



**HAL**  
open science

# Writing Music for Ancient Greek Tragedy's Stagings in France and in Greece in the Twentieth Century: The Use of the Voice in Pierre Boulez's *Orestie*(1955) and Jani Christou's *The Persians* (1965)

Andriana Soulele

## ► To cite this version:

Andriana Soulele. Writing Music for Ancient Greek Tragedy's Stagings in France and in Greece in the Twentieth Century: The Use of the Voice in Pierre Boulez's *Orestie*(1955) and Jani Christou's *The Persians* (1965). Revisiting the past, recasting the present. The reception of Greek Antiquity in music, 19th century to the present, Study Group for Russian Polyphonia Journal and Eastern European Music; Hellenic Music Centre; Polyphonia Journal, Jul 2011, Athènes, Greece. pp.32-41. hal-04002431

**HAL Id: hal-04002431**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04002431>**

Submitted on 10 Jul 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# **Writing Music for Ancient Greek Tragedy's Stagings in France and in Greece in the Twentieth Century: The Use of the Voice in Pierre Boulez's *Orestie* (1955) and Jani Christou's *The Persians* (1965)**

**Andriana Soulele**

CRIHAM, University of Poitiers, France

**ABSTRACT:** Among the ancient Greek themes that have been inspiring artistic creation for centuries, tragedy has had a special place by offering the opportunity for an extraordinary diversity of approaches and (re)interpretations. In the nineteenth century, the philhellenic movement and the literary, philological and poetic interest in ancient Greece that emerged thanks to factors such as the archaeological excavations, the revival of open theatres and the creation of various festivals, encouraged the glorious return of the myths of the Labdakids and the Atreids in Europe, especially in France and Greece. In particular, this great revival took place during the unstable economic and socio-political conditions of the twentieth century, instigating serious reflection on the progress of humanity, mostly through numerous theatrical productions.

Considering Greek tragedy as their ancient inheritance, Greek and French composers adopted different and often very original ways to create the music accompanying these performances. Much of this incidental music showed a considerable preoccupation with experimentation, thus innovation, which relates to different compositional aspects, such as the instrumentation, the musical language (association of various sources: traditional, avant-garde, extra-European), the chorus treatment, the relationship between text, staging and music, or the function of the voice.

Pierre Boulez and Jani Christou wrote incidental music for the staging of the *Orestie* (1955, Compagnie Renaud-Barrault) and of *The Persians* (1965, Theatre of Art), that paid a great attention to the vocal interpretation. Boulez used the chorus's voice as a primordial instrument having a very demanding role, that joined the orchestra's ensemble. On the other hand, Christou reduced the importance of the instrumental parts by 'orchestrating' the voices, namely by using the vocal timbre of the Persians' chorus (which dominates the whole work) in a really inventive way. Focusing on the tragedy's stage action and working closely with the text, both composers exploited the various possibilities and nuances of the voice, but adopted opposite and singular approaches, that contributed significantly to the development of incidental music for the ancient Greek tragedy.

Among the ancient Greek themes that have been inspiring artistic creation for centuries, tragedy has had a special place by offering the opportunity for an extraordinary diversity of approaches and (re)interpretations that reflect upon and criticise the society of a particular time. In the nineteenth century, the glorious return of the myths of the Labdakids and the Atreids in Europe was encouraged by the development of the philhellenic movement and the literary, philological and poetic interest that emerged from the archaeological excavations, the revival of open theatres and the creation of various festivals. However, the great renewal of Greek tragedy took place during the unstable economic and socio-political

conditions of the twentieth century, instigating reflection on the progress of humanity, mostly through numerous theatrical productions. In particular, after the end of the Second World War, Greek tragedy provoked a vivid scenic and musical revitalisation, especially in Greece and in France, between which there was important cultural exchange.

Considering Greek tragedy as their ancient inheritance, Greek and French composers adopted different and often very original ways to create the music accompanying these performances. Overcoming several shortcomings relating to the composition of music for modern stagings of Greek tragedy, much of this incidental music showed a considerable preoccupation for experimentation, thus innovation, which related to different compositional aspects, such as: the instrumentation, the musical language (association of various sources: traditional, avant-garde, extra-European), the chorus treatment, the relationship between text, staging and music or the function of the voice.

