

# Rena Kyriakou (1917-1994): Composer, Pianist, Woman

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The career of Greek pianist and composer, Rena Kyriakou (1917-1994), exemplifies the obstacles placed before foreign-trained women musicians who aspired to be taken seriously as composers in twentieth-century Greece. By all accounts Kyriakou was a remarkable musician who demonstrated an early talent for both composing and playing the piano. Nevertheless, by her late twenties she decided to forego her promising future as a composer and instead limit herself to the career of a performing virtuoso. The pivotal moment seems to have been the poor reception of her First Piano Concert, which she premiered in Athens in 1943.<sup>1</sup> Considering all her efforts to become a composer and all she had achieved toward that end, her decision to stop composing after the 1943 concerto performance demands closer scrutiny. Clearly, one must be careful when attributing motivations to any historical figure. Nonetheless, in Kyriakou's case considerable evidence suggests that prevailing social and aesthetic prejudices against women and certain kinds of foreign influence, expressed by a hostile critical press, led her to her reluctant decision to abandon composition.

Kyriakou's musical talents were apparent from an early age. In 1923, at age six, she performed her premier recital at the Athens Parnassos Hall, drawing the infatuation of the Greek press. She also attracted the intense interest of Elena Venizelou, wife of the Greek prime minister, who sponsored Kyriakou's subsequent studies in Europe. This initially involved a 1925 visit to Paris, where, despite having no formal musical training, she was permitted to present her own compositions to Vincent d'Indy and Albert Roussel, both of whom praised the eight-year-old's innate talent.<sup>2</sup> Kyriakou continued her youthful studies in Vienna with Paul Weingarten (piano) and Richard Stöhr (composition), eventually returning to Paris to enter the Paris Conservatoire in 1930, at age thirteen. Studying piano with Isidore Philippe, she graduated two years later with the prestigious first prize in piano. By that time, she had begun studying composition with Henri Büsser and had heard some of her works performed in the concerts of the Société Nationale de Musique. She also managed to have some her works published by the French company Durand. Kyriakou had accomplished all this by 1935, her eighteenth year, whereupon she moved back to Athens to begin a career as a pianist and composer. Despite marriage, motherhood, and the disruptions caused by the Second World War, Kyriakou was

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<sup>1</sup> Her only work dated after 1943 is a Greek dance from 1947.

<sup>2</sup> '[Ses] improvisations, évidement très rudimentaires, denotent un sentiment et une intelligence certainement très au dessus de son âge.' (Her improvisations, obviously very rudimentary, manifest an emotional and intellectual level certainly beyond her age.) Vincent d'Indy, letter of 12 April 1925. 'Je n'ai jamais rencontré jusqu'ici un enfant plus prodigieusement doué pour l'art musical.' (I've never before met a child more gifted in the art of music.) Albert Roussel, letter of 4 March 1925. Although d'Indy refers to Kyriakou's 'improvisations', she herself always maintained that they were complete compositions. Georgios Sclavos, a musician who visited little Rena in Greece in 1922 with the purpose of transcribing some of her compositions, testifies that the girl repeated each passage several times, playing it in an identical manner with a 'remarkable precision', *Μουσική Επιθεώρηση* (June 1922). All translations are mine.

highly successful as a pianist, playing concerts in Greece and throughout Europe, which regularly included her own compositions alongside standard repertoire.

It is important to recognize that Kyriakou did not stop composing for lack of encouragement from established composers. In fact, this is attested to by a significant corpus of correspondence dating from 1934–39 that includes letters from her father, who worked in the Dean's Office at the University of Athens; her former teachers; the Legation de la République Française en Grèce; and the Legation Royale de Grèce.<sup>3</sup> These letters highlight Kyriakou's efforts to raise the funds necessary for her return to Paris, where she hoped to continue her education. In this effort she enjoyed the support of many prominent Greek artists and journalists. For instance, a 1936 letter signed by, among others, the poet Kostis Palamas, the writer Grigoris Xenopoulos, the writer-journalist Pavlos Nirvanas, and the composers Georgios Lavrangas and Frank Choisy praises Kyriakou's talent and achievements and underlines the importance of her completing her compositional studies.<sup>4</sup> That same year, a group of seven professors from the Athens Conservatory, including Dimitri Mitropoulos, Giorgios Sklavos, and Filoktitis Economides signed a letter recognizing her 'remarkable' talent for composition.<sup>5</sup>

It is equally necessary to point out that Kyriakou never ceased regarding herself as a composer, and that she made continuous efforts to promote herself as such. In the numerous interviews she gave throughout her life, she often described herself as an active composer, or at least as planning to return to action soon. Similarly, in her many press releases and letters, she

