

Some Piano Compositions by Nicolas Economou, Notated Post Mortem from the Composer's Recordings

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Abstract: The paper examines the nocturnes of the Cypriot composer and pianist Nicolas Economou (1953-1993) and how much they reflected the traditions of the genre of the piano nocturnes from the 19th Century, enriched with contemporary compositional techniques from the 20th Century. The different approach towards the structure as well as the influence of the jazz instrumental culture, mark a radical departure from the old forms. This is a consequence not only of the artistic temperament of Economou but also of the fact that he never notated but only recorded the nocturnes. The piano was his true medium of expression; therefore the compositions retain a strong element of improvisation and nonconformity. The cycle of eight nocturnes testify to the great improvisatory gift and spontaneity of Nicolas Economou as one of the most significant Cypriot composers of the 20th Century.

Keywords: Nicolas Economou, Piano, Nocturne, Improvisation, Jazz, Cypriot Composer, Chick Corea, Romanticism

1. Introduction

The subject of my research is on certain piano compositions of the Cypriot composer Nicolas Economou (1953-1993). These were only recorded but not notated by him and to a great extent represent the composer's skill at improvisation. The main research was done on the nocturnes of Nicolas Economou and on few more piano pieces from the 1970's and 1980's.

2. Aims and Objectives of the Research

The aims and the objectives of my work are to find how the nocturnes of Nicolas Economou reflected the traditions of the genre of the piano nocturnes from the 19th Century, enriched with contemporary compositional techniques from the 20th Century; his different approach towards the form and the structure, as well as the influence of the jazz instrumental culture on his creative personality. Nicolas Economou was a brilliant pianist and the piano was the medium for the composer through which he expressed himself best.

During the 1970's and the beginning of the 1980's, Nicolas Economou created a cycle of eight nocturnes. The compositions existed only on one recording, performed by

the composer himself. The composer did not write them down, notorious for his reluctance to set his compositions on paper. The nocturnes were notated much later, after his sudden death, by the German musicologist Reiner Starzonek. He used the recording of Nicolas Economou, which had taken place during the 1980's in a recording studio in Germany. The eight nocturnes are marked with dark colours, dynamic juxtapositions and charged with strong and contrasting emotions. They are different from the nocturnes of Frederic Chopin in many ways and reflect some features from those of the Irish composer and pianist John Field.

The name "nocturne" ("pertaining to night") is often used for a music composition, which suggests a nocturnal atmosphere. [1, p. 516] This is a lyrical miniature, more often in a moderate or slow tempo, which uses lots of melodic ornamentation and often has an ABA structure. As a child of Romanticism from the 19th Century, the nocturne epitomizes the exultation and the mystery of the night. It has an expressive melodic line in the right hand; and an accompaniment of arpeggios and broken chords in the left hand.

The Italian name Notturmo was used during the 18th Century by Joseph Haydn in his 'Notturmos for lira organizzata'. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart also wrote a Notturmo in D, K.286 and Serenata Notturna, K.239. [1, p.

516]

The nocturne established itself as a solo piece, mostly during the 19th Century. The first piano nocturnes were written by the Irish composer, John Field, who is considered to be the father of the genre. However, the most famous composer that remained in this genre was Frederic Chopin, who wrote 21 nocturnes. Later on, composers such as: Gabriel Faure, Alexander Scriabin, Eric Satie, Francis Poulenc, also wrote piano nocturnes.[1]

The nocturnes of Nicolas Economou are difficult to compare with other compositions of the sort as they hold many elements of the classical genre but also many individual features. They are wonderful and idyllic musical pieces that are saturated with a lot of colour and intensity. Some of the nocturnes are peaceful, expressive and lyrical while others are quite dark. A few of them exceed the borders of the genre, combining some elements of jazz with other contemporary musical forms.