Among those examples of incidental music that paid a great attention to the vocal interpretation, we will refer especially to Pierre Boulez's *Orestie*, staged in 1955 by Jean-Louis Barrault, and Jani Christou's *The Persians*, staged in 1965 by Karolos Koun. Focusing on the tragedy's stage action and working closely with the text, both composers exploited the various possibilities and nuances of the voice, but adopted opposite and very singular approaches.

The first two tragedies of Aeschylus' *Orestie* were presented by the Renaud-Barrault Company in Bordeaux's Festival on 24 May 1955. The entire trilogy was performed in October in the same year at the Théâtre Marigny and in 1962 at the Théâtre de l'Odéon. The original texts were adapted by André Obey so as to make possible their performance as a triple bill; the costumes were designed by Marie-Hélène Dasté, the masks were created by Amleto Sartori and Petrus Bride, and the decors by Félix Labisse. Boulez's music for this trilogy was written at the time he was the musical director of the Company. It was in perfect harmony with Barrault's staging approach, that favoured occultism and ecstatic trance. Actually, Barrault wanted to give a symbolic significance to the staging, a primitive dimension,<sup>1</sup> and to create a 'great savage celebration' in order to enchant the spectator by its magic and incantatory force.<sup>2</sup> His interpretation was based on ritual elements, cults and trance practices originally from the extra-European, African or South-American traditions. Even if they seemed, at first sight, to be far away from the ancient Greek civilisation, they gave the opportunity to the stage director to get closer to the religious dimension of the tragedy. According to Marianne McDonald, Barrault's *Orestie* 'signified a return to "primitive rawness", which was associated with Greek tragedy';<sup>3</sup> 'it returned the drama to the religious and ritualistic drums and the music enhanced this effect'.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Vasseur-Legangneux, *Les Tragédies grecques sur la scène moderne, une utopie théâtrale* (Villeneuve-d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2004), 38.

<sup>2</sup> Évelyne Ertel, 'La Tragédie grecque et sa représentation moderne', in Roger-François Gauthier (ed.), *La Tragédie grecque. Les Atrides au Théâtre du Soleil* (Théâtre aujourd'hui, 1; Paris: CNDP, 1992), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Marianne McDonald, *The Living Art of Greek Tragedy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Indeed, oscillating between a language typical of the musical avant-garde of the time and oriental inspirations, the *Orestie's* score reflected the character of the spectacle and was composed in close collaboration with Barrault. According to him, the *Orestie's* music was influenced by the music of Tibet, the imperial Japanese music and the music of Noh Theatre;<sup>5</sup> despite the dodecaphonic and serial style of the composer, the chorus's form and the instrumental part were based more on the oriental tradition than on the occidental one.<sup>6</sup> In May 1955, Boulez indicated that:

Sans vouloir faire de la reconstitution, on s'est appuyé sur la construction de la trilogie [...] pour pouvoir écrire une musique qui correspond au texte. Malgré le manque d'indications précises concernant la représentation des tragédies grecques, on peut penser que le théâtre oriental — où chant, parole, danse, musique sont étroitement imbriqués — nous fournit un modèle assez proche. (Compte tenu des différences ethniques).<sup>7</sup>

Without wishing to make a reconstruction, we focused on the trilogy's construction [...] in order to be in a position to write music corresponding to the text. Despite the lack of precise indications regarding the performance of Greek tragedies, we can suppose that the oriental theatre – where chant, speech, dance, music are closely related – offers a model very close to it, keeping always in mind the national differences.

The score is written for flute, oboe, clarinets, trumpets, harp and three groups of percussion instruments (vibraphone, xylophone, glockenspiel and so on), the vibraphone and the xylophone having very elaborate parts. Working closely and very elaborately with Obey's translation, Boulez nonetheless tried to relate the music to the action without being willing to explain or underline the text; he was very attentive to the text's form when setting it to music, and also reflected on the music's staging. His acute literary faculty surfaces in the *Orestie's* score, which gives a primary place to vocal intervention. Boulez gave a great importance to the chorus, whose treatment is very varied; its place is almost equal to that of the orchestra. According to the composer, the lyric parts are based on the text's division to strophes and antistrophes; their metric analysis designate the tempo indications and the relation or contrast between strophe and antistrophe.<sup>8</sup> In 'Agamemnon', the choral parts are mainly declaimed, while in 'Les Choéphores' the chant is very developed; finally in 'Les Euménides' 'the conception is rather that of dancing and chanting'.<sup>9</sup> Using his own musical vocabulary, serialism, Boulez composed very dense music, rhythmically and melodically as well; its performance was very demanding for the musicians as well as for the actors, amateurs in music – members of the chorus – despite the fact that he tried to simplify the lyric parts. In fact, these parts reveal polyphonic complexity, contrapuntal thinking and

