

## Some Piano Improvisations by Nicolas Economou

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**Abstract:** The paper examines some of the piano improvisations of the Cypriot pianist and composer Nicolas Economou (1953-1993). Highly acclaimed for his piano interpretations, Economou is little known as a composer and improviser. A large part of his compositions existed only as recordings and they were notated after his tragic death.

The paper reviews how the composer's creative personality was influenced by the jazz instrumental culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The research focuses not only on some of the individual improvisations of Economou but also on the "group" improvisations of Nicolas Economou, Friedrich and Paul Gulda, Chick Corea and Rodion Shchedrin during the Munich Summer Piano Festival in 1982 and 1983.

Nicolas Economou explained in the preface of the album "On two pianos" that his attempt was to "break down the stuffy ritual surrounding classical music" and bring the spontaneity of music creativity back to the audience.

The aims and the objectives of the research are to introduce a very important feature of the creative thinking of Economou – his mastership in improvisation, which is reflected in the different approaches towards the form of his compositions. His great improvisatory talent places him among the most important Cypriot composers.

**Keywords:** Piano, composer, jazz, improvisations, Cyprus.

## 1. Introduction

Nicolas Economou (1953-1993) was an outstanding figure for Cypriot music and culture. An extraordinary pianist, improviser, composer and conductor, he spent most of his life abroad where he accomplished many artistic projects but managed to keep close ties with his native Cyprus and its music. Despite his short forty-year life, the alluring power of his creative work is perceived as an artistic 'explosion' and inevitably reminds us of the tragic fates of other young poets and musicians, who died early.

Nicolas Economou was well-known to the international audience as a remarkable piano interpreter with an international career. Although he has left an original compositional output, it remained largely unknown to audiences and to professional circles. The reason is that very few of his compositions were written down and published during his lifetime. Even now, twenty-six years after his death, a large part of his work exists only as recordings. Some compositions (*Eight Nocturnes*, *Improvisations in vier Sätzen* and others) were notated by the German musicologist Reiner Starzonek. The German pianist Ratko Delorko arranged Economou's *Corelli-Variations*, Jan Filla edited *Variationen über einigés Thema*. The compositions were printed and kept in single copies in the archives of the Nicolas Economou Foundation in Limassol, Cyprus. Unfortunately, they have rarely been performed, since they have not been published.

As said, Economou did not notate but recorded most of his musical creations instead. We do not know whether the composer aimed to notate them at a later stage or simply considered the recording as a sound score. It is not clear, and it might never be revealed. The majority of Economou's compositions had an improvisatory character. This rare gift was the essence of his work, in the context of the tradition of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

## 2. Aims and objectives of the research

The emphasis of the present research is on the improvisatory work of Nicolas Economou. It aims to introduce an important feature of the creative thinking of Economou – his mastership in improvisation, which is reflected in the various approaches towards the form of his compositions. This would not have been possible had the composer not been such a brilliant pianist with a warm, expressive tone, a variety of articulations and a virtuoso technique.

The paper also examines how the composer's versatile personality was influenced by the jazz instrumental culture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially by the collaboration with the famous American jazz pianist, Chick Corea. The research focuses not only on some of the individual improvisations of Economou, but also on the 'group' improvisations of Nicolas Economou, Friedrich and Paul Gulda, Chick Corea and Rodion Shchedrin during the Munich Summer Piano Festival in 1982 and 1983. Their collaboration is a completely new form of music communication.

The ability to improvise was highly esteemed in the past and many remarkable composers were great improvisers too. Nicolas Economou was familiar with the tradition of improvisation of the classical masters and in jazz. In his last interview on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1993 with the journalist Paris Potamides on the television programme «Τέχνη και Πολιτισμός» [Art and Culture] on CyBC, Economou talked about this unique ability of some composers to create music in the form of improvisation.

Here we need to mention the work of Nicolas Economou, *Improvisations in vier Sätzen*, composed as a suite in four movements. The movements – Prelude, Fugue, Aria and Toccata – were improvisatory structures, widely used during the Baroque epoch. The improvisation was released on an LP by the ARTISTIC record company, in March 1978, in Germany, as the last item of a track list including Mozart, Schumann and Tchaikovsky. The musicologist and friend of Nicolas, Andreas Elsner wrote in the sleeve note:

[sic] One other of the artist's special skills has also been recorded: his skill in improvising, a skill of which he had already produced evidence on the Bavarian Radio with free fantasias in the style of great composers. At the end of a recording session in the studio, at which the works on this record have been recorded, too, Economou decided – at the request of the people present – to improvise in classical patterns of style. A choice was made in favour of the forms prelude, fugue, aria and toccata, which were in use above all in the Baroque age. What Economou invented in the language of music of our time on the complex of forms presented to him is published uncut on this record as a document of an unusual talent.<sup>1</sup>

Inspired by the improvisatory piano tradition, Nicolas Economou also created three sets of variations – *Waltz with Variations*, *Variations on a Theme* and *Corelli-Variations*. The composer experimented with the classical form, expanding its diapason in a new and innovative way.

