

## Cultural Elements of Crete in Contemporary Composition

**Abstract.** Composition has always been something more than a creative process for me. I always used to consider it as sculpting, morphing and personalizing parts of time according to personal taste, logic and notion. Growing up in a country characterized by strong Eastern traditions and the same time decisively influenced by western elements, it would be almost impossible for Hellenic (and especially Cretan) culture not to have contributed to the development of my compositional language. The national elements that definitely affected an important part of my approach to music composition were folk modes, rhythms, and harmonies—elements which are very often used as primary music material and are combined with contemporary compositional thought in order to generate new sounds and structures. The subject of this paper falls within my compositional research and is focused on the exploration of Greek cultural elements such as modes, traditional rhythmic patterns, harmonic environments, etc. in contemporary composition. In this paper, characteristic musical traits of the Cretan music tradition will be demonstrated, both in their original form and the one that was used as primary music material for my composition. The main focus of this paper will be the exploration of several compositional attempts to incorporate all the above national ideas into my personal compositional language, in order to create a personal perspective of the Cretan tradition in contemporary writing.

**Keywords:** contemporary music, Crete, dance, Cretan dance, contemporary piano music.

### 1. Introduction – Characteristics of Cretan Music and Influences

The island of Crete is located in the southern part of Greece and is one of the southwestern frontiers of Europe, in the Mediterranean Sea. Cretan history begins, according to archaeological findings, around 6500 BCE, at the end of Neolithic Period<sup>1</sup>. The most well-known and glorious historical period appears to have been the time under Minoan rule, in the Bronze Age. Despite the fact that the volcanic eruption of Santorini marks the end of Minoan civilization, the Cretan culture is basically present in almost all the subsequent historical events up to the present day, with a special reference to the Renaissance era, where, during Venetian rule (1204–1566), brilliant minds such as El Greco (in painting) and Francesco Leondariti (in music composition) paved the way for the development of later Cretan intellectualism (Miller 1908, 574). The folk music of Crete, at its more contemporary form, was critically shaped during the periods of the Byzantine and Ottoman rules, continuing its evolutionary course during the foundation and reformation of the first Hellenic Republic and up to the present.

Evaluating the above, it may be concluded that Crete has always been a crossroads of different cultures, a fact which contributed to the formation of different types of traditions in different geographical parts of the island.

Geophysically, the island of Crete is divided into two different parts, the coastal and the mountainous areas. Each of these has developed a different form of Cretan culture, reflecting the social structure of each area. Folk music, of course, cannot be excluded from contributing significantly to the overall social and cultural context of the island. Inevitably, traditional songs and dances, have many similarities (they are both developed on the same small piece of land). But, at the same time, after careful listening, one may notice many differences in terms of instrumentation, melodic structure, and style, which reflect the different musical needs of each social group. Apart from the two main different areas of Crete, there is a special third one called Siteia, in the eastern part of Crete, which is strongly influenced by western culture. Both the Venetian rule during the Renaissance period and the Italian rule over Dodekanissa (smaller islands of the Aegean Sea) up to 1948 have provided Siteia and other nearby territories with western musical influences that are still alive. Western instruments such as the violin and the classical guitar are often involved in the local tradition, and the harmonic texture is mostly organized according to western harmony, rather than placing modal material over a group of pedal notes, which could be expected in other parts of Crete.

During the 20th century and beyond, we come across many composers whose work was decisively inspired by Cretan folk music. Apart from the Hellenic National School in the first decades of the 20th century, where the majority of works were based on the tradition of Greece in any case, contemporary Greek composers such as Nikos Skalkottas, Yannis Konstandinides and Dimitri Mitropoulos have used Cretan folk music

<sup>1</sup> Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Crete/Government-and-society>

elements for their works (*36 Greek Dances* for orchestra, *8 Island Dances* for piano and *Fête Crétoise* for piano respectively), bringing various forms of this specific national sound world on the international compositional foreground. Apart from the three composers mentioned above, Greek contemporary music includes multiple additional composers, who use ethnic Greek elements (Cretan included) in various styles and aesthetic directions. The most usual, cultural musical elements of Crete that can be found in the contemporary music repertoire are:

1. Traditional songs and dances in Duple time rhythms (occasionally, also 3/4, 7/8 and 5/8 rhythms).
2. Songs (usually for unaccompanied voice) built on a non-steady rhythmical pulse (Rizitika).
3. Vocal and instrumental improvisations on a non-specific rhythmical pulse, frequently used as introductions to a rhythmical song (Taximi).
4. Improvisational variations of the main theme, either developmental or contrasting (Gyrismata).