---

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Louis Barrault, 'Eschyle et l'*Orestie*', *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*, 11 bis (May 1955–January 1962), 116.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Boulez, 'La Musique de l'*Orestie* vue par son auteur', *La Vie Bordelaise*, 14 May 1955.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

dense harmonic structures just like the instrumental ones. Presenting his work in the French journal *Le Franc Tireur*, Boulez mentioned:

Bien que la part du chant soit réduite, les voix des acteurs et du chœur sont utilisés, comme des instruments, d'une manière allant, si l'on veut, du parler pur au chant pur en passant par tous les degrés du *sprechgesang*, le parlé rythmé inventé par Arnold Schoenberg. Je précise encore que la musique inspirée par les modes musicaux orientaux, est écrite d'après les plus strictes disciplines de la musique sérielle dodécaphonique. Mais on ne doit à aucun moment isoler cette musique de l'ensemble du jeu dramatique. Ce n'est pas une suite d'orchestre, mais une musique utilitaire. Je peux enfin ajouter, que si les acteurs furent au début un peu affolés par le caractère inhabituel de cette musique, ils s'adaptèrent très vite aux rythmes discontinus, aux intervalles vocaux déroutants comme à la rigueur métrique de la musique dodécaphonique.<sup>10</sup>

Even though the part of the chant is reduced, the voices of the actors and the chorus are used as instruments, indeed going from pure speech to pure chant, passing through all levels of *Sprechgesang*, the rhythmic declamation invented by Arnold Schoenberg. Inspired by the oriental musical modes, the music is composed according to the strictest rules of the dodecaphonic serial music. But we must at no point isolate this music from the dramatic interpretation. It is not an orchestra suite, but functional music. Finally, I would add that if the actors were at first a bit terrified by the unusual character of this music, they were quickly used to the discontinuous rhythms and the perplexing vocal intervals as well as the rigorous metrics of dodecaphonic music.

The chorus is divided into eleven solo voices according to Obey's adaptation, that follows in this respect Paul Mazon's translation. The text is distributed to each actor or chorus member depending on each one's declamatory way.<sup>11</sup> There are passages performed in *tutti*, by solo voices (chorus D, 'Les Choéphores'), chants for two different voices (chorus B, 'Les Choéphores'), for two alternating semi-choruses (*parodos*, 'Les Choéphores') and even for a female and a male chorus which sing at the same time different melodic lines ('Les Euménides', No. 17; Example 1). The performance of the choral parts is very diverse, ranging from the most discreet speech without instrumental accompaniment to rhythmic declamation, *a cappella* or accompanied by percussions, passing through pure chant. According to Martin Zenck, Boulez tried to make the vocal sound deeper than the instrumental sound by using the human voice either for singing or for reciting and distinguishing it among the pitch, the vocal intensity and the language.<sup>12</sup> The declamatory writing was transported to the instruments: the percussions have accented parts, the

---

<sup>10</sup> Guy Verdot, 'Pierre Boulez nous dit ce que sera musicalement "l'Orestie" d'Eschyle que monte J.-L. Barrault à Marigny', *Le Franc Tireur*, 1–2 October 1955.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Zenck, 'Pierre Boulez' *Orestie* (1955–1995). Das unveröffentlichte Manuskript der szenischen Musik zu Jean-Louis Barraults Inszenierung der Trilogie im Théâtre Marigny', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 60 (2003), 50–73.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

melodic lines of the winds are in perfect dialogue with the voice of the choristers and the protagonists, the vibraphone and the harp are in pedal and in *sostenuto* in order to extend the human voice.<sup>13</sup>