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<sup>3</sup> There are several letters from Kyriakou's former teachers. A letter from Henri Rabaud, director of the Conservatoire to the Greek Ambassador of Paris, Monsieur Politis, dated 5 January 1934, is the first in a series suggesting that additional funding was needed for Kyriakou to complete her compositional studies: 'Si par votre intervention bienveillante Mlle Kyriakou pouvait obtenir l'aide qui lui est encore nécessaire je puis vous assurer que cette générosité encouragerait un jeune talent, hautement digne de votre intérêt.' A letter from Henri Büsser to the Rector of the University of Athens, dated 25 August 1934, urges the University to grant a scholarship to Kyriakou to continue her studies: 'Je puis vous assurer que si l'Université d'Athènes donne à Rena Kyriakou la bourse qu'elle postule, elle aidera au développement d'une carrière qui fera certainement honneur à ceux qui l'auront soutenue et encouragée.' In her archive there is also an undated letter from Dr. Richard Stöhr to the Rector of Athens University. Stöhr confirms Kyriakou's compositional studies and states that he believes that once they are completed she will probably become an important composer: 'Wenn das gennante Fraülein ihre Studien fortsetzt und beende wird sie wahrscheinlich eine Komponistin von Bedeutung werden und so ihrem Vaterlande alle Ehre machen.' Finally, there is another letter dated 9 September 1934 from Paul Weingarten to unknown recipient that also verifies Kyriakou's studies and talents. In addition to these letters from teachers, a letter from the Légation de la République Française en Grèce to Rena Kyriakou, dated from 18 August 1939, confirms that Kyriakou was granted a semi-scholarship for the academic year 1939–1940: 'J'ai l'honneur de vous faire savoir qu'il vous a été attribué une demi-bourse d'études par le Gouvernement français pour l'année scolaire 1939–1940. Le montant de cette bourse est de 5.000 francs.' Similarly, a letter from the Legation Royale de Grèce to Rena Kyriakou, signed by Madame Politis, dated 15 September (year unknown), suggests that 5000 francs remaining from her last scholarship could be used to continue her composition studies, and that this would be in addition a new scholarship of 1250 francs per month – apparently from another source: 'Par consequant il restait encore à votre disposition 5000 francs qui, éventuellement, pouvaient fournir le début d'une nouvelle bourse. [...] d'un autre côté, nous avons l'information que vous avez obtenues (je ne sais pas de quelle source) une nouvelle bourse de 1250: par mois pour la composition.' All of Kyriakou's correspondence cited in this article is held in the Rena Kyriakou Archive in the Kyriakou family house in Rio, Greece. Copies of all items in the Archive have also been donated to the Historical Museum of Crete, in Heraklion.

<sup>4</sup> The other signatories were Palamas, Psaroudas, Melas, Synadinos, and Dambergis, letter, 9 May 1936.

<sup>5</sup> 'Κατά τας τελευταίας Συναυλίας αυτής τας δοθείσας εν Αθήναις, η Δις Κυριακού εξετέλεσε πλείστα έργα ιδίας Συνθέσεως δια των οποίων διεπιστώθη το αξιοσημείωτον τάλαντον αυτής εις το είδος τούτο της μουσικής.' (In the course of her last Athenian concerts, Miss Kyriakou performed many of her own compositions, manifesting thus her remarkable talent in this kind of music.) Farantatos, Skokos, Mitropoulos, Economides, Veloudios, Sklavos, and Bustodios, letter, 13 May 1936.

consistently identifies herself as a performer and composer.<sup>6</sup> As late as 1962, long after she had stopped composing, she claimed that

Η σύνθεση περπατάει δίπλα μου σε όλη μου τη ζωή. Το όνειρό μου, ο μεγάλος μου σκοπός είναι να γράψω ακόμα περισσότερο από τις στοίβες των χειρογράφων που δεν έχει δη ούτε ακούσει ποτέ κανείς.<sup>7</sup>

(Composition is a close companion at every step in my life. My dream, my ultimate ambition, is to produce many more manuscripts than the already existing pile of manuscripts that no one has ever seen or heard.)

Despite the unfavorable initial reception of her piano concerto, she made several attempts to revive it.<sup>8</sup> She finally succeeded in 1954 with a second performance in Geneva with the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. Kyriakou also made efforts to promote and publish her compositions. In 1950 she arranged for a music critic to spread news of an agreement with Durand to publish all her preludes and the variations set.<sup>9</sup> While this deal never materialized, she did manage, with Isidore Philippe's assistance, to have her *Perpetuum mobile*, Op. 15, printed by the New York-based publisher Carl Fischer in 1954.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, Kyriakou's decision to abandon composition cannot be attributed to a single cause. Certainly her international performing career, whose potential for success had never been doubted, reduced the time she could devote to composition. It is also necessary to point out that Kyriakou adapted rather poorly to changes in the postwar professional environment. For example, she refused to hire an agent, relying instead on personal references from teachers and acquaintances, as had been common practice before the war. In the 1960s and 70s, when executives from the Vox recording company, along with members of her family, urged Kyriakou to get a manager to coordinate her recitals with record sales, advertise her works, and deal with publishing companies, she insisted on doing all this work herself. She also seems to have naively believed that the pure value of musical excellence would suffice to generate the acclamation of a well-educated audience. This, in fact, is a running theme in her correspondence with friends and colleagues, including Mitropoulos and Philippe.

It must be acknowledged that Kyriakou's own attitude towards her compositions was not without some puzzling ambivalences. Although she programmed some of her pieces for solo concerts or used them for encores, for some reason her performance repertoire did not include

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<sup>6</sup> According to critic Achilleas Mamakis she was planning to finish a second piano concerto by the summer of 1949, *Έθνος*, 6 May 1949. This concerto, however, remained uncompleted. Kyriakou has left us a general plan of ideas and harmonic development. The first movement is still a sketch with the piano part partially provided; the second is completed; and the third is essentially non-existent. However, when interviewed in 1963, she included it in her list of her works: 'J'ai composé quelques mélodies, mais l'essentiel est consacré au piano: des pièces pour piano seul, un concerto, un second concerto inachevé [...]' (I composed some songs, but for the most part devoted to the piano: some pieces for solo piano, a concerto, a second uncompleted concerto [...]) *Gazette de Lausanne*, 7 April 1963. All parts and fragments of the Second Piano Concerto are held in the Kyriakou Archive, see n. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Rena Kyriakou, *Ελευθερία*, 12 August 1962.

