Kasper T. Toeplitz –questions for Avopolis (Greece)
Vangelis Poulios

- **As you are working in a very wide spectrum – from operas, to noise music - one wonders: what you are up to at this period of time?**

  KTT : On the contrary, I work in a very narrow spectrum, I actually only work on one "kind" of music, one family, one style if you prefer, or rather, as it is not a question of musical styles, in one direction. Which is "now", which, maybe, is not even music (as "art of sounds") but just art or just a view at the world as it is now ; and the fact that my "answer" or reaction uses sound, or music, is not so much about music but because it is a field I feel at relative ease in, a tool I learned to use. I could speak about a language I know how to manipulate, except that I do not consider the music as being a language (and much less an "universal " language as some say – this is just the contrary, even !) but the metaphor of a language is an appropriate one, here : I answer those questions of yours in English, I would not be able to give you answers in Greek, and if I would be using some other language I speak and write, the phrases would be different, but, hopefully, the meaning would be the same.
  But, yes, in this field of music I did use (and still do) what might seem different tools : I first spend years as a "serious" composer (of contemporary / classical music) writing mostly for acoustic instruments, writing for full symphonic orchestras, operas, string quartets, ensembles, this kind of things – but at the same time I was playing electric bass. And then with the change of century I "discovered" the electronics, the computer, and the vast field of possibilities (and directions) they offer – and it seemed a more appropriate tool to say what I wanted to say… But basically my music always was and still is the "same", even if the shape of it changed ; I have never played different styles of music, never played jazz or rock or pop, never thought about writing instrumental contemporary music and then switching to, I don't know, electronic "musique concrète" or "abstract illbient", never decided to follow a trend, like "post-doom" or "new complexity". Basically it always was, and still is the fact of choosing the tools that you feel are the most appropriate – and sometimes I did wrong choices, but who did not ? it is just like asking to someone "you did write letters, then you switched to using Fax, now you write emails, or are switching to twitter – what are you up to, now?" when the important thing is what you write and how you interact with your time.
  So yes, my music is still more or less the same, rather deep (I hope) sounds with slow motions, without much apparent rhythm, but rather slow breathing, with dense textures of sound… clouds of sound.

- **How did you come up with the name Sleaze Art? What makes your art sleazy?**

KTT : well, "Sleaze Art" is a name I came with when still in school, and it sure sounded good – but it is a good name which also has a strong meaning : it is about art, which maybe is something much more "serious" that just entertainment, which is not meant to be (or only be) "pretty" or joyful or light, but also the "sleaze" part of it balances the meaning and maybe takes it away from the pompous seriousness of "art" – it is not about a pretentious game of mind, it is not about some "high level" of dealing with ideas, it also has to do with the gutter, with simple (even if deep) feelings, you don't have to know the history of 20th century music to get it, you might even not get it, or you might feel it without knowing why and how. Yes, a balance between ideas and feelings – something all art should be, of course ; you can be taken by some paintings without knowing much about them, about their place in history, just the raw force of it : and you can be taken by it and still not like it – those are two different things.

And then this name, Sleaze Art seems to stuck with me since then, it was the name of my first serious project, an ensemble of 5 electric basses, then it became the name of my orchestra of electric guitars and basses (and, in the very end of 20th century, the juxtaposition of the terms "electric guitars" and "orchestra" sound very much as "Sleaze" and "Art", didn't they ?) then it became kind of generic term for my activities – and now, in 2014, it is the name for this new project I work on, an ensemble of electric basses : I told you I am still doing the same one thing!

- **What changed in your perception of music when switched from acoustic/electric instruments (bass, guitar, reeds etc) to computer? And what do you mean by the notion of seeing the computer as a "real instrument"?**

KTT : The computer, in music, was for me a God's send. When you write instrumental music, most of the time you depend on musicians, other, different from you, people, with their own vision of the world, and of course their own ability on their instruments. Even if you write music only for yourself, which you play on your instrument, they are two sides of yourself – the composer and the musician (unless you define yourself as an improviser, in which case you can be seen as a musician building forms and not a "composer" – which of course is very fine, I have no problems with it). But if you compose music, you have to know and accept that it will go through the prism of other people minds and tools – instruments – before it exists, before it produces sound. Which is fine, but which can be frustrating : how often does a composer use tricks to have an orchestra play what he wants, for example quarter tones (writing for instance extremely difficult phrases, in half tones, so you know that after a while the players will be out of tune and will actually play quarter tones, without really meaning it – same goes for rhythms or how to lose the perception of a steady pulse, using a lot of *rubatos*, or difficult way of writing..). Since using the computer is "just" a

level of work between the composer and the machine, you can feed it with all your ideas, as precise or chaotic they are…