The above elements have been utilized during the 20th century as departure points of inspiration for the creation of new works, either by recalling traditional elements of the island, or by acting as primary material to generate completely new, previously unheard sonorities and structures. In the next chapters of this paper, three solo works will be presented. Each work deals with different cultural elements of Crete, which were incorporated into a personal, contemporary compositional language, aiming to produce new functional structures and textures.

## 2. *Lux Perpetua* for Solo Flute (2003)

*Lux Perpetua* for solo flute was composed in 2003 and premiered at the Music Department of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens the same year. It is dedicated to the memory of George Bouhalakis, a Cretan, very talented and promising young contemporary music composer, who passed away at the age of 19 after been awarded his first prize in a composition competition. Technically, the main idea of this piece was to create a Theme & Variations structure, in order to approach various improvisational ways of varying a simple melody, which is frequently encountered in the live performances of traditional Cretan musicians. The theme of *Lux Perpetua* is based on a traditional Cretan song, the lyrics of which describe a young man who passed away and, after entering Hades, reunites with his long-dead mother, who left him alone years ago. A simple transcription of the main, original melody is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Original transcription of *Lux Perpetua*

At the very beginning of *Lux Perpetua*, the main melody appears to have been composed in a simple binary form, AB, in the form of “Question and Answer”. The pitch material is exclusively in the Aeolian mode, which is very common in the tradition of Crete and other parts of Greece. Beyond the primitive music material, the original theme was reconstructed on a more free and irregular rhythm, in order to let its character be more narrative and distant for the flute. In terms of structure, the binary form was kept for the melodic material, but, at the same time, a secondary, ternary ABA1 form is implied, according to how the timbre is organized. More specifically, the theme begins with an ordinary flute sound, combined with vocals, an idea that imitates the Greek vocal lament. After that, a couple of percussive sonorities (Key clicks and jet tones) were used, to return to the initial flute and voice timbre. Hence, the piece opens with a two-level structure of the theme—binary in terms of its melodic material, and ternary, according to the succession of timbres. Figure 2 shows the organization of both the timbral and the melodic shaping of the work’s introductory theme.

After exposing the main theme of the work, a number of variations were set in order to elaborate and expand the melodic, rhythmic and timbral material of the main theme. The overall structural plan of the work traces a path from relatively low levels of intensity to higher ones and then back to the initial low level of intensity. To achieve the goal desired during the compositional process of each variation, elements of instrumental register, dynamics and melodic complexity play a significant role to the manipulation of tension.

Along the composition’s timeline, there are two main modulations, where pitch material is expanded from the Aeolian mode to a more complex, 10-note scale at the 3rd variation, and to an 8-note scale at the final part. By increasing the number of pitches within an octave, more semitones/points of tension were generated, and support the route to the peak of the work. On the other hand, reducing the number of pitches within an octave helps to lower the level of intensity, aiming to organize a suitable texture for the epilogue of the piece. Figure 3 demonstrates the overall structure of *Lux Perpetua*, including the development of pitch material from one variation to the other.

The image shows two musical excerpts. The first, labeled 'A - Flute & Voice', is marked 'Tempo Rubato' with a tempo of approximately 60 beats per minute. It features two staves: 'Play' (flute) and 'Sing' (voice). The flute part has dynamic markings *mp*, *sfz*, *sfz-mp*, *mf*, and *pp*. The voice part has a dynamic marking of *mf pos.*. The second excerpt, labeled '(B) Jet tones' and 'A1 - Flute & Voice', shows a sequence of notes with dynamic markings *pp-sfz* and *pp* for the 'Jet tones', and *mp*, *mf*, and *pp* for the 'A1 - Flute & Voice' section.