<sup>8</sup> In 1948 she played it for Richard Austin, music advisor of London's New Era Concert Society, Richard Austin, letter to Rena Kyriakou, 9 August, 1948. In 1950, Henri Büsser mentions in one of his letters his deliberations with Albert Wolff about whether the concerto could be performed in the Paris *Concerts Pasdeloup* the following year. Büsser suggests also contacting Felix Apprahamian, the famous British music critic and promoter of French music in the UK, Henri Büsser, letter, 6 February, 1950.

<sup>9</sup> Achilleas Mamakis, *Έθνος*, 21 July 1950.

<sup>10</sup> In 1948, Kyriakou sent a copy of the work to her former piano teacher, Isidore Philippe – by that time living in New York – who forwarded it to publishing company. Philippe writes to Kyriakou of this event: 'J'ai reçu votre *Perpetuum mobile* et je l'ai donné ensuite au directeur de la Maison Carl Fischer, la plus important ici, plus même que Schirmer.' (I received your *Perpetuum mobile* and then gave it to the director of the Carl Fischer company, the most important one here, even more important than Schirmer.) Isidore Philippe, letter, 21 April 1948.

an even coverage of her composed material. Thus, for example, her two sets of Preludes, Opp. 12 and 13, nowadays considered two of her better works, remained unfamiliar to audiences and even to her immediate family.<sup>11</sup> She was also very reluctant to share her compositions with students or fellow pianists, even when asked.<sup>12</sup> Also curious is her apparent indifference to cataloguing and dating her works, which she did only towards the end of her life upon the insistence of her nephew and admirer, Pavlos Kalligas.<sup>13</sup> Of course, none of this indicates a lack of concern for her compositional legacy. Any number of reasons might explain her reluctance to disseminate and catalogue her unpublished works. At any rate, by 1992 she was exploring the possibility of recording herself playing the main corpus of her solo piano pieces.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, by that time Kyriakou was seventy-seven and already suffering from the serious health problems that would lead to her death the following year.

If there was any explicitly self-imposed constraint on Kyriakou's pursuit of a compositional career, it may have been her recognition of the associated financial difficulties. We know, for instance, that she commonly complained about this to her family. On the other hand, one should recognize that her financial problems began in 1933, when Helena Venizelou suspended her support for Kyriakou's studies. Although Venizelou claimed in a letter to Kyriakou's father that this was because she had fulfilled her agreed term of support, it may have also been motivated by Venizelou's disapproval of the direction in which Kyriakou's education was taking.<sup>15</sup> It had been Venizelou who required Kyriakou to leave Vienna to enter Philippe's piano class at the Paris Conservatoire. While Venizelou claimed that she was worried that Kyriakou's piano playing was not improving sufficiently under Weingarten, her failure to comment on the progress of Kyriakou's composition studies with Stöhr cannot go unnoticed.<sup>16</sup> Once Kyriakou was in Paris, Venizelou certainly failed to support her efforts to continue

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<sup>11</sup> Theodoros Choïdas, interview with the author, 5 August 2013, Rio, Greece.

<sup>12</sup> Domna Evnouhidou, the pianist who recently (2010) gave a the second performance of Kyriakou's piano concerto in Greece, and who had met the composer several times, states that she was very reluctant to share her compositions, or even to discuss them openly. Interview with the author, 30 August 2013, Thessaloniki, Greece.

<sup>13</sup> Pavlos Kalligas, 'Introduction to the Musical Works of Rena Kyriakou', *Μούσικος Λόγος* [print series] 3 (2001): 152–67.

<sup>14</sup> Leopoldine Rozsa, a friend of Kyriakou and writer of some of her liner notes, wrote to Kyriakou: 'Denn wir müssen das Programm sehr vorsichtig und kommerziell auswählen. Auch Deine Vorschläge *18 Preludien – Les Cloches – Burlesque* und *Perpetuum mobile* sind nicht schlecht, aber wie gesagt, dass muss man alles prüfen und den Mann [aussuchen], der die Aufnahme dann verkaufen muss, der weiss genau, was auf dem Markt fehlt und was Aussicht hat, sich gut zu verkaufen'. (We have to choose the programme very carefully from a commercial point of view. As far as your proposal is concerned, about the *18 Preludes*, *Les Cloches*, *Burlesque*, and the *Perpetuum mobile*, it's not bad, but, as already said, one has to check everything and then [find] someone capable of selling the recording, who knows exactly what is missing in the market, and what has the potential to sell well.) Letter to Rena Kyriakou, 14 June 1993.

<sup>15</sup> 'Είχε υποσχεθεί ν'αναλάβη τας σπουδάς της Δδος θυγατρός σας δια 5 έτη. Επτά όλα έτη παρήλθον από το 1926. Εξώδευσε δια την μικράν περισσότερον από 3.000 λίρας' ([Venizelou] had promised to take over your daughter's studies for a period of five years. Seven full years have passed since 1926. She has spent more than 3000 pounds for the child). Helena Venizelou to Dimitris Kyriakos, letter, 12 August 1933.

