

The Cavafy – Mitropoulos Connection: Poetry Set to Music

By

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Perhaps the greatest tribute to a poet is that his/her poetry or prose is set to music. As a living tribute to Cavafy's memory and contributions, his poetry has been set to various styles of music and by a wide range of international composers. This is not always the case with poets but then Cavafy was not just any poet, he was a Hellenic poet whose poems were "odes," that were intended to be metrical texts set to the rhythms of music. This was not a new concept but a style of performance practiced by the Ancient Greeks where all poetry, as well as theatrical tragedies or comedies were intended to be sung throughout to the meter of the poetry or prose in a recitative style, or as the Greeks called it "Ekphonesis." As an example, Homer's *Illiad and Odyssey* in Ancient times were performed in this practice where the poetry/prose was recited in a manner of "speech-melody recitation." Furthermore, this is still continued in this performance style among theatrical scholars. (This practice of "speech-melody" recitation in Homer's *Odyssey* might have been an inspiration to Cavafy, who saw himself in Odysseus, as a man who left his home in Ithaca to wander for the next twenty years.)

This practice is also documented by Pindar, an award-winning 5th-6th century B.C.E. award-winning Olympic poet, who always sang his odes and accompanied himself with a kithara. Furthermore, this relationship between poetry and music displayed by Pindar was transmitted through the ages. More precisely, Pindar's poetry and music was used as a teaching tool in Byzantine music manuscripts as a way to instruct Medieval Byzantine composers as to how to set the liturgical poetic meter to music.¹

The first composer to set poems by Cavafy was Dimitri Mitropoulos (1896-

¹ Cf. Diane Touliatos-Miles, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Musical Manuscript Collection of the National Library of Greece: Byzantine Chant and Other Music Repertory Recovered* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2010): 192-196.

1960), a Hellene, who was born and raised in Greece, studied at the Athens Conservatory and received his diploma in 1919 in advanced music theory and piano. Upon graduation, he left Greece to study composition in Brussels and Berlin from 1920-24. It was especially in Berlin where Mitropoulos had the opportunity to study composition with the renowned Ferruccio Busoni. This period abroad was very important because he became immersed in the compositional study of Baroque form and even atonal 12-tone (Serial) compositions which were strongly influenced by the works of Schoenberg and the style of neoclassicism in the works of Stravinsky. The study of these musical forms and styles would be used in his compositions of Cavafy's works.

After these compositional studies, Mitropoulos formally began his career as composer, pianist, and conductor. Mitropoulos went on a concert tour in the U.S.A. in 1925-26 and it was during this same time that Mitropoulos wrote to Cavafy requesting permission to compose music for Cavafy's poems from the year of 1905. Mitropoulos' original request was for the first ten poems (with translations in French) and then a second request came later for another four. Mitropoulos had earlier composed music for the poetry of Angelos Sikelianos, that preceded the Cavafy settings, so that writing poetic music was not a new venture for him. The suggested title by Mitropoulos for the initial collection of ten was originally the following: *10 Invenzioni à 2, 3, e 4 Voci/ on 10 Hedonistic Poems of C. P. Cavafy*. Instead, the original score had the title: *C. P. Cavafy/ 10 Inventions/ D. Mitropoulos*. The numbers 11 – 14 were not included in the original but can be found in a more recent edition of the *Fourteen Invenzioni* printed in 2010 in Corfu. The poetry in this edition is in the original Greek text.

In the Cavafy 14 *Invenzioni* settings, Mitropoulos uses conservative musical forms. The *Invenzioni* title is taken from J.S. Bach's *Two-Part* and *Three-Part Inventions*. Mitropoulos also uses other titles from Baroque musical forms such

as *Canon*, *Fugue*, and *Passacaglia* but contrasts these traditional forms with highly original and evocative rhythms.²

Mitropoulos initially wrote “Pedale” [number –XIII] from Cavafy’s poem “I’ve looked So Much” for the mezzo-soprano vocalist, Miss Sertsiou, who initially sang it in a private venue in 1926. The first public performance by Sertsiou was in 1927 when she sang the *10 Inventions* composed by Mitropoulos from the Cavafy poems. Another significant event took place on October 20, 1932, a year before the death of Cavafy. This was a private performance where Mitropoulos sang his compositions of the Cavafy settings while he accompanied himself on the piano. Of importance, this private performance had only the presence of Cavafy, who listened while Mitropoulos performed the piano and sang.

