

VARIATIONS ON A GREEK ISLAND DANCE BY VANGELIS KARAFILLIDIS

Luminița GUȚANU¹

Abstract: *Vangelis Karafillidis' piano work "Variations on a Greek Island Dance" imaginatively combines the fascination of a melodious piece, the originality of Greek folk music, the mood alterations of programmatic music, the macro-structural accordance to a very well know classical form and the micro-structural motivic transfigurations with the exploration of several piano technique issues. This article comprises an analysis of the above mentioned work under the perspective of an educational tool for both music theory and piano students.*

Key words: *Vangelis Karafillidis, Greek folk music, motivic transfiguration, analysis.*

1. Introduction

Vangelis Karafillidis is a composer, pianist, physicist and music teacher. He was born in 1971 in the city of Alexandroupoli, Greece. In 1996, he received his university degree in Physics at the "Aristotle University" of Thessaloniki. In 1994 he received his Piano Diploma at the Macedonian Conservatory of Thessaloniki (after studying under Nicolas Astrinidis) and in 1996 his Composition Diploma at the Music College of Thessaloniki (after studying under Alkis Baltas). Vangelis Karafillidis is an official member of the Greek Composers' Union. His works have been performed both nationally (in Thessaloniki, Alexandroupoli, Xanthi and Athens) as well as worldwide in Germany (Berlin and Wuppertal), Bulgaria (Sofia), Lithuania (Vilnius) and Romania (Bucharest). As a pianist, he has performed in concerts in Thessaloniki, Xanthi, Alexandroupoli and

other Greek cities. His compositions have earned him both national and international prizes. In 2000, he won the 1st prize for his *Variations on a Greek Island Dance* and the 2nd prize for his *Micrographies* at the 1st Competition for Piano Composition, organized by the House of Education and Arts in the Municipality of Xanthi, Greece; in 2003 he was awarded the 3rd composition prize for his string quartet "*The Darkness of Time*", at the 11th "Music and Earth" International Competition in Sofia (Bulgaria); in 2010 a Honourable Mention Citation for his *Etude* at the "International Composition Competition" organized by the National Academy of Music (Public Educational Charity, State of Colorado) in cooperation with the Conservatories of Neapolis and Sykies in Thessaloniki, Greece. Recently, in October 2011, after participating in the 9th International Composition Competition held by the "Yorgos Foudoulis" Conservatory in Volos, Greece, he won

¹ Centre "Advanced Research on Mechatronics", *Transilvania* University of Braşov.

three 2nd prizes for his works *Toccata* for solo piano, *Concertino for Two Pianos* and *Hymn to Love* for mezzo-soprano and Orchestra in the categories “Solo Instrument”, “Chamber Music” and “Song with Accompaniment” respectively. He took part in a series of international conferences and symposia, in Greece (Lamia), Romania (Bucharest, Piteşti, Alba-Iulia, Braşov, Oradea, Iaşi), Lithuania (Vilnius) and in the Republic of Moldova (Chişinău) [1].

The composer’s work is not directed towards a unique, specific style, but rather, it is varicoloured. Hence, his works largely synthesize various stylistic trends: influences from composers such as Béla Bartók, Dmitri Shostakovich or classical style; however, the national specificity is indubitably present in his oeuvre. In some compositions, Karafillidis uses traditional melodies in their original form, but he also creates melodies in the style and spirit of Greek folk music.

His entire oeuvre revolves around various music aesthetics. For example his *Etude* clearly follows the romantic style, his *Variations on a Greek Island Dance* amalgamate Greek folk music with classical and romantic elements, his *Micrographies* (which also include some Greek folk melodies), are influenced by Béla Bartók’s compositional language and by impressionism, his *Concertino for Two Pianos* reflects various compositional hypostases, combining romantic elements, influences from Shostakovich’s music as well as musical modes. In his three string quartets, we can also notice a wide spectrum of stylistic influences from modernism, minimalism and the Balkan style. The third quartet utilizes contemporary instrumental techniques. His *Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano* combines modality, modernism and Byzantine music elements.

In general terms, Vangelis Karafillidis’ deep as well broad knowledge of both instrumental as well as compositional techniques constitutes the basis for high quality compositions. His inspiration results in enchanting musical works. His ingeniousness synthesizes in an imaginative way elements from Greek folk music with western musical composition techniques. His serious and systematic avocation with music tuition consciously leads some of his compositional efforts towards the direction of producing educational material for music students.

2. Problem Formulation. The *Variations on a Greek Island Dance*; an overall outlook

The art of the piano is an important aspect of European music culture, to say the least, thanks to the wide range of possibilities that this instrument can offer. The creation of a national repertoire has always been a priority for Greek composers. In fact, the musicians’ repertoire, in general, represents one of the most important aspects of their professional activity, since it can be proved to be important for both their training as well as their performances. In addition to the arrangements and compositions inspired by folk music, Karafillidis has also composed original piano music, which can serve being used for both educational and performing purposes. For example, Karafillidis himself reveals the reason why he composed the piano work *Variations on a Greek Island Dance*: “I composed this piece in order to explore the synthesization of Greek folk music with western music compositional techniques as well as to provide an educational tool for both piano as well as music theory and composition students”.