<sup>16</sup> Helena Venizelou to Dimitris Kyriakos, letter, 2 November 1929. Kyriakou had some initial success in Vienna, as documented by press reports concerning an event that took place on 25 March 1927, where Greek art students participated. The nine-year-old Kyriakou performed Chopin and works of her own. On 3 April 1927, the *Allgemeine Zeitung* writes, 'Diese 9 Jahre alte kleine stammt aus Heraklion auf Kreta, komponiert aus ihrem dritten Lebensjahre, und hat bereits mehr als 100 Musikstücke geschaffen. Freitag brachte Sie eine musikalische Schilderung der Entführung der Persephone, Erinnerungen aus Griechenland, une eine Phantasie aus griechischen Tänzen zum Vortrage. Mann kann nur gespannt sein, welche Entwicklung dieses Musikgenie nehmen wird'. (This nine-year-old child comes from Heraklion, Crete. She has been composing since she was three, and she has already penned more than 100 musical pieces. On Friday she presented a musical description of the abduction of Persephone, reminiscences of Greece, and a fantasy consisting of Greek dances. One can only look forward to the evolution of this musical genius.)

studying composition. In 1931, when Kyriakou expressed her intention to compete for the prestigious Prix de Rome, Venizelou refused to allow this, claiming that it would require her to change her citizenship from Greek to French.<sup>17</sup> As mentioned, Kyriakou would go on to graduate with the first prize from Philippe's piano class in 1932, whereupon she decided to continue her studies in composition exclusively. That same year Venizelou refused to sponsor the publication of Kyriakou's works by the Senart company, despite an offer from Dominique Crossfield, a friend of Venizelou and admirer of Kyriakou, to contribute half of the required costs.<sup>18</sup>

The least that one can make of all this is that Venizelou had been primarily interested in Kyriakou as a pianist and had little concern for her development as a composer. It was undoubtedly charming to have a young protégée like Kyriakou composing such pieces as her *Cretan Dance*, which celebrated Venizelou's familial and national heritage.<sup>19</sup> But it is certainly plausible, and perhaps likely, that Venizelou's actions reflect the prevalent belief that serious composition was both inappropriate for, and beyond the abilities of, women musicians. As it turned out, Venizelou's withdrawal of support effectively ended Kyriakou's compositional training. Kyriakou did manage to secure enough funding to complete a certificate from the Conservatoire, auditing the Büsser's composition classes during the 1937–38 academic year.<sup>20</sup> That was to be the end of Kyriakou's formal study of composition.

A derisive attitude towards women's potential to succeed as composers is evident in much of the Greek critical reception of Kyriakou's performances of her own works. On 7 March 1936 Kyriakou gave a solo recital in Athens whose programme included a large number of her own recent compositions. According to numerous Greek newspapers, the audience's enthusiastic response to her works included repeated encores. Greek music critics, by contrast, were far less complimentary. While critical opinion was far from unanimous, even the most supportive reviewers tended to characterize her compositions as the pleasant works of a beginner whose full potential had not yet been realized. Ioannis Psaroudas, for example, praises Kyriakou's compositions and wonders why she remains 'in a country full of Maecenas' rather than returning to Paris.<sup>21</sup> Michalis Kyriakides detects in Kyriakou's works 'an intense restlessness, a sign of her

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<sup>17</sup> 'Ελπίζω ότι δεν θα λησμονήσεις ποτέ ότι είσαι Ελληνίς και ότι αυτό ήτο αρχικώς η κυριωτέρα σύστασις η οποία εκίνησεν το ενδιαφέρον μου προς σε...εάν αληθινώς έχεις τάλαντον όπως είμαι πεπεισμένη δεν έχεις ανάγκην του Prix de Rome δια να διαπρέψεις.' (I hope you will never forget your Greek identity and the fact that this was what kindled my interest in you in the first place [...]) If you are truly talented, as I am convinced you are, you do not need any Prix de Rome to excel.) Helena Venizelou to Rena Kyriakou, letter, 15 February 1931.

<sup>18</sup> Dominique Crossfield to Madame Kyriakou (Rena Kyriakou's mother), letter, 18 February, 1932.

<sup>19</sup> Venizelou was of Cretan origin. A postcard from Crossfield mentions her own performance of Kyriakou's *Cretan Dance* for the Venizelou couple and that they were both thrilled. Dominique Crossfield to Rena Kyriakou, postcard, 19 September 1931.

<sup>20</sup> She received partial funding from the Orthodox Community in Trieste and, according to her nephew, Pavlos Kalligas, from the Athens Academy. A letter from the Orthodox Community in Trieste to Rena Kyriakou, dated 19 December 1936, verifies the partial scholarship: 'Η [...] Επιτροπή [...] απονέμει εις Υμάς το επί τούτω ωρισμένον βραβείον εκ. Λι. 1000 (χιλίων), εγκαρδίως συγχαίρουσα'. Pavlos Kalligas states that the Athens Academy granted a scholarship for one academic year, 'Introduction', 157.