In the spirit of the Romantic tradition were few of the compositions of Nicolas Economou such as *Liszt-Paraphrase*, as well as his *Ungarische Rhapsodie im Stil von Liszt* [Hungarian Rhapsody in the Style of Liszt]. They both contained an improvisatory passion and were influenced by the work of the great Hungarian composer.

Improvisation is the most distinct feature of jazz, which distinguishes it from the rest of the genres. There is a basic requirement of all musicians who perform jazz to be able to raise themselves to a certain level of creativity.<sup>2</sup> The collaboration of Nicolas Economou with Chick Corea during the Munich Summer Piano Festival in 1982 and

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Elsner, Liner notes for *Nicolas Economou spielt Klavierwerke von Mozart-Schumann-Tschaikowsky-Economou*, Artistic Musikproduktion, Bestell-Nr.KL 11148, 1978, LP.

<sup>2</sup> In *Prisms*, Theodor Adorno reviewed the improvisation in jazz, from a very negative point of view. The bottom of his negativity was the 'popularity' of the genre, the standardisation of the harmonic progressions, and the accessibility close to the level of simplicity (Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, 121-132. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1967). We could argue with Adorno since the collaboration of Economou with Corea can be seen as evidence against this argument.

with other improvisers such as the Russian composer Rodion Shchedrin in 1983, gave Economou the chance to develop his improvisatory talent to a new level.

Among the contemporary styles, the improvisation is mostly existent in *chance* or *aleatory* music. In his early piano sonata *Orthodoxia*, which was composed and notated by the composer in 1970, Nicolas Economou used few aleatoric techniques and clusters to create an interesting sonic effect. Alternating between conventional and aleatoric music notation, the composer created a piece with a strong relation between Cyprus folk music and the aleatoric way of expression. Economou inserted into the music structure free metric episodes, which gave the performer an opportunity to improvise.

### 3. Some differences between composition and improvisation

There have been a lot of discussions about the differences between improvisation and composition and which form is more valuable. The improvisation is regarded as a personal act of creating music, which is relevant for a certain moment, e.g. it is not meant to be reproduced or repeated.

The music score is a document and symbol of a creative achievement. The essence of the music performance is somewhat evanescent and transient. Even when the music performance had passed, the music score was the living proof of the innovative individualism of the composer. The sound recording has a very similar purpose to the score. It helps the music experience to be preserved. In a way, it immortalises the music experience. This was the favourite form of music documentation of Economou. Also, through this form, the composer kept his creations for his own use because they were inaccessible to other players.

The recording of an improvisation does not document the preparation but only the final stage. This is, perhaps, the main reason why improvised music is considered inferior to notated music. Another possible reason for Economou's rarity of notated scores was that, he, from the position of a great piano improviser, wanted to catch the unique creative impulse.

There are few characteristic differences between composition and improvisation:

1. The improvisation is created at the moment it is performed. The possibility of making changes does not exist. The nature of improvisation in real time is its strength and weakness simultaneously.
2. The composer often works alone (although there exist few compositions created collaboratively). On the contrary, the improvisation – especially the jazz one – is mostly a group activity. A unique and impressive experience was the group improvisations of Nicolas Economou with Chick Corea, Friedrich Gulda, Rodion Shchedrin and others.

Economou's improvisations were beyond simple mimicry of different styles; they sounded contemporary but marked certain epochs. Economou improvised works that remind us of the Baroque, the Classical and the Romantic periods.

