Precisely, Constantinidis, Kalomiris, Kasassoglou and Papaioannou, who belong to the older generation of 20th century Greek composers, named as composers of the National Music School of Greece, created piano repertoire for elementary level pianists incorporating irregular meters based on Greek folk music. (Bampali, 2015) On the other hand, Sfetsas, Skarvelis, Lygnos, Zannas and Antoniou who are still active musicians (except for Antoniou who died at the end of 2018) make use of irregular meters in multi-metric version and sometimes in distance from the original folk music rhythmic structure, attributing some sophisticated style to their piano music and heightening its pedagogical value.

I regard that the piano repertoire of elementary level written by 20th century Greek composers is piano music with “artistic content”, demanding piano technique. When reversing Stanislavski’s expression about any kind of art, we may say that it is piano music with “conscious creativeness, through unconscious technique” (Stanislavski, 1936:53). The incorporation of irregular meters offers the right palate for compositional creativity in rhythmic structure, texture, articulation and accentuation, shaping an intuitive technical background as well as creating a significant musical experience for the player.

5. References

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