Figure 2. The theme of *Lux Perpetua*

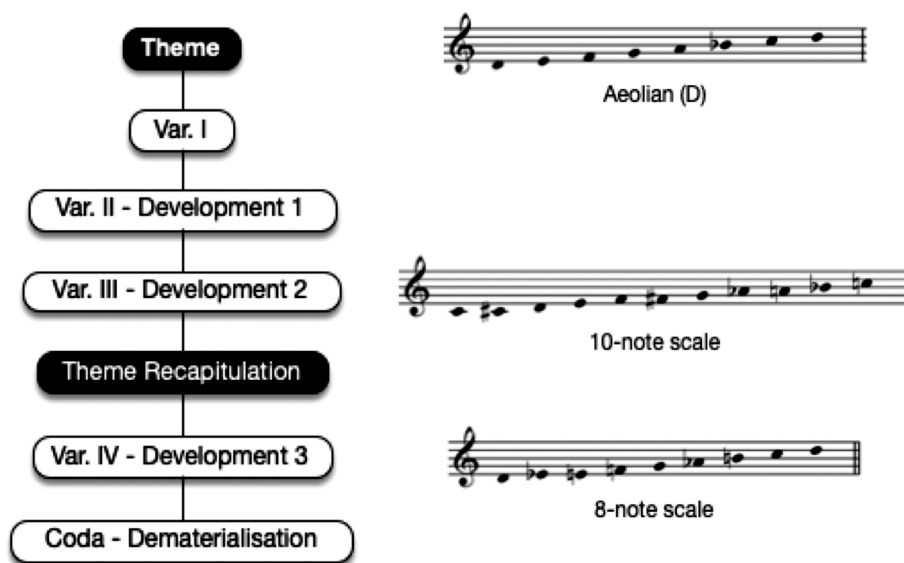


Figure 3. Structural plan of *Lux Perpetua*

Examining each part of the work, Variation 1 could be characterized as the simplest of all, as it appears to be a short paraphrase of the main theme. The melody is placed at the second octave of flute’s register, which means that it is brought one step forward to the foreground, while remaining almost the same in terms of distance (in a simplified form). Additional ornaments, such as groups of grace notes, have been added in order to introduce the next compositional steps, where the main development of the material takes place (Figure 4).

Variation 2 is the first point of the work where musical material is significantly elaborated. At this section, previous ideas such as grace notes, the sound of the flute and singing, pitch bending and key clicks are

combined in a descending melodic line which covers almost the whole middle-register of the flute. After that, the third variation can be considered as the more complex one. Here, the developed melodic material covers almost the whole range of the instrument. Gestures seem to be much more kinetic and flute sonorities are transformed from slow and quiet ones, to loud and fast. Apart from the melodic line's expansion, it should be mentioned that the groups of grace notes create a second voice, a kind of counter-subject to the main melody. Hence, the additional contrasting voice helps to further increase the intensity of the texture, pushing it decisively to the peak. To make a musical statement of Cretan culture, the above compositional decisions were made in order to imitate the human outburst in such a difficult situation as a beloved person's loss. After the tension peaks, achieved at the end of the previous variation, a short, contrasting section is placed as an abstract recapitulation of the main theme. Here, the music returns to slower and more quiet levels, where a paraphrased form of the main melody is re-exposed. This particular passage functions as a bridge which leads to the fourth, and last, variation of the work. During this section, although the musical material is still being developed, the sounds appear to be more distant through low dynamics and breathy harmonics. The melodic line moves from the middle register to the bottom one, preparing for the de-materialization of musical ideas which will happen at the epilogue, through timbral transition, from ordinary sound to half sound/half air and, finally to breath tones, fading out the completed work.

Figure 5 shows representative extracts for each of the different sections discussed above.