Another thing is that, in my music, I never use any "found" sounds or samples of existing instruments or sounds – it is all pure, real-time synthesis. Which means it gives a higher level of responsibility : if you play a recording of, for instance, the sea, you did choose the recording, maybe even edited it but you are not the one who decided all the micro-elements of the sound, you take it as a whole – same goes for instrumental composition : even if you are a not-so-good composer, and write a solo cello piece, if you have (let's dream) Rostropovitch play it, it will suddenly sound way better that played by some "ok" cellist from a small orchestra – this is the part of the sound, of the music, you can not claim to be responsible for… But when conceiving your music on a computer, calculating all your sound from scratch you can say that you are fully responsible for everything that the audience hears….

And then what "a real instrument" is : what an instrument is, everybody knows ; it is something build towards the aim of producing sounds of a more or less defined nature (as a piano is not really meant to play long sounds, without attack, with micro-variations of pitch, or a clarinet is really not suited to play chords !), and also an instrument is sounding differently depending who and how plays it –most of the time Cecil Taylor will make your piano sound more explosive that your grand-aunt ! What I mean by real instrument is this, the capacity to re-interpret the same music differently every time – to play the music as opposed to play a sound file (if I play to you a CD of the Beatles, or a recording of an orchestra, it will sound exactly the same if someone else plays it to you..). A real instrument is a question of responsibility – and also the always possible failure !

- **You frequently use this instrument bass-computer, and you speak about the aesthetic context behind it – apart from its use as an instrument. So, what is, in brief, its aesthetic value?**

KTT : it is the continuation of this thing with the computer-as-instrument : the bass becomes something else that the instrument is, it is generating the sound, or part of the sound, it is also the interface you use to talk to the computer – it is also easier to have a deeper connection with such an instrument that with a box manufactured for being a (super-)calculator ! But what the box does to the instrument is also great – in a word it totally changes it, taking away most of its limitations : it is fairly easy to have the instrument go higher or lower that what it was meant for, it is also possible to have a much bigger polyphony out of it – you can lose the "pitch" factor as well, not even speaking about the volume – the instrument can now be just the murmur of wind or hell's roar! And all in between. And again, it changes the level of composer's responsibility, the question is no more "what can I do with this instrument ?" given all of its limitations (a bass goes only that high and that low, you can play chords on it, but in kind of limited way, usually no

more that 3 or 4 notes at a time and in a somewhat limited register as well, and so for) but the question becomes "what do I want to hear, what kind of music/sound do I want to produce ?" And the possibilities are (virtually) limitless – or the limit is your brain, not the instrument.

- **Have you developed another instrument like the bass-computer?**

KTT : those days all the compositions I write for different instruments (they all are now connected to the computer) are not any more compositions for the given instrument but rather compositions for the musician(s) playing it – which is the most important part of the equation. "Deperdition" is not so much a piece for the Double bass and live electronics, but a piece for Bruno Chevillon, who happens to play (very well) the double bass, "Convergence, Saturation & Dissolution" premiered in march 2014 is not a piece for electric harp, but a piece for Hélène Breschand, and "Rupture & Dissipation" is not written for flute, clarinet, tuba, percussion etc but for the "Phoenix ensemble". But it goes further that the instrument – it is a state of mind, and rather that developing "new" instruments the question is about developing and "electronic mind", a different vision of music, a different take on it. A different state of your brain, a different (electronic) definition of what music is.

- **I think in some of your works you use frequencies that are only bodily felt, that the human ear cannot catch. How does the audience respond when they are exposed to them?**

KTT : well, that is a nice idea, of course, but I am not sure how true it is : my computer can of course produce a very low frequency, such as 21 Hz (which is said to be the limit of human hearing) or very high, such as 19.000 Hz (the other limit) and, for sure, I never met anyone able to hear it. But I am less that certain that any audio equipment (amps and loudspeakers) can reproduce those – oh, of course something happens, but is it what you play?? It is something else? Not sure... It might as well be just an impression, something made up by our minds.
As a more general rule I am not very interested in audience's response to my music – and no, I don't think it is some arrogant attitude, feeling so much "superior", or claiming that no one can "understand" my music, at least not before 200 years or so !! No, what I think is that way too often if an artist listens too much to the different opinions he/she might lose its own point : in trying to please too many people there is not much to gain ; that is, of course, unless you want to please everybody, but, in music, this is part of the commercial attitude (which might produce nice things, certainly, but is not at all anything that interests me – I never listen to "pop" artists, don't know at all what is happening on that side of music)