**Example 1.** Pierre Boulez, ‘Les Euménides’, No. 17, bb. 1–6  
(Transcription based on the manuscript score; Basel, Paul Sacher Stiftung,  
Pierre Boulez Collection, Mapped G, Dossier 1)

Boulez exploited the possibilities of the voice by passing constantly from speaking passages to rhythmic, singing or even shouting ones and vice-versa (‘Agamemnon’, ‘Clytemnestra’s entry at the arrival of Agamemnon’; Example 2); the latter often demand a precise tempo and specific expression: ‘animé, un peu retenu, modéré’ (animated, a little bit retained, moderate) (No. 7, chorus B, ‘Agamemnon’), ‘accentué, psalmodié’ (emphasised, like a psalmody) (No. 3, chorus B, ‘Agamemnon’), and so on. Thus, the composer follows a particular dramatic conception for the chant and the chorus’s declamation depending on the tragic action. Zenck believes that the different tempi of speaking and the various forms of declamation have a particular function according to the characters of the tragedy.<sup>14</sup>

**Example 2.** Pierre Boulez, ‘Agamemnon’, (‘Clytemnestra’s entry’), bb. 1–4  
(Transcription based on the second copy of the manuscript score, Paris, BnF,  
Collection Renaud-Barrault, Mapped G, Dossier 1)

Nevertheless, the *Orestie’s* vocal music presents numerous and serious difficulties for the performer concerning the melodic development, due to the large intervals, the

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

dissonance, the division of the chant into two different voices ('Les Choéphores', *parodos*) as well as the rhythmic unfolding, which is often very complex (chorus C, 'Agamemnon'). It involves also continuous changes of metre, probably because of the prosody of the French text. Moreover, the choral parts are rarely doubled by the orchestra, and if we find some melodic motifs repeated in 'Agamemnon', this is only due to the repetition of the same text. The two final tragedies also reveal a very complicated writing for the voice, which required more professional performers with experience in the avant-garde music of the time rather than actors, mostly amateurs on the musical level, who had to sing by heart (Example 3). According to Jean Gillibert, stage director and Barrault's assistant at that time, Boulez's music could not really be sung by amateurs.<sup>15</sup> Apparently, Boulez had to change his vocal music several times in order to align his language with the musical competences of the actors. In fact, the consultation of the two versions of the manuscript score reveals important modifications of many choral parts: most of the times, in the second version they were declaimed rather than sung.

Choeur

Dai - gnez \_ vous met - tre en marche O puis - sant \_ tes dé\_esses

O fil \_ \_ \_ les in - fer \_ \_ \_ condes de \_ la \_ \_ fé con - de nuit

**Example 3.** Pierre Boulez, 'Les Euménides', No. 11, bb. 1–6  
(Transcription based on the manuscript score, Basel, Paul Sacher Stiftung,  
Pierre Boulez Collection, Mappe G, Dossier 1)

The sophisticated treatment of the voice, that is aligned with the rest of the orchestra, rhythmically and melodically, gives the impression of writing for an instrument that was added to the ensemble. Thus, we can suppose that with this work Boulez touched the limits of an opera (a genre that does not appear in his work catalogue) since he exceeded, on the technical level, the performance requirements of incidental music by actors, namely non-professional musicians. Furthermore, the vocal writing in the *Orestie* relates to two other important vocal works, *Le Marteau sans maître* (The Hammer without a Master, 1953–1955) and *Improvisation sur Mallarmé* (Improvisation on Mallarmé, 1957), in which Boulez experimented with the penetrating nature of the instrumental sound, the vocal sound and the percussions.<sup>16</sup> The important role of the chorus and the particular vocal writing, which is based on the text, reveal common points with Christou's music for *The Persians*.