<sup>21</sup> 'Θα εκφράσω την απορία μου πώς και γιατί, ενώ από πέρυσι η Ρένα Κυριακού επρόκειτο να ξαναφύγει για το Παρίσι, βρίσκεται βέβαια προς μεγάλη χαρά μας, ακόμη στις Αθήνας, αλλά και προς βλάβη της, γιατί της λείπει ελάχιστος καιρός για να φτάσει στο σημείο να θεωρήται ώριμη πλέον συνθέτις και εν τούτοις για λόγους τους οποίους υποπτεύομαι αλλά ανεξήγητους σε έναν τόπο που αφθονούν οι Μαικήναι, δεν ημπορεί να επιστρέψει προς το παρόν στο Conservatoire [...]' (Let me voice my wonder at the fact that while Rena Kyriakou should be in Paris, since last year she is still in Athens, of course to our great joy, but to her own disadvantage, because she is very close to being considered a mature composer. And yet, for reasons which I suspect but frankly find hard to understand in a country full of Maecenas, for the time being she cannot get back to the Conservatoire [...]) Ioannis Psaroudas, *Ελεύθερον Βήμα*, 10 March 1936.

very soul, as well as a vivid quest towards a future serious and important artistic creation'.<sup>22</sup> And Frank Choisy observes that 'some episodes catch one's attention for a moment due to the poetic aspects or their exuberance', but adds that such effects are 'transient impression[s], less communicative than her playing as a pianist'.<sup>23</sup>

Such mildly complimentary reviews could not possibly counter the disparaging attacks from the likes of Manolis Kalomiris, the leading figure of the Greek National School and arguably the most influential musician in Greece at the time.<sup>24</sup> Mingling his openly sexist attitude with his presumption of the superiority of German music, Kalomiris writes of Kyriakou's compositions:

Δεν υπάρχει αμφιβολία πως υπάρχει κάποια αυτοσχεδιαστική διάθεση και ευκολία στα έργα της που εξετέλεσε, δυστυχώς όμως υπάρχει και πολύ ερασιτεχνική αντίληψη και μεγάλος επηρεασμός από το γαλλικό μουσικό μπρεσιονισμό. Εν πάση περιπτώσει, προκειμένου για σύνθεση, δεν πρέπει να είμαστε πολύ απαιτητικοί από μια δεσποινίδα....στη δημιουργική μουσική [οι γυναίκες] δεν έχουνε φύγη από τον κύκλο του μετρίου, μετριωτάτου, που η ανώτερη εκδήλωσή τους αποτελούν τα ζαχαρόπηκτα έργα της Σαμινάδ και κάποια εξαίρεση τα λιγοστά σοβαρότερα έργα της Ν. Μπουλανζέ.<sup>25</sup>

(There is no doubt that in her works one can find an improvisational mood as well as a natural aptitude. Unfortunately, at the same time one can also find a very amateurish approach and a stark influence of French Impressionism. Be that as it may, one should not expect much from a young lady [...]. As far as creating music is concerned, women have not gone far beyond a mediocre, *very mediocre*, level, whose most sublime manifestation is represented by Chaminade's sugary works, the only exception being a few serious works by N[adia] Boulanger [emphasis added to convey meaning of the original Greek].

In some of the negative reviews, gender bias is merely implied by terminology frequently used to dismiss stereotypically feminine characteristics. For instance, Manolis Skouloudis derides Kyriakou's works for their amateurishness, superficial beauty, and lack of emotional depth:

Για τη Ρένα Κυριακού, τη συνθέτιδα, οι ζωϊκές συναισθηματικές έννοιες: χαρά, λύπη, αγώνας, νίκη δεν υπάρχουν παρά μόνο εξωτερικά....στη συνθετική της προσπάθεια βλέπει κανείς καθαρά την ρηχή αγωνία της ωραιότητας για την ωραιότητα να ζωγραφίζεται με τα άτονα χρώματα ενός ντιλετάντικου σχεδίου, που δεν ταιριάζει στην αναμφισβήτητη μουσική της ιδιοσυγκρασία.<sup>26</sup>

(For Rena Kyriakou the composer, vital emotional concepts like joy, sadness, struggle, [and] victory exist only superficially [...]. In her

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<sup>22</sup> 'Ως συνθέτης η Ρένα Κυριακού παρουσίασε μια ζωνρά ανησυχία, που είναι αυτή η ίδια η ψυχή της, και μία εντατική αναζήτηση προς μίαν μελλοντικήν σοβαράν και μεγάλην δημιουργίαν.' Michalis Kyriakides, *Ελληνικά Γράμματα*, 5 May 1935.

<sup>23</sup> 'Certains épisodes arrêtent un instant l'attention par leurs côtés poétiques ou par leur exuberance. Mais l'impression reste passagère, moins communicative que ne l'est le jeu de la pianiste'. Frank Choisy, *Le Messager d'Athènes* 11 March 1936.

<sup>24</sup> The 'Greek National School' refers to a group of nationalist composers dedicated to creating a distinctively Greek style of music, which might be described somewhat simplistically as aspiring to adapt what they considered to be characteristically Greek modes and melodies to a generally nineteenth-century German conception of harmony and form.

<sup>25</sup> Manolis Kalomiris, *Έθνος*, 10 March 1936.

<sup>26</sup> Manolis Skouloudis, *Ηχώ της Ελλάδος*, 18 April 1935.

compositional attempts one clearly sees the shallow effort of beauty for beauty's sake, painted in the dull colors of an amateurish design, incompatible with her unquestionable musical imagination.)