In the nocturnes of Nicolas Economou, there is a search for construction at various textural levels. The first textural level is the bass or the bass line. It is arpeggiated but sometimes there is a use of a chordal texture. The second very important textural level is the "canto", which is the expressiveness of the melodic line. It is often connected with the expression of loneliness, depression and melancholy. Economou infused the melody with emotions, the primary source of which remains unknown. We do not know whether the composer felt such suffering ever or the nocturnes are an emanation of a creative experiment. Music as an art normally uses abstract, non-verbal means of expression. A known fact is that, according to the sister of the composer, the pianist Tania Economou, the nocturnes were written over a long period of time, at least a decade. They reflect the different influences which the composer experienced.

The third textural level is the intermediate layers, which unfold themselves in the middle register of the piano. Through it, the composer makes the texture very rich. He adds harmonic colours and enhances the changing emotions in the "canto" or the melodic line.

In my study I refer to the work of the English musicologist Allan J. Wagenheim on the nocturnes of John Field [2, p. 14]. He differentiated two types of nocturne: the Introspective and the Idyllic and summarizes many features of the genre. Wagenheim differentiates ten specific motifs:

"1. *The yearning: a short phrase, usually three to six beats in length, in which the notes rise and retreat, often with a crescendo and diminuendo.*

2. *The sigh or sob: usually a phrase of two notes, but*

sometimes three or four, in which the first note is higher in pitch than the other(s) and is sometimes accented.

3. *The cry or outburst: a single note, interval or chord, which is struck forte, fortissimo, or sforzando, preceded and immediately followed by a subdued passage, usually piano or pianissimo.*

4. *The flight or release: a sudden run of 16th or 32nd notes that usually approaches or exceeds high C and may be extended for as few as three or four beats and as many as several bars.*

5. *Mood contrast: passages characterized by an abrupt shift from soft to loud, or the reverse; change of mode, from major to minor, or the reverse; a marked change in tempo.*

6. *Mode alterations: frequent chord changes from major to minor, or the reverse, within a bar, phrase, or short passage.*

7. *The struggle: a sequence of syncopated or heavily accented two or three-note phrases, almost always rising.*

8. *The pang or stab: a chord or interval, often accented, that contains a grating or piercing element, such as a minor second. A softer effect is created by lingering chromatics whose resolution is delayed.*

9. *The conversation: a duet between upper and lower voices that is usually consoling*

10. *The leap: a two-note phrase in which the second note is higher by at least six steps, but usually by an octave, and is often accented. This figure suggests either desperation, exuberance, or triumph, depending on the context of the passage."* [2, p. 14]

I think that all features, outlined by Wagenheim, are observable in the piano nocturnes of Nicolas Economou. The influence of the Russian tradition is also apparent. The Cypriot composer was a pupil in the Moscow Conservatory and indisputably, he was familiar with the development of the piano nocturne of Mikhail Glinka, Alexander Scriabin, and later of Dmitri Shostakovich. To give information about it, I will review each of the nocturnes of Economou. The length of the cycle is about 19 minutes.

2.1. Nocturne No. 1

The tempo of the piece is adagio, tempo rubato. The nocturne starts with a motif like a call, sigh or groan, in ascending seconds, followed by a leap in intonation, very emotionally charged. The dreamy, idyllic and mysterious atmosphere is created by the heavily chromatic chords, often diminished or augmented, situated in the melodic layer and the slow tempo.



Fig.1a. Introduction to Nocturne No.1.

After a six bar introduction, the composer presents the main theme. The tempo is faster, *piu mosso*. Economou unfolds his ideas, changing the time signature- 4/4, 3/4, 6/8. The distinctive feature of the nocturne, an accompaniment in arpeggios in the left hand, is used here. The mood is idyllic,

with element of static, but with a lot of inner tension. Very intriguing is the conversation between the hands in which the rhythm is complementary. A digital recording can be listened to at:

<http://www.nicolaseconomou.com/downloads.htm>



Fig. 1b. Nocturne No.1, bars 5-8.

2.2. Nocturne No.2

The piece has a time signature of 3/4 and tempo directions “tempo di valse” which is not very characteristic for the genre of the nocturne. John Field and Frederic Chopin, as the classics of the genre, wrote few nocturnes in triple time, always giving preference to two and four beats’ time signature. John Field wrote only the nocturne No.2 in C minor in 3/8. There are two nocturnes in 3/4 in the work of Frederic Chopin and these are op.15, No.1 in F major and

No.3 in G minor.