#### 4. Piano improvisations in collaboration with other musicians

The visionary nature of Economou's character led to a unique encounter with Chick Corea, in 1981. Nicolas met him in his house in Los Angeles, while visiting the United States. The two musicians improvised with zest and energy in a style between jazz and classical. Economou explained that the collaboration was "a need to soften the rigid rules of the classics".<sup>3</sup> In the short annotation to the record during 1982, the Cypriot composer revealed an interesting perception to the birth of this innovative form of reconciliation between jazz and classical music. This is the text that he wrote thirty-seven years ago to present his work with Chick Corea:

The idea of improvising on two pianos in a concert hall occurred to us in 1981. Chick invited me to his house in Los Angeles, where we played classical works and our own compositions to each other. Three hours before my return flight, we attempted free improvisation together on two pianos for the first time. Though we were products of entirely different backgrounds, we suddenly discovered that through listening and reacting to each other, we found a common language in which our two contrasting idioms stimulated each other and blended to form something new.<sup>4</sup>

Later, the two musicians appeared on the podium of Congress Hall in Deutsches Museum in Munich in November 1981. This piano dialogue initiated the first *Klaviersommer* in Munich in 1982.

The compositions-improvisations the two musicians created together were *Improvisation: Suite* – 26'30", including 9 pieces and *Invention* – 4'59". They also improvised on six pieces of *Mikrokosmos* by Bartok – 7'14", Chick Corea's compositions *Homecoming* – 8'54" and *Duet for Two Pianos in Three Parts* – 9'44".

Economou continued to tell the story in the preface of the CD:

For the Munich Summer Piano Festival, we wrote some compositions of our own including a series of free improvisations. Chick provided two

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<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Economou, Liner notes for *L'art de Nicolas Economou Vol. VII - A deux Pianos - Chick Corea & Nicolas Economou*, Suoni e Colori SC 253172, 2003, compact disc. The CD was released with the courtesy of Deutsche Grammophon, as the original was called *On Two Pianos* (1982).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

piano pieces which were partly written out and partly to be improvised, and we also played works for two pianos from Bartok's *Mikrokosmos*.<sup>5</sup>

### 5. *Improvisation: Suite*

The *Suite* was a collaborative composition-improvisation, created on the concert podium during 1982 at *Münchener Klaviersommer*. It lasted for 26 minutes and 30 seconds and consisted of: *Prelude, Ballade, Toccata, Humoresque, Invention, Fugue, Aria et Ostinato, Valse* and the humoristic *À l'intérieur du piano* [Inside the piano]. Again, the composer himself gave an explanation about the creative process:

In the nine free improvisations and *Invention*, the encore, we took turns in stating: the first player improvises a motive or theme as in a fugue, suggesting the character of the musical world the other will enter and replay to. Through the changes of mood between sections, a sequence of individual characteristic pieces is built up, comparable to a suite form.<sup>6</sup>

Chick Corea suggested the thematic ideas for two other pieces – *Homecoming* and *Duet*, which were partly written, partly improvised. Both compositions had passages where only the rhythm and the harmony were fixed as a base on which they improvised freely. According to Economou, this innovative and interactive communication between the musicians was an attempt for recovering the forgotten art of music improvisation in the so-called “classical music” of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:

In the last two decades, the pressure of specialisation has deprived music of perhaps its most elementary form of expression, the art of improvisation. For centuries it seemed totally natural that a composer was also the interpreter of his own works and he could improvise, fantasise on themes, and thus create a work on the spur of the moment during performance. Even in the virtuoso age of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, this tradition was very much alive; at any rate it was still normal for a soloist to play his own cadenzas in a concerto. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century has seen the virtually complete disappearance of this creativity. Jazz, on the other hand, often seems musically livelier and more spontaneous. Everywhere today there is a desire – particularly noticeable at the first ‘Münchener Klaviersommer’ in 1982 – to break down the stuffy ritual surrounding music. The juxtaposition there of classical interpretations and free improvisation

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Economou, *L'art de Nicolas Economou, Vol. VII*.

brought many new listeners into the concert hall without driving away traditional music lovers.<sup>7</sup>

### **6. *Invention for two pianos***

*Invention* was performed as an encore at the end of the concert of Economou – Corea. The piece was only five minutes long. Although the work was collaborative, it was closer to the improvisational features of Economou’s output. It was composed polyphonically, with amazing virtuosity. The main theme consisted of an atonal sequence, developed between the main parts. It was in ternary form and the middle part was very interesting, because it was influenced by another piece – *Inside the Piano* from *Improvisation: Suite*. Both performers created a special episode with acoustic sound effects, such as plucking the strings the same time they repeatedly played the lowest A on the piano, juxtaposition of extreme registers, syncopations, etc.