This piano work (composed in 1992), comprises (in addition to the theme) a

series of ten Variations. The Theme is a folk song from the Aegean Sea islands called "Thalassaki" ("Little Sea"). The predominant musical characteristics of this work are clarity of form, melodiousness, harmonic simplicity, use of modality and varicoloured emotional expression. The Theme ("Thalassaki") is a very popular folk song and specifically speaking it is Vangelis Karafillidis' favourite folk melody. Essentially, this song is a meditation addressed to the sea; a pray not to cause trouble to seamen and protect them from danger. The same song is also a "Kalamatianos" dance and therefore follows the rhythmical pattern 7/8 [(3+2+2)/8]. The name "Kalamatianos" is derived from a city of Peloponnesus, in southern Greece (Kalamata). The piece is based on an almost typical classical "Theme and Variations" form. The Theme and each one of the Variations (apart from the last one) bear structural uniformity; they each consist of two segments of five and six bars respectively.

We could also mention that the emotional context of the piece ranges from calmness to storminess (bringing to mind the sea itself in this way) and from devoutness to triumph. In overall, the style of the music is romantic with a pervasive nostalgic inclination. The (almost) classical "Theme and Variations" form along with the motivic unity of the piece ensure clarity and coherence. The romantic mood of the work provides interesting emotional alterations and the usage of modality (E Aeolian and E Dorian modes) as well as tonality (E Minor) underline the Greek temper of the piece.

Although the composer followed the (macro-structural) context of the classical "Theme and Variations" form, he consciously based the Variations on the treatment of motivic material derived from both the Theme and the 1st Variation (at the micro-structural level). The reason is

that he wanted to liberate himself and diverge from any "predictability" side effects of the classical form, while at the same time concentrating on the alterations at the melodic level which constitute the predominant expressional means of Greek folk music.

Under the perspective of piano writing, the work utilizes various techniques which are conducive to the piano student's development and progress. The difficulty level of the piece varies from Variation to Variation but in general terms it ranges from intermediate to advance. Also, it's easy to use as piano tuition material not the whole piece, but selected Variations according to the level of the piano student.

The alterations of mood result in an almost programmatic environment which functions as an emotional voyage for the listener, as an interpretational challenge for the piano performer and as a source for aesthetic and expressive means' analysis for the potential composer. Overall, this work, in addition to being an attractive choice for the piano interpreter and an enchanting piece for the listener, can aid piano as well as music theory and composition tuition.

3. Problem Solution. The *Variations on a Greek Island Dance*; the analysis

Although the first impression (after taking a look at the score) is that most of the Variations bear no connection with the Theme, nothing is further from the truth; each one of the Variations is strongly connected either to the Theme or the 1st Variation via the procedure of motivic transfiguration.

The Theme

As mentioned above, the Theme is a very popular folk song ("Thalassaki"). The song consists of three verses. The composer utilized the melodies of the first two verses

for constructing the Theme. Specifically speaking, he consciously decided to expose this material in a very simplified (almost subtractive) form. Thus, the melody appears in the right hand part, while at the same time the left hand plays the original “Kalamatianos” dance rhythmical pattern formed of plain harmonic octave intervals. The composer intentionally simplified the original folk song for utilizing it as the Theme. This offers the opportunity to the listener to concentrate on the motivic construction of the Theme. Actually, it’s the motivic construction of the Theme that functions as the starting point for the unfolding of each one of the Variations. Furthermore, the classical “Theme and Variations” form most of the time preferably evolves from the relaxation of the Theme to gradually complicated and aesthetically intense Variations.

Variation I

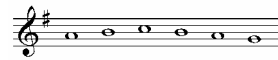
The 1st Variation follows the “Kalamatianos” dance rhythmical articulation (7/8). The melody in the right hand part seemingly has no connection with the Theme. But actually, it has a very strong one, which is revealed at the end of the *Variations*; the “A” segment of the 1st Variation is a countermelody of the corresponding segment of the Theme. The “B” segment of the 1st Variation exposes an oppositely directed (inversed-like) melodic line when compared to the segment “A” one. Both “A” and “B” segment melodies are strongly connected with the Theme, due to the motivic coherence between them, which is derived from micro-structural transfigurations of the Theme motives.