<sup>15</sup> Personal testimonies after interviewing both stage directors, Jean Gillibert et Lucien Durand, during the author's doctoral research. Andriana Soulele, 'La Musique de scène des représentations de tragédies grecques en France et en Grèce, de 1945 à 1975', doctoral thesis (Université de Paris Sorbonne, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Under Karolos Koun's<sup>17</sup> staging, Giannēs Tsarouchēs's set, Giannēs Moralēs's costumes and Maria Kynēgou's choreography, *The Persians'* performance illustrates a different, but at the same time very imaginative, concept for the Greek tragedy that applies mostly to the remarkable use of the voice. It was presented by the Art Theatre in London's Aldwych Theatre in April 1965 and afterwards in the Odeon of Herodes Atticus in Athens. Close to the ideas of Jean-Louis Barrault, Koun's staging approach took into consideration the contemporaneous reality and the rites of the Asian and African traditions as well. According to the stage director Gerasimos Evangelatos, his conception of putting on stage Greek tragedies was based on 'a popular expressionism', on a nodal point, where the past meets the present and the Orient meets the Occident; his goal was to stimulate the mind and the aesthetic point of view of the spectator.<sup>18</sup>

The aesthetic convergence between the director and the composer resulted in a mutual and very fruitful influence: Koun perceived *The Persians* through Christou's music and Christou staged the Aeschylarian tragedy in his mind before composing the music.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Christou wrote the music taking into consideration the staging and the acting; according to him, the text constituted 'a score to which the sounds are added afterwards'.<sup>20</sup> His conception of a fundamental musical function and his original initiatives concerning the chorus met with the total enthusiastic approval of Koun. According to him, Christou's music supported completely his staging,<sup>21</sup> particularly as regards the chorus's imposing role. At the same time, Christou found in Koun a stage director willing to allow space for experimentation without limits. Hence, his score represented totally his personal musical aims.<sup>22</sup>

Written for magnetic tapes (prepared piano and *musique concrète*), an ensemble of wind, string and percussion instruments,<sup>23</sup> singing and declaiming chorus, *The Persians'* complex score comprises dissonant and chromatic melodic development, various rhythmic

---

<sup>17</sup> Karolos Koun (1908–1987) was an exceptional stage director, renowned in Europe for his vivid performances of ancient Greek tragedy and comedy. He founded the Theatre of Art in 1942, presented numerous productions of avant-garde European writers such as Brecht and Pirandello, and collaborated with many Greek composers. Michael Mayar, *O Karolos Koun kai to Theatro Technis* (Karolos Koun and the Art Theatre), trans. Erika Kairi (Athens: Ellēniko Logotechniko kai Istoriko Archeio, 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Gerasimos Evangelatos, 'H epanastatikē anoixē enos theatrou. Synopitikē istoria enos anthrōpou kai enos oramatou pou allaxe to teatro stēn Ellada' (The Revolutionary Spring of a Theatre. Concise History of a Man and a Vision that Changed Theatre in Greece), *Iridanos*, 8 (October 2006) <<http://www.hridanos.gr/volume08/afieroma/index.php>>, accessed 26 March 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Cōnstantina Stathouloupoulou, 'Epidauria melismata' (Chants in Epidaurus), in Kōstas Geōrgousopoulos (ed.), *Epidaurus. To archaio teatro, oi parastaseis* (Epidaurus. The Ancient Theatre, the Performances) (Athens: Militos, 2002), 220.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> S. I. Artemakēs, 'O Karolos Koun milaei gia tous Perses' (Karolos Koun talks about *The Persians*), *Kathēmerinē*, 25 March 1965, n.p.n.

<sup>22</sup> 'Jani Christou. Gnōmē enos neou synthetē' (Jani Christou. The Opinion of a Young Composer), *To Ethnos*, 12 July 1968, n.p.n.

<sup>23</sup> The orchestra consists of 3 horns, 2 trombones, tuba, piano, violoncello, contrabass, santouri, xylophone, blocks, military drum, cymbals, tam-tam, bass drum, bongos, conga, toms, timpani, and different types of bells.



motifs and attributes an important role to percussion instruments. In addition, the magnetic tapes present various vocal effects such as sighs, breaths, gasps and whispers.<sup>24</sup> As for the *stasima*, the lyric parts, most of them are recited naturally and rhythmically by soloists and the chorus. They are often accompanied by percussions, such as tam-tam and timpani. The chant actually occupies a smaller part in the score and shows considerable influence from the Byzantine chant due to its hieratic and psalmody aspect.<sup>25</sup>