- **You have developed your own notation system. Could you describe the way it is written and what made the typical one inefficient?**

KTT : Again, it is simpler that it sounds like – the shortcomings of the "old" system (*solfeggio*) are quite obvious when it comes to the "new" music, especially electronic music : solfeggio is based on the idea of notes (pitches) and rhythm (pulses based on a more or less steady beat, similar for all the players of a given ensemble). Two points which are more and more irrelevant in some of the new music, where the main concern is more about the timbre, or the texture of the sound itself and how the time passes. What is more is that very often a "classical" score says what a given instrument (or rather the person playing it) should do, at any given time, but says very little about why to do such an action – a typical traditional score says things such as "play THAT pitch for THAT amount of time" without saying why this pitch, why that amount of time. And yes, it can produce great music (sometimes), but if I want to address a musician (and not an instrument) and if I want this musician to play the music and not only execute the given instructions, I have to give him some more… For instance the question of the pitch, which is so essential to some music, might be totally irrelevant in some other music : if you work with slightly pitched noise (as I often do) the color of this noise is far more important than its exact pitch, which could be F or F# or G or something – sometimes even the octave is not so important, but the impression of being in "high" or "low" register is what you are after : or you just want the effort : play the highest *possible*. Sometimes, on the contrary, the precisely written notes are not precise enough : if I want a precise beating between two frequencies, just stating it is F and F# is not enough. So I came with what basically is in a way a graphic score (but not at all similar to what graphic scores of 60's and 70's were) in which there are some very precise things – sometimes the exact frequencies are written down, much more precise that notes – and some are just… indications (how could you write a sweep of a filter? The note is the same but the impression of crossing many many territories and timbres is there, and more important that the pitch itself…)
And also what I try to describe is what I am after, why a note/sounds stops, why it appears, is it the consequence of something which did happen, is it preparing something else, is it an "echo" of a past event?
And yes, sometimes, when it is just the right way, I use also traditional solfeggio in the middle of it.
There might also be other reasons – the economics make the traditional solfeggio the only possible way to communicate with an orchestra. Because, yes, the final question is how much it communicates with the player(s). Using a graphic score which takes hours to understand, which just makes things more complicate, would be absurd.

- **You mostly perform written compositions, am I right? Does improvisation have a role in your music-making?**

KTT : yes, I am coming from this old idea of a composer who invents the music without actually playing it – I compose in silence, when I write a score or when I write a program in the computer. What I like in this is that you are not limited by the possibilities of the instrument or your own possibilities on the given instrument : the idea is to decide what I want to hear, not to notate the sounds I am capable of producing. So yes, most of the time I write things down (then sometimes a computer program can be the score). But I also play music, I like playing, I guess, and it is a very nice way to communicate with other musicians (I remember when living in Japan, not speaking Japanese, I made some very nice meeting by just playing with other musicians). So I would say that, yes, I improvise, even if I call myself mostly a composer. My improvisations however might sound a little too much as compositions – I like very much to articulate time in music, not only the NOW and the immediate moment, but also the future, what will happen, and the past, to work with the memories ; and this is much more a compositional way of thinking the music, on the contrary of the improvised music whose credo is often to <u>listen</u> (to the other musicians) : I sometimes when improvising think it is better NOT to listen, but construct on the longer term : yes, the construction being more important (for me) that the moment.

- **Your performance in Athens will be with choreographer Myriam Gourfink. Reading the Data_Noise part of your website, I understand that you were using the dancer as an instrument – so to speak. Was that so? Is that what you will present in Athens?**

KTT : yes, we will play the piece Data_Noise which is a musical composition played by two musicians, but one of them happens to be a dancer ! So the dancer dances (we do collaborate on various projects since some 15 years!), a very very slow-motion dance, and I place a lot of different sensors, accelerometers etc on the dancer, but also on the surface on which she dances : those sensors send continuous streams of data to the computer which plays the music, disturbing, so to speak, the program – yes the idea was to *inoculate* some chaos in the maybe too precise calculations of a computer – and what better source or uncertainty, randomness and chaos that the human body ?

Appreciate your time, thank you.