In writing about his performance of the *10 Inventions* in the private performance for Cavafy in 1932, Mitropoulos wrote the following:

Each of the poems has as its basis a different formal structure, in which the voice, the remitter of the poem, is but a particle of the structure. It is neither a song nor a dry recitation with accompaniment. One should neither sing them or simply recite them, but rather something between the two. Perhaps a stylized form of recitation with rhythms that correspond to ‘meter of the text.’ (This is in reference to the “Sprechmelodie” also known as “Sprechstimme” which is a speaking-song technique that was associated with Schoenberg and his 12-Tone Serialism compositions.

Mitropoulos continues his writing:

The technical elements of the Cavafy poems created the impetus for the various musical structures and their corresponding plans....

However, the other, probably indefinable, but important aspects of the poems are what, I imagine, created the opportunity for the clearly technical and musical structures to become alive.

² The original musical manuscript settings of the Cavafy songs composed by Mitropoulos are held in the Dimitri Mitropoulos Archives of the Gennadius Library in Athens.

And even more briefly... 10 artistic mathematical formulae with sounds and words.³

Cavafy was considered to be a non-traditionalist poet and definitely broke tradition with the conservative poetry of Palamas. However, Cavafy's poetry also rallied a generation of new modernistic poets who were Cavafy's followers in the 1920s, such as Takis Papatsonis, who is given credit for initiating free verse in Greece;⁴ Nikos Kalamaris, a Marxist and later a Surrealist writer who had the utmost respect for Cavafy;⁵ and George Vrisimitzakis.⁶

Although Cavafy had a following of modernist poets, his poetry was not widely accepted during his lifetime. There are a variety of reasons for this:

- Cavafy's poems were written in a spoken, non-intellectual language;
- Some of his writings were autobiographical with homosexual eroticism;
- Cavafy often used iambic meter, a dominant meter from antiquity, with some of his verses but these were not always rhythmically congruent and most often were in an aperiodic poetic rhythm;
- Cavafy's irregular rhythms resulted to equivalent musical settings of "indeterminacy" also known as atonal system of pitches.

In a letter to Cavafy dated July 11, 1926, Mitropoulos referred to his poems as "hedonistic." Mitropoulos writes the following in his letter:

You will be astonished at the courage I have shown in my choice of your songs, yet besides all my fears, the music is so appropriate for this type of meter and atmosphere that I can assure you it was liked by even the most moralist, conservative of people.⁷

³ Dimitri Mitropoulos, "Tragoudia tou Cavafy Melopoiemena apo ton Mitropoulo," *Nea Estia*, vol. 12 (November 15, 1932): 1218.

⁴ Takis Papatsonis, "To the Poet C.P. Cavafy, out of Great Esteem and Respect," *Nea Techni*, vol. I / 7-10 (July-October, 1924): 107-8.

⁵ Kalamaris wrote in 1933 this statement about Cavafy: "The first of the Modern Greek Poets."

Cf. Nikolas Kalas, *Keimena politikis kai esthithikis*, ed. by Alexandros Argyriou (Athens: Plethron, 1982): 115.

⁶ Giorgos Vrisimatzakis, *To Ergo tou C. P. Cavafy*, Prologue and literary editing by G. P Savidis, 2nd ed. (Athens: Ikaros, 1984): 1a.

The correspondence and meetings between Mitropoulos and Cavafy indicate that there was a mutual respect and understanding of a modernistic connection that both shared: Mitropoulos with his atonal counterpoint settings and Cavafy with his asymmetrical metrical meters with unconventional rhythms that had been influenced by Mitropoulos. Prior to their relationship, Cavafy had been perceived as a more conservative poet. As a tribute to both of these two great artistic men, a more recent publication of the Mitropoulos-Cavafy compositions of the *Invenzioni* was published in 2010.