The originality of this work resides in the innovative treatment of the text and of the chorus. Some of Christou's techniques for the chorus – such as mixing various sung and recited verses, non synchronous performance and superposition of different voices and texts – can be traced in incidental music composed by others, such as Xenakis' *Oresteia*, written almost at the same period in 1965. However, Christou's concept shows a different employment of them; his large dramatic and musical imagination goes beyond borders that limit the chorus function on stage. With the collaboration of the director, the stage action is written on the score: some passages of the actors and the total text of the chorus, their movements and every possible nuance of expression as well, are written down in order to control and determine their relation with the music.<sup>26</sup>

The chorus, the chant and the diverse declamations are employed by Christou as sound material which has to be treated and developed musically during the tragedy's action. He declared on this matter:

Γράφοντας τη μουσική των *Περσών* δεν με ενδιέφερε να δημιουργήσω απλά υποκρουστικά αποτελέσματα. Εκείνο που με τράβηξε ήταν η δυνατότητα να χρησιμοποιήσω το Χορό σαν μέσο αναπαραγωγής της πρώτης ύλης της τραγωδίας – των πρωτόγωνων, βασικών συγκινήσεων. Αυτό προσπάθησα να το πετύχω τοποθετώντας λέξεις και φράσεις με τρόπο που να δημιουργούν σχήματα απόλυτου αυτάρκους φωνητικού ήχου, ποικίλης υφής.<sup>27</sup>

By writing the music of *The Persians*, I wasn't interested in creating merely a musical background. What attracted me was the ability to use the chorus as a medium of reproducing the tragedy's raw material – of primitive, primary emotions. I tried to achieve this by placing words and phrases in a way that they would create forms of absolutely autonomous vocal sound of varied texture.

---

<sup>24</sup> According to the manuscript score of *The Persians*: 'Softest cluster vibrations – only just audible, very faint heavy sighings – breath only – in echo chamber – slow and infrequent', 'soft cluster vibrations, slow gasps, only just audible', 'whispers in echo chamber – extremely slow, hollow sigh like repetitions of κα...είς [no...body]...superimposed'. Athens, Jani Christou Archive, Jani Christou, *The Persians*, manuscript score.

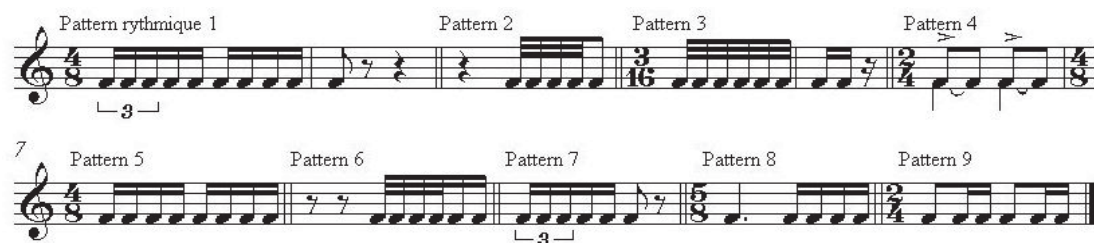
<sup>25</sup> The Byzantine chant's influence, evident in every *stasimon*, is incontestable in the second *stasimon*: the Persian chorus invokes Darius' spirit with a short melody based on chromatic tetrachords.

<sup>26</sup> Giannēs G. Papaïōannou, *O Giannēs Chrēstou kai ē metafysikē tēs mousikēs* (Jani Christou and the Metaphysics of Music) (Athens: E.S.SY.M., 1970), 13.

<sup>27</sup> Jani Christou, 'Grafontas gia ton choro' (Composing for the Chorus), in Sophia Zarampouka-Sarrē (ed.), *Theatro Technēs 1942–1972* (Theatre of Art 1942–1972) (Athens: Hellēnikē Etaireia Theatrou – Theatro Technēs, 1972), 33.