This type of implicit gender bias was certainly not limited to Kyriakou's male critics. For example, Kalomiris's sentiments are echoed in a similar review by Sophia Spanoudi:

Όσον για το στάδιο της συνθέτιδος, όσοι την αγαπούν οφείλουν εκ καθήκοντος να την αποτρέψουν να το ακολουθήσει, όπως φαίνεται ότι ενασμενίζεται να το πράξει. Δεν επιτρέπεται να συγχέει κανείς μίαν φυσική εύκολη ροπή προς τα σπουδάς της αρμονίας της μουσικής με την δημιουργική μουσική εφευρετικότητα, που είναι ανύπαρκτη σε γυναίκες. Και ό,τι δεν παρουσίασαν ως τώρα τόσοι αιώνες μουσικής, δεν θα το παρουσίαση βέβαια ποτέ ο φτωχός ελληνικός αιώνας.<sup>27</sup>

(As far as a career as a composer is concerned, those who love [Kyriakou] have the duty to dissuade her from following it, which she is obviously pleased to believe she will do. One should be wary not to confuse a natural aptitude for the study of musical harmony with creative musical inventiveness, which does not exist in women. Not to mention that what so many centuries of music history have failed to produce will definitely not be produced by our own penurious Greek century.)

Another woman critic, musicologist Avra Theodoropoulou, responded to Kyriakou's recital with an article in which she advises Kyriakou to abandon composition completely. As well as dismissing Kyriakou's interpretation of Chopin's Second Piano Sonata, which, according to Theodoropoulou contains 'a world of passion virtually unknown to a nineteen-year-old girl', she finds Kyriakou's compositions 'artful and pianistic' but 'lacking personality and spontaneity'. She then adds that 'one can only wonder whether it would be preferable for the young artist to devote herself exclusively to the career of a virtuoso, which one could safely predict as being brilliant'.<sup>28</sup> The obvious irony here is that Theodoropoulou is prepared to imagine a 'brilliant' performance career for Kyriakou, despite her supposed limited capacity for 'passion', yet refuses to consider that any flaws in her compositions might be the result of youthful inexperience, and thus admitting of improvement with continued training.

The negative critical reception of Kyriakou's works in Greece stands in sharp contrast to the praise they sometimes received from foreign critics. For instance, the Serbian composer Milenko Zivkovic described Kyriakou's compositions as belonging to 'the best of Greek art music we have ever listened to'.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Hungarian music historian and critic Tóth Aladár declared that:

Her grandiose polyphonic imagination provides her compositions with authentic poetic grace and completeness [...] these compositions, full of soul and impetus, offered to us by a nineteen-year-old girl, are quite an

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<sup>27</sup> Sophia Spanoudi, *Αθηναϊκά Νέα*, 10 March 1936. Spanoudi was Kalomiris's piano teacher and a prominent advocate for his style of musical nationalism.

<sup>28</sup> 'Άραγε θα παρουσιασθή αυτό [το προσωπικό και αυθόρμητο] αργότερα ή θα ήταν προτιμότερο για τη νεαρή καλλιτέχνη να αφοσιωθεί αποκλειστικά στο δεξιότεχνικό στάδιο, που ασφαλώς προβλέπεται για αυτήν λαμπρό.' Avra Theodoropoulou, *Ελευθέρα Γνώμη*, 13 March 1936.

<sup>29</sup> 'Композиције г-це Кириаку сладају у најбольше што смо уопште из грчке уметничке музике чули.' Milenko Zivkovic, *ВРЕМЕ* (newspaper), 11 January 1937.

unusual phenomenon. Hence, one can look forward to a glorious future for this female, or in this case, creative spirit.<sup>30</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Kyriakou's 1943 premier of her piano concerto in Athens marked the end of her compositional activity. This time the critical reviews were mostly negative, but at least they focused on the perceived deficiencies in the composition rather than the natural limitations of women composers. Criticism from male reviewers was rather mixed. Iosif Papadopoulos-Grekas, for example, found the concerto overly dependent upon impressionistic harmonies expressed in a Stravinskian aesthetic, which for him indicated that Kyriakou's compositional models were both 'alien' and 'already very old'.<sup>31</sup> Phoebos Anogianakis felt that the piano was not as prominent as it should have been in a solo concerto.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, as one might expect, there were favorable reviews as well. Ioannis Psaroudas praises the concerto's artistry and originality of harmony and orchestration, adding that it was the only example of a first piano concerto by any woman composer that could be characterized as a major work.<sup>33</sup> And Dr Walter Trienes, writing in the Nazi newspaper *Deutsche Nachrichten in Griechenland*, compliments the concerto's robust rhetorical musical language, 'the highly able craftsmanship, [and] the formal handling of the piano part'.<sup>34</sup>

One of the more interesting reviews came from a Greek woman, Alexandra Lalaoui. In 1942, upon hearing Kyriakou's Theme and Variations, Op. 17 and *Perpetuum Mobile*, Op. 15, Lalaoui had praised her 'exquisite understanding of elaboration and form', and suggested a recital 'consisting exclusively of Kyriakou's compositions'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, her description of Kyriakou's concerto as lacking 'the form responsible for true art' comes rather as a surprise.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, if Kyriakou's previously warm praise precludes suspecting her of gender bias, one nevertheless suspects that her criticism does not reflect a disinterested appraisal of the concerto's compositional merits. A few months before the premier of Kyriakou's concerto, Lalaoui's daughter, Lila, had premiered her own rather conservative First Piano Concerto, also with the Athens State Orchestra. It might be that nepotism motivated her negative review, especially if one bears in mind Ioannis Psaroudas's contemporaneous public declaration, cited above, that

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<sup>30</sup> 'Popmás instrumentális fantáziája valódi festői bájít és gazdagságot kölcsönöz szerzeményeinek', Tóth Aladár, *Pesti Napló* (newspaper), 10 January 1938.