The piece of Economou- Nocturne No.2 is a fiesta of cheerful themes in E flat major. It is written in a complex ternary form. This nocturne substantially differs from the rest regarding the structure-it is in ternary form, the tempo, which is a quick waltz and the character - festive, joyful and lyrical but not nostalgic. The thematic material is close to the chanson, although without sounding like a hit song.



Fig. 2. Nocturne No.2, bars 1-4.

2.3. Nocturne No.3

The next nocturne starts with a short motif of two semitones. Using the motif, the composer gradually builds the introduction. The motif sounds like a cry or a sigh. The introduction consists of a sequence of minor 2nds, which

remind of the motif of the pang or stab, according to Allan Wagenheim [2, p.14]. There are many chromaticisms that create tension but do not find relaxation. They create the feeling of a frustration.

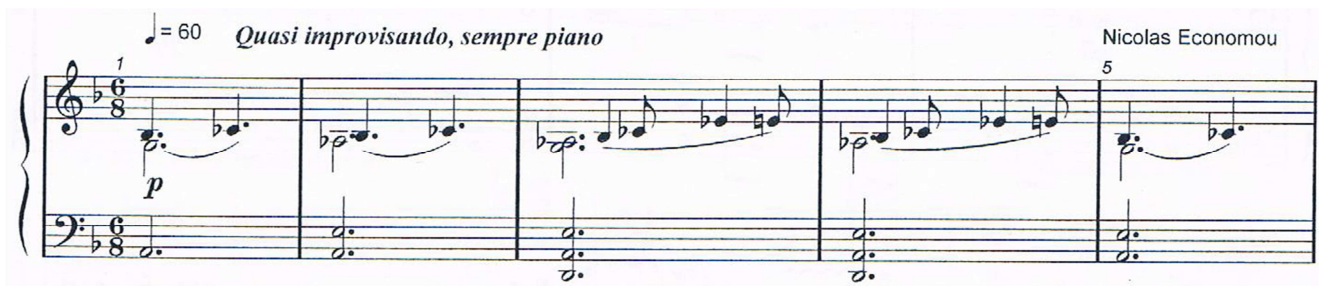


Fig. 3a. The opening to Nocturne No.3.

The nocturne has the character of improvisation, the frequent change of the main time signature 6/8 with 8/8 and 10/8 adds some misbalance in the expression. The texture is built as a conversation between the hands. The harmonic structure of this nocturne is intriguing. The composer started the piece with a dominant ninth; going through many

interesting harmonic sequences, at last modulating in C major. The vicissitude of major and minor is characteristic for the genre of the nocturne. In bars 27 and 29, we find the motif of the flight, starting with a trill and followed by an outburst in ascending demisemiquavers.



Fig. 3b. Nocturne No.3, bars 25-28.

2.4. Nocturne No.4

This short piece sets the beginning of a sequence of rather “unusual” for the traditional genre nocturnes, which Economou includes in the cycle. The composer apparently thought of the eighth nocturnes as a cycle, which needs contrasting pieces, rather than as separate pieces. The nocturne is constructed around chromatic arpeggios, played very fast. The arpeggios are aiming towards the strong thumb but at the same time are played in piano. The particular effect brings rather capricious, erratic character to the composition.

It is like intrusive thoughts, which bother the restless mind. The editor quite successfully puts as tempo directions *tempo libre*, *capriccioso*.

Between bar 10 and 15, Economou introduces a new theme with sharp, abrupt leaps. After that he returns to the original texture with arpeggios from the beginning. The nocturne is reminiscent of another piece of the sort - “The Night Music” from the suite “Out of doors” by the Hungarian composer Bella Bartok.



Fig. 4. Nocturne No.4, bars 1-3.