Christou thought of the chorus as a complex instrument occupying a dominant place in tragedy's interpretation; the human voice offered him a large canvas moving from speaking to singing, and from singing to shouting, convoking every possible vocal sound and expression (wailing to the mournful psalmody, *glissandi* to the sound of breath, sighing to screaming and crying, inhalation and exhalation), by emphasising particular text fragments, employing the rhythmic possibilities of the Greek language and using every nuance from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*.<sup>28</sup>

The division of the chorus allowed him to cut and divide the text, repeat it and exploit it freely. Hence, he singled out key words and phrases and created rich rhythmical and melodic patterns (Example 4) that are performed by one or more choral groups or soloists, while other chorists and soloists recited different fragments of the text simultaneously or not. Employing different tempi, rhythms, dynamics, various accentuations and techniques (such as the rhythmic or melodic polyphonic treatment), as well as the question-answer game and the canon, Christou 'orchestrated' the chorus in an ingenious way that made the use of instruments almost unnecessary.<sup>29</sup> The vocal interpretation that he proposed also offered more vigour to the recitation, the dialogue, the complaints and the chorus lamentation; it marked crucial moments of the stage action and brought out the profound meaning of the text. Thus, even though music had a vital role, the text was always at the forefront. As a consequence, Christou reformed not only the musical, but the theatrical performance of the chorus as well: staging and musical interpretation became one, interdependent and inseparable.



**Example 4.** Jani Christou, *The Persians*, patterns  
(Transcription from the manuscript score, Athens, Jani Christou Archive)

Considered as the most original and unique work of its genre by many Greek composers, such as George Couroupos and Theodore Antoniou,<sup>30</sup> *The Persians* abolishes the frontiers between speech and music through its vocal realisation; it unifies them at a higher level that could surpass the form of the opera. According to Anna-Martine Lucciano, the dichotomy

<sup>28</sup> Anna-Martine Lucciano, *Jani Christou: The Works and Temperament of a Greek Composer*, trans. Catherine Dale (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000), 75.

<sup>29</sup> Letter addressed to Folke Rabe from Jani Christou, at Christmas 1964. Consulted on the composer's official site <<http://www.janichristou.com/commentaries/commentaries.html>>, accessed 26 March 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Andriana Soulele, 'Ē mousikē gia to archaio ellēniko drama. Mia synenteuxē me ton synthetē Geōrgio Kouroupo' (Music for the Ancient Greek Drama. An Interview with the Composer George Couroupos), *Polyphonia*, 7 (autumn 2005), 147–170.

between text and music no longer exists; instead there is an integrated sound substance arising from these two heterogenic sources.<sup>31</sup> She considers that Christou exploits the voice's immense musical possibilities, no longer by simply valorising its profoundly human dimensions, but by going beyond this stage and taking it to the limits of its sonorous possibilities, to the boundary of the normal world and that of madness.<sup>32</sup> The exploration of new methods of expression, the spirit of experimentation, and the development of the theatrical element in this incidental music lead Christou to the ritualisation of musical action in his subsequent music. His works *Anaparastasis* (Proto-performances or Re-enactments) – ritual compositions uniting music, gesture, movement and choreography, written between 1966 and 1968 – represent exactly this aesthetical evolution.

Both the *Orestie* and *The Persians* demonstrate an exploitation of the human voice to an important extent, which results from fastidious work on the text. Both composers experimented with various vocal nuances moving from reciting to singing, passing through rhythmic declamation to shouting and screaming. Even though in the *Orestie* several choral parts were recited in the end, Boulez used the chant for the actors and the chorus to a greater extent than Christou did in *The Persians*; the latter principally explored various rhythmical and declaiming ways by combining solo and choral voices and using synchronous performances of different texts or only words and syllables with diverse intensities according to the tragic scenes. If Boulez used the voices of the chorus members as a virtuosic instrument in order to enrich his orchestral ensemble, Christou exploited the chorus vocal possibilities so as to almost replace his orchestral ensemble and make it practically useless! Boulez, consciously or not, reached the borders of a serial opera through a very elaborate writing for the lyric parts; yet Christou went beyond them by making inseparable the relation between music and text. Original and innovative for its time, the music of these scores proves the great degree to which it is possible to experiment through the genre of the ancient Greek tragedy and affirms the possibility of amalgamating different traditions, inspirations and influences in order to reinterpret its context and meaning for the modern world. Being unique works in both composers' repertory, the *Orestie* and *The Persians* brought a new spirit into writing music for contemporary productions of Greek tragedy, that certainly improved the image and facilitated the development of incidental music during the last decades of the twentieth century.

---

<sup>31</sup> Lucciano, *Jani Christou*, 81.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*