<sup>31</sup> 'Το να είσαι όμως σύγχρονος συνθέτης, αποδίδων εξ ιδίων τον παλμόν, την ψυχήν και τον εσωτερικόν κόσμον της γύρω ζωής και της φυλής σου ιδιαιτέρως, είναι τρομερά δύσκολο. [...] (ξεχνιέσαι) όταν αντιγράφεις απλώς τα ξένα μοντέλα του 1919-1926 περίπου, που είναι αυτά - φευ! - πολύ παλαιά πλέον'. (However, it is very difficult for someone to be a contemporary composer, to render on one's own the pulse, the soul, and the inner reality of surrounding life and especially of your race [...] One is condemned to oblivion when one is copying alien models of ca. 1919-1926, themselves, alas! already very old.) Iosif Papadopoulos-Greka, *Ραδιόφωνον*, 26 December 1943-1 January 1944.

<sup>32</sup> Phoebos Anogianakis, *Καλλιτεχνικά Νέα*, 25 December 1943.

<sup>33</sup> Ioannis Psarouda, *Ελεύθερον Βήμα*, 21 December 1943.

<sup>34</sup> 'Hervozuheben ist die bedeutende handwerkliche Könnerschaft, die Ausgestaltungen des Klavierpartes [...] Walter Trienes, *Deutsche Nachrichten in Griechenland*, 21 December 1943.

<sup>35</sup> 'Αυτό [η κυριαρχία της σκέψης πάνω στην καρδιά] φαίνεται και στις συνθέσεις της κ. Κυριακού που είναι γραμμένες με ξεχωριστή τεχνική επιδεξιότητα, με λαμπρή αντίληψη της φόρμας και της αναπτύξεως... μια συνθετική εργασία πάντως εξαιρετικού ενδιαφέροντος που αξίζει να παρακολουθήσωμε περισσότερο σε κανένα πρόγραμμα αφιερωμένο αποκλειστικά σε συνθέσεις της κ. Κυριακού'. (This [prevalence of intellect over emotion] is evident in Kyriakou's compositions, which are composed with a remarkable technical virtuosity, an exquisite understanding of elaboration and form [...] at any rate, an extremely interesting compositional work which deserves to be followed more closely, perhaps on the basis of a program consisting exclusively of Kyriakou's compositions.) Alexandra Lalaoui, *Βραδυνή*, 23 December 1942.

<sup>36</sup> 'Το πιάνο μένει στο δεύτερο πλάνο, συχνά σκεπάζεται από την ορχήστρα κι ανάμεσα του πιάνου και ορχήστρας δεν υπάρχει καμμία συνοχή και λογική συνέπεια - λείπει η φόρμα, η φόρμα που κάνει την πραγματική τέχνη'. (The piano is relegated to the background, more often than not eclipsed by the orchestra, and there is no coherence or logical consistency between the piano and the orchestra – the form responsible for true art is absent.) Alexandra Lalaoui, *Βραδυνή*, 20 December 1943.



Kyriakou's concerto was the first such work by a woman composer that deserved recognition as a major work.

At any rate, as with earlier reviews of Kyriakou's works, the most acerbic criticisms of the concerto came from women. Sophia Spanoudi, whose 1936 review in *Athinaïka Nea* is quoted above, attacks the concerto to smugly reaffirm her opinion that Kyriakou had wasted her time with self-deluding aspirations to be a composer:

‘Η νεαρά αυτή καλλιτέχνις, τόσο πλούσια προικισμένη μουσικώς και τεχνικώς ως σολίστ, δεν εννοεί με κανένα τρόπο να περιορισθή μέσα στο πλαίσιο του πιάνου, το οποίο βρίσκει στενό για τις ανώτερες φιλοδοξίες της.’<sup>37</sup>

(This young artist, otherwise so greatly gifted musically and technically as a soloist, could simply not imagine remaining a pianist, considering this to be too narrow for her ambitions.)

Throughout her review, in which she restricts her comments to musical considerations, she nevertheless always uses scare quotes to refer sarcastically to Kyriakou as the ‘composer’.

The review by another woman critic, Mary Chalkia, is strikingly similar to Spanoudi's. Chalkia claims that ‘Ms. Kyriakou mishandled every single instrument’, accuses her of lacking originality, and also urges her to stop composing.<sup>38</sup> While Chalkia superficially makes her case on the basis of the concerto's compositional flaws, her objectivity and critical acumen are thrown into doubt by the reason she gives for the hopelessness of Kyriakou's future as a composer. ‘Even Beethoven’, says Chalkia, ‘was influenced in his early years by Mozart’.<sup>39</sup> By Chalkia's estimation, Kyriakou could not express originality because she had not benefitted from a similarly influential relationship with a great master. Leaving aside Chalkia's logically tortured implication that originality necessarily depends upon the influence of great historical figures, by her account any composer who fails to measure up to the compositional prowess of *even* Beethoven, or who did not enjoy the childhood influence of a Mozart figure, could never become original, and thus should never start composing in the first place.