2.5. Nocturne No.5

The next piece is completely beyond our conception about nocturne. The tempo is fast, *marcato*. The texture is full of syncopated rhythmic figures. The nocturne apparently reflects the influence of the well-known jazz pianist Chick Corea over Economou. Their creative relationship dates from the beginning of the 1980's when the musicians met in the recording studio “Loft” in Heidausen, Germany. There they both collaborated, improvising in a style at the border between jazz and classical music. Inspired by this creative collaboration, Economou composed the short miniatures “Three pieces for Chick” and “Sonata for Chick”. During

1982 Chick Corea and Nicolas Economou recorded the album “On two pianos” with Deutsche Grammophon.

The individualistic jazz-nocturne is based on one motif, based on major and minor second. There are elements of the motif of the “struggle”, according to Wagenheim.[2] The phrase consists of two to three syncopated and strongly accented notes in ascending movement.

The harmonic structures are rather jazzy, the dynamic contrasts are often abrupt, and the texture is chordal with seventh intervals. The overall mood reminds of a flight at a breakneck speed.



Fig. 5. Nocturne No.5, bars 1-4.

2.6. Nocturne No.6

The next piece is an experimental perusal of the genre of the piano nocturne. This particular piece sounds very tense, like passions and sufferings had overwhelmed the composer, not giving him peace. It is a work full of introverted sensitivity. The introduction is based on short flashing phrases, forming the first subject. The second subject appears

in bar 9, based on three notes and carried on in descending tonal sequence. The development of the nocturne is based on the second theme. The composer plays with it, exposing it repeatedly in octaves and in an ascending movement. This passage in octaves (bars 30-33) is very characteristic and memorable point in the whole emotional construction of the cycle of the eighth nocturnes.



Fig. 6. Nocturne No.6, bars 30-33.

2.7. Nocturne No.7

Here Nicolas Economou returned to the idyllic in the nocturne in its original form. Despite that, the composition sounds almost ceremonial and solemn due to the pulse quasi passacaglia. The tempo is slow, adagio, quasi una fantasia, according to the editor. The texture of the accompaniment is based on broken chords. After introduction of four bars in G minor, the composer developed an expressive theme in C

sharp minor. The bass line is very static due to the use of parallel fifths in the chordal texture. The middle part is the engine of the harmonic development, which provides the sense of movement, especially needed for the establishment of the structure. From bar 17 the composer returns to G minor. The nocturne finishes with the sense of enlightenment due to the sudden final G major chord. The nocturne is like a lyrical island between the expressive Nocturne No.6 and No.8.



Fig. 7. Nocturne No.7, bars 33-35.

2.8. Nocturne No.8

The final nocturne is like a firework of sounds and contrasts. This is a "bravura" piece, the theme evokes the

piano music of Bella Bartok and especially the composition "Chase" from the cycle "Out of doors". There are some elements from the Russian-Soviet tradition, in particular the music of Dmitri Shostakovich. The final nocturne is the

longest of the whole cycle-215 bars.

The rather unusual nocturne sounds like hunting scene or chasing. From the motif E-D sharp-A sharp-G-A sharp emerges a new theme with strong, repeated rhythm. Economou treats the piano as a percussion instrument at

certain places, especially in using short, abrupt chords, combination of perfect and augmented intervals of fifths in staccato in the left hand. The piece sounds quite agitated. It is structured in quasi rondo form.



Fig. 8. Nocturne No.8, bars 39-42.

3. Conclusions

1. Generally looking at the cycle of eight nocturnes by Nicolas Economou, we find out that there is an intriguing development in the individual pieces, which enables the performer to play them separately or in performer's cycles of two, three or four works.

2. The cycle impresses with its size, content and verve. This might be the reason why the only complete interpretation of the nocturnes, apart from the composer's one, belongs to his sister, the pianist Tania Economou.

3. The pieces reflect many tendencies of the piano nocturne of the 19th Century, enriched with contemporary methods, characteristic for the 20th Century. The elements of the jazz instrumental culture impress without making the pieces sound eclectic.

4. The nocturnes, being only recorded but not written down by the composer, e.g. not being subject of any changes

or alterations, testify about the great improvisatory gift and spontaneity of Nicolas Economou as one the most significant Cypriot composers of the 20th Century.

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