### **7. Collaborative improvisations of three pianists – Friedrich Gulda, Nicolas Economou, Chick Corea**

Economou not only gave the idea but also actively took part, inviting other pianists such as the Austrian Friedrich Gulda. A series of legendary concerts followed, in which the performers interacted in a style that could be named ‘fusion’. During one of the group improvisations Friedrich Gulda leapt on his feet and exclaimed to the audience, “this is pure alchemy”. Fortunately, the concerts were video recorded and shown on television under the name *The Meeting*, though they were not released on a CD or DVD.

Every one of the performers had his individual improvisatory ‘signature’. Despite the mixture of styles, there was creative unity. The improvisations of Economou were rather ‘classical’, marked by virtuosity and deep understanding.

### **8. Collaborative improvisations of four pianists – Paul Gulda, Rodion Shchedrin, Nicolas Economou, Chick Corea**

During another edition of *Klaviersommer* in 1983, a significant ‘meeting’ occurred, this time with Rodion Shchedrin. He, along with Nicolas Economou, Chick Corea and Paul Gulda, improvised on four pianos during a concert in Munich. Rodion Shchedrin evoked the idea for the collaborative work *Hommage to Chopin* and defined the formal structure. The composition contained some themes by Chopin, woven in the improvisatory texture of this rather extravagant musical monument.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



The style of the improvisations was fusion, a mixture of different elements and types of music, classical and jazz at the same time, but never eclectic. In his last interview with CyBC, mentioned above, Nicolas Economou stated that concerts with improvisations of this kind were revolutionary for their time because they were highly experimental.

All this revealed the inquisitive nature of Economou, who tried to expand the diapason of his creative endeavours, experimenting with completely new musical forms.

The collaboration between Nicolas Economou and Chick Corea created some interest on behalf of Deutsche Grammophon, which released a record under the name *On Two Pianos*. It reflected the innovative collaboration between the two artists, whose output contained lots of features of the contemporary music at the time. Nicolas Economou found in Chick Corea what we call a 'soul mate' – a friend, an associate and a source of inspiration. His admiration founded different forms of expression towards the enigmatic personality of Corea, from poems to compositions. Economou created *Three pieces for Chick* and *Sonata for Chick*, of which only the three pieces were notated after the composer's death. Both compositions-improvisations were influenced by jazz but also by the contemporary tendencies. He also dedicated an early piece of his, called *Encore* to Corea, who apparently appreciated it highly.

## 9. Conclusions

Despite the ever-changing and highly perceptive nature of Economou, there were some constant elements of the piano language, including also some specific structural elements, rhythmic formulas, etc. After careful analysis of the piano improvisations of Economou, we found some features of the piano structure and piano vision of the Cypriot composer:

- An alternation of traditional and contemporary musical ideas with a variety of devices coming from different musical styles – from Baroque to Jazz.
- Dialogue between dense texture and monodic linearity.
- Use of piano 'silences' to create an effect of psychological expectation and improvisational swing.
- Use of different types of metric organisation.
- The ability to create a recital space with piano improvisation at the concert stage or the recording studio.

The idiosyncrasy of the rhythmic idioms in the works of Economou is very interesting. In his early compositions, he often referred to folklore as a source of inspiration for rhythmic and metric variety. The 'chameleon' nature of the composer sought ideas by imitating a number of works, styles and genres. The influences were numerous, beginning with Cypriot folk music, Greek and Turkish musical cultures,

Russian tradition (Orthodox and academic), as well as aesthetic ideas from the countries of the Middle East with which Cyprus borders. Nicholas Economou was interested in irregular time signatures and used a wide range of them, incorporating them into his improvisations.

As a piano performer, Nicolas Economou wanted to transcend his sense of self and become one with the works he was performing. He had a strong affinity and respect for the work of the composer. At the same time, he had a remarkable talent to improvise in different styles, to the extent that the listener was lured into the imitation style. In this line of thought, we can conclude that, with his extraordinary dualistic talent as a profound interpreter and a wonderful 'imitator', Nicolas Economou was a master of piano improvisation.

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**Biography:** Dr. Galina Dimova - Georgieva was born in Bulgaria. She obtained a PhD from the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv on the piano compositions of the Cypriot composer Nicolas Economou. Galina presented her work at the International Scientific Conference "Art and Education" in Plovdiv, Bulgaria (2014); "Modus-Modi-Modality" – European University, Nicosia, Cyprus (2017); Moesgaard Museum – Aarhus, Denmark (2017); ECMTA Autumn Gathering – European University, Cyprus (2018) and many others.

Among her publications are:

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