Such was the level of 1940s Greek musical critical discourse that contributed to Kyriakou's decision to end her compositional activities. As shown in the foregoing examples, it is apparent that much of it was motivated by gender bias, nepotism, and implausible music historicism, decorated with superficial musical observations intended to provide a veneer of technical legitimacy. While that alone would constitute a fairly strong indictment of Kyriakou's critics, one may equally challenge them for the things they fail to mention. Even if one were to grant that Kyriakou's piano concerto suffers from a number of compositional flaws, a fair critical assessment would surely have to take into account that it was the first large-scale work of a twenty-five-year-old composer, who, until that point, had written only solo piano pieces. Additionally, the aforementioned First Piano Concerto of Lila Lalaouni represents an essential element of the critical context for Kyriakou's piece. That none of Kyriakou's critics offers any

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<sup>37</sup> Sophia Spanoudi, *Athinaïka Néa*, 23 December 1943.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Η κ. Κυριακού κακομεταχειρίσθηκε όλα τα όργανα...(συστήνω) να παραιτηθη παρομοίων επιχειρήσεων και ν'αφοσιωθεί αποκλειστικά εις το πιάνο της’. (Ms. Kyriakou mishandled every single instrument [...] I suggest she abandon any such endeavor and devote herself exclusively to the piano.) Mary Chalkia, *Καθημερινή*, 22 December 1943.

<sup>39</sup> ‘Ας μη ξεχνούμε ότι κι ο Μπετόβεν ακόμη, προτού δημιουργήσει την ακατάλυτο προσωπικότητά του, ήτο επηρεασμένος από τον Μότσαρτ και ο Λίστ απ' τον Σοπέν κτλ’. Mary Chalkia, *Καθημερινή*, 22 December 1943.

comparison of the two is all the more astonishing in light of the fact that these two concertos by young, female Greek composers were premiered by the Athens State Orchestra in 1943.<sup>40</sup>

If Kyriakou's decision to stop composing may be partially, not to say largely, attributed to the negative reception of her concerto, it must be admitted that poor audience reaction may have contributed as well. While none of the critics cited thus far comments on it, Dimitris Hamoudopoulos, writing in *Proia*, notes that it was largely negative. Interestingly, he attributes this response to negative press releases prior to the performance that, he claims, prepared the audience to have a bad impression of the work before they had heard it.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, Hamoudopoulos does not specify which press releases he is referring to, and I have not been able to identify them. But if it were to turn out that those press releases express sentiments similar to those found in the reviews we have seen, that would reinforce the impression that Kyriakou's concerto, and by extension her potential as a compositional career, had been unfairly judged according to prejudice and rumour rather than its manifest qualities.

While it is ultimately impossible to demonstrate with certainty why Kyriakou stopped composing, it seems reasonable that prolonged and unfair attacks from music critics, writing on behalf of the Greek musical establishment, played a major role. We do know that Kyriakou generally did not take criticism very well.<sup>42</sup> We may further speculate that the negative critical reaction to her work in Greece would have struck her as inexplicably dissonant with the general praise and encouragement she had received while abroad. In this respect, Kyriakou's career bears remarkable similarities to that of two other Greek composers: Dimitri Mitropoulos and Nikos Skalkottas. Like Kyriakou, they both enjoyed early successes outside of Greece, where they were trained in idioms that did not reflect the priorities of the Greek National School, especially in the 1930s. Like Kyriakou, they returned to Greece only to face an extremely hostile reception that forestalled their ability to continue their compositional careers in their native country. And like Kyriakou, they eventually abandoned composition (at least in public, in Skalkottas's case) in favor of performing careers: Skalkottas as a relatively obscure violinist in Athens, and Mitropoulos, of course, as a pianist and internationally renowned conductor.

Ultimately, Kyriakou's decision to abandon composition in favor of performance reflects the unfortunate realities of musical life in mid-twentieth-century Greece, which was dominated by intrigues, nationalist ideologies, and demagoguery. As a foreign-trained young woman, writing music that failed to satisfy the stylistic prescriptions of the Greek National School, Kyriakou probably never stood much of a chance of having a compositional career in Greece. This is clearly born out by the biased reception of her works in the critical press. And if her works may not claim the status of central masterpieces in the international piano repertoire, they certainly deserve a fairer hearing than they received in their own day as noteworthy examples of one Greek composer's attempt to contribute to an emerging compositional art in her native country. At the very least, their present neglect should not continue on the basis of their unfair assessment by the 1940s Greek musical establishment, whose prejudices and ideological commitments have been largely discredited by modern scholarship.

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<sup>40</sup> It is noteworthy that two concertos by female composers were premiered in 1943, especially considering that, apart from the generally conservative atmosphere, this was perhaps the most difficult year of the German occupation because of severe famine in the Greek capital.

<sup>41</sup> 'Η όποια επιφυλακτικότης του κοινού, στην αρχή κυρίως πρέπει να αποδοθεί στην κακή μάλλον εντύπωση που έκαναν οι δημοσιεύσεις στον τύπο πριν απ' τη συναυλία, γύρω από το έργο της Ρ. Κυριακού.' ('Any reservations of the audience – especially at the beginning [of the performance] – should be attributed to articles on Rena Kyriakou's work that were published before the concert and created a rather bad impression?'), Dimitris Hamoudopoulos, *Proia*, 21 December 1943.

<sup>42</sup> Theodoros Choïdas, interview with the author, 5 August 2013, Rio, Greece.

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## **Abstract**

Pianist Rena Kyriakou (1917-1994) was a child prodigy who completed her performance studies at the Paris Conservatoire before her twenties. She subsequently embarked on an international career as a performing and recording artist. It is less well known that Kyriakou was also a child prodigy in composition. Despite a promising apprenticeship, she abandoned composition before turning thirty. An examination of published criticism, personal correspondence, and recorded interviews suggests that Kyriakou reluctantly stopped composing in the face of overwhelming prejudice against women composers in mid-twentieth-century Greece.

## **About the Author**

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