Compositions by Dimitri Mitropoulos (1896 – 1960) set to poetry by Constantine P. Cavafy:

14 Invenzioni

- I. *Preludio a 4 Voci* (Ἡδονῆ / To Sensual Pleasure) [1913]
- II. *Canon a 3 Voci* (Για νά 'ρθουν / To Call Up the Shades) [c.1920]
- III. *Prologo – Fughetta – Epilogo a 4 Voci* (Μιά νύχτα / One Night) [1907]
- IV. *Prologo – Fughetta – Epilogo a 4 Voci* (Ἡ ἀρχή των / Their Beginning) [1915]
- V. *Canon a 2 Voci* (Νὰ μείνει / Comes to Rest) [1918]
- VI. *Canon* (Ἐν ἀπογνώσει / In Despair) [1923]
- VII. *Passacaglia a 3 Voci* (Γκριζα / Gray) [1917]
- VIII. *Passacaglia a 2 Voci* (Μέρες τοῦ 1903 / Days of 1903) [1919]
- IX. *Canon a 2 Voci* (Τὸ διπλανὸ τραπέζι / The Next Table) [1918]
- X. *Canon a 2 Voci* (Μακρὰ / Long Ago) [1914]

⁷ Stefania Merakou, "Allilografia Dimitri Mitropoulou-Constantinou Cavafy," *Mousikos Logos*, vol. 2 (2002): 146-7.

- XI. *Preludio (Scherzino) a 1 Voce* (Έν τῇ ὡδῶ / In the Street) [1916]
- XII. *Fuga 4 Voci* (Ὁ ἥλιος τοῦ ἀπογεύματος / The Afternoon Sun) [1918]
- XIII. *Pedale a 3 Voci* (Έτσι πολὺ ἀτένισα / I've Looked So Much) [1911]
- XIV. *Coda (Finale) a 2 Voci* (Ἐπῆγα / I Went) [1905]

Although Mitropoulos was the first to set Cavafy's poetry to music, he is far from the last. There is a growing legacy of composers who have continued to compose settings. More recently in 2012, there is Dimosthenes Stephanides, another pianist, composer, and conductor on tours that has written music for Cavafy's poetry. The numbers of composers from different countries (such as U.S.A., Germany, United Kingdom, and Greece) and different language translations are constantly being enlarged and could very well be over 400 musical settings in a variety of musical genres from Baroque to Classical to Modern Styles from dance to instrumental and vocal to electronic instruments. Among the large number of Greek composers, some of the more prominent names are Mikis Theodorakis, Dimitiris Papadimitriou, Manos Hadjidakis, and many more. Also of note is Vangelis, who lives in England, and who composed *Odysseus* set to the epic poetry of Cavafy's *Ithaka* and interestingly enough is recited in the recording by the actor Sean Connery.

Another British composer, who has composed a work in honor of Cavafy is Sir John Tavener, a composer who embraced and converted to the Greek Orthodox religion. Sir Tavener composes contemporary Byzantine music and is internationally known for having composed the Nekrosimon Akolouthia music in honor of the funeral of the Diana, the late Princess of Wales. During his Greek phase of composing, Tavener wrote a work in 1999 entitled *Tribute to Cavafy*. This musical setting was written for a four-part (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) *a capella* chorus with a narrator and only percussion instruments of bells and tympani. The music is based on three of Cavafy's better known poems: *God Abandons Antony*, *Voices*, and *Ithaka*. This tribute by Tavener is a supreme honor and homage to one of Greece's superior poets. Through his music Tavener reflects Cavafy's life that underwent lyrical pathos, grandeur, tragedy,

solemnness, and eventually glorification for his poetic contributions. This tribute is a most fitting Hellenistic musical honor for a wandering poet who was a Greek immigrant searching for Hellenism and his Hellenic identify.

ΚΥΚΛΟΦΟΡΗΣΕ
Ο ΔΕΥΤΕΡΟΣ ΤΟΜΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΣΕΙΡΑΣ
« ΜΝΗΜΕΙΑ ΝΕΟΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΜΟΥΣΙΚΗΣ »

ΜΝΗΜΕΙΑ ΝΕΟΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΜΟΥΣΙΚΗΣ - 2

Δ Η Μ Η Τ Ρ Η Σ
ΜΗΤΡΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ

1896-1960

14 Invenzioni
σε ποιήματα του Κ.Π. Καβάφη
για φωνή και πιάνο



ΙΟΝΙΟ ΠΑΝΕΠΙΣΤΗΜΙΟ / ΤΜΗΜΑ ΜΟΥΣΙΚΩΝ ΣΠΟΥΔΩΝ
ΕΡΓΑΣΤΗΡΙΟ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗΣ ΜΟΥΣΙΚΗΣ