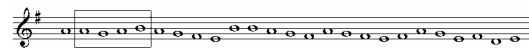
Variation II

The rhythmical articulation of the 2nd Variation again follows the “Kalamatianos” dance rhythmical articulation (7/8). The principal motif in the right hand part is derived from the Theme. In detail, the melodic construction of the “A” segment of the Theme in its simplified form looks like this:

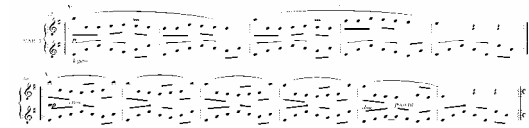
The reversion of the selected notes actually constitutes the motivic source for the “A” segment:



In the “B” segment of this Variation, the motivic source of the melody is derived from the “B” segment of the Theme. The melodic construction of the “B” segment of the Theme similarly looks like this:



The motif shown in the oblong constitutes the motivic source for the melodic articulation of the right hand part in this segment.



Variation III

The melody in the left hand part is based on the conjunction of two motives. In the “A” segment of this Variation the motivic source is actually the corresponding segment of the Theme. In the “B” segment the melody is clearly connected with the corresponding segment of the 1st Variation.

Variation IV

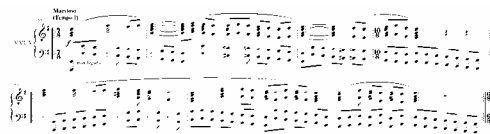
This (*Allegro molto*) Variation comes in contrast to the previous Variations. Aesthetically, it functions as a precursor of the following Variation, where the Theme is recapitulated. The fast sixteenth notes

passages are based on the opening of the "B" part of the 1st Variation. The alteration of mood here is consciously used in order to instigate the listener's attention and prepare him/her of the next Variation.



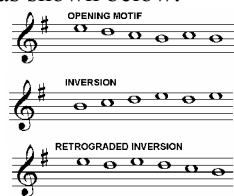
Variation V

The composer intentionally placed this enriched recapitulation of the Theme exactly at the middle of this series of Variations. The alteration of mood and the motivic explorations in the previous Variations make the listener diverge from the Theme. The melody here appears enriched with chords in the right hand part. The left hand performs a contrapuntal accompaniment formed of harmonic octave intervals, which clearly reminds of the 1st Variation.



Variation VI

The mood of this Variation is closely connected with the previous one. The melody of the "A" segment is derived from the corresponding segment of the 1st Variation as shown below:



The melody in the "B" segment is derived from the same material. If we partition the principal motif of the previous segment into two groups of three notes each, we have the following triads:



The inversion of the 1st triad in combination with the 2nd triad generates the principal melodic pattern of this segment:



Variation VII

The motivic material of this Variation is clearly derived from the "B" segment of the 1st Variation.

Variation VIII

This Variation is based on contrapuntal writing. Although such techniques are virtually non-existent in Greek folk music, the composer utilized contrapuntal-like dialogues between the right and left hand parts. The thematic material is clearly derived from both the Theme and the 1st Variation.



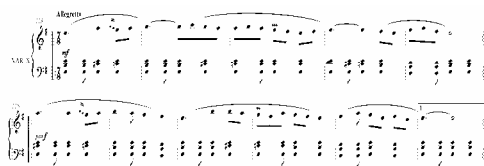
Variation IX

This Variation is based on thirds. The principal motives for both segments are derived from the Theme. Both fast passages (sixteenth notes) as well as the accented notes bear close connection with the Theme.



Variation X (finale)

This Variation not only constitutes an altered recapitulation of the Theme, but furthermore is an exposition of the whole song. The right hand performs the melody, while at the same time the left hand performs relatively simple chord formations which clearly follow the “Kalamatianos” dance rhythmical pattern. It’s highly remarkable that the composer again after four Variations recapitulated the Theme (the same thing happened with the precious recapitulation of the Theme in the 5th Variation). This results in a strong sense of symmetry and integration for the piece. We should also mention that in the closing of this Variation the left hand part performs the opening of the Theme while at the same time the right hand part performs the opening of the 1st Variation. The composer intentionally chose the closing of this series of Variations in order to reveal the strong connection between the Theme and the 1st Variation. Under this perspective it is exactly at this point, the listener solves the coherence “mystery” of this piece and the music theoretician traces the justification of the motivic treatment in this series of Variations.



4. Conclusion

The *Variations on a Greek Island Dance* can serve both performing purposes as well as achieving educational goals. The instructive aspect of these series of Variations is conducive to the student developing a series of skills; the specificities of interpreting a wide range of emotions, the improvement and enrichment of his/her piano technique and the assimilation of several compositional techniques such as structural formation, motivic transfiguration, counterpoint handling, modality/tonality usage, etc. All these aspects make this piano piece highly useful for studying both piano as well as composition. Studying the *Variations on a Greek Island Dance* facilitates the solution of some crucial problems of music education. Moreover, it helps the young pianists in developing their artistic individuality.

References

1. Karafillidis, V.: *Variations on a Greek Island Dance*, score. Thessaloniki, 1992.