Variation 1 - Additional ornaments to the main melodic line

Figure 4. *Lux Perpetua*, Variation 1

Variation II - Development

Variation III - Development 2/Peak

Coda - Dematerialisation

Figure 5. Extracts from *Lux Perpetua*

### 3. *Lament for Theodore* for Bass Flute Solo (2020)

*Lament for Theodore* for bass flute solo was composed in 2020 and it is dedicated to the memory of Theodore Antoniou, one of the most important and innovative composers for Greek contemporary music, whose compositional approach and tuition has been inspiring more than three generations of Greek composers. The piece was written for Iwona Glinka’s flute project “Lament for Theodore” after the composer’s passing in 2018. The title refers to the famous solo flute work *Lament for Michelle* which was written by Antoniou after the death of Michelle Sahn, a flutist and member of the ALEA III orchestra in Boston. All the collected pieces bear the same title and were recorded by Iwona Glinka for Phasma Music. The triple album was awarded at the Academia Music Awards in Poland and the Clouzine International Music Awards in 2021. Contrary to *Lux Perpetua*, discussed at the previous chapter, *Lament for Theodore* was structured according to improvisation of a Cretan song by the lyra player Kostas Mountakis (1926–1991). The song describes the argument between a musician and Charon, the transporter of the dead to the underworld, who announces that he is going to take the musician with him to Hades by the morning.

The structure of *Lament for Theodore* is considered a three-section invention based on the musical material of the original song. Initially, the folk melody was re-composed in a more abstract way, giving a distant perspective of the original. During the opening, the pitches of the main theme have been placed relatively far from each other. As the work’s timeline moves forward, original pitches appear more and more often. Hence, occasionally, full original gestures appear, which keep the Cretan character in place all over the piece. The first section mainly deals with the timbral transition between the ordinary bass flute sound and a breath tone. Hence, the flute sound fades in and out in an attempt to imitate the unstable character of a human speaking or a singing voice while lamenting. The basic sonorities for the first part, apart from the ordinary flute sound, are harmonics, jet tones, breath tones and half air/half sound pitches. At the last bar of this section, a combination of three different techniques—Harmonics, Smorzato and flutter-tongue—was used in order to imitate human sobbing. Figure 6 shows an analysis of the first part to clarify the re-compositional processes applied to the original song.

Part 1 - Formation of pitches from the original melody

The figure shows a musical score analysis for Part 1 of *Lament for Theodore*. It consists of four staves of music with various annotations. The first staff shows dynamics from *pp* to *f* and includes markings for "ord.", "Br. t.", and "50-50%". The second staff shows dynamics from *mf* to *ppp* and includes "ord." and "50-50%". The third staff includes "Tempo (♩=60 ca.)", "poco accel.", and "poco rit.", with dynamics from *pp* to *mf pos.* The fourth staff includes "Tempo (♩=60 ca.)", "50-50%", and "ord.", with dynamics from *pp* to *mp-pp sub.* A vertical bar on the left contains the text "Part 1 - Formation of pitches from the original melody".

Figure 6. *Lament for Theodore*. Part 1 analysis

The middle part of *Lament for Theodore* recycles the musical material exposed in the previous part in a developmental way. Melodic shaping is enriched with more complex gestures, while the successive interaction between breathy and ordinary sounds is used as a tool to reach the most tense point of the work, where the highest pitch point and the highest dynamic level appear (Bb 5/*ffz*). During the development, various gestures from the theme have been placed together with individual pitch-points which recall the initial material. The “recalled” melodic motifs appear in various, previously established, timbres such as breath tones and flutter-tongue sonorities, as shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. *Lament for Theodore*. “Recalled” melodic motifs

Most of the material in the third and final section of the piece is placed at the first octave of the bass flute, a register which appears to be the most recognizable for the instrument. Here, ideas from the initial and middle part keep re-appearing in varied forms, such as the *smorzato-sobbing idea*, or the *peak motif*, implying the D minor scale. Finally, the piece ends with a chromatic surrounding of pitch D, which is the tonal center both for the original song and for *Lament*.

#### 4. *Cretan Dance for Piano* (2023)

*Cretan Dance* for piano was composed to be performed by pianist Elena Perisynaki in the contemporary music project “ConTempo”, at the Heraklion Concert Hall in Crete. Contrary to the previous works presented above, *Cretan Dance* is based on Syrtos—a Cretan, stepped circular dance, mostly written in duple time. Syrtos can be considered as a cultural connection not only between the various regions of Crete but also between many other areas of Greece. The particular folk song/dance by which this piece was inspired is attributed to Athanassios Skordalos (1920–1998), a widely-acclaimed traditional musician of the 20th-century Cretan culture. Figure 8 illustrates a transcription of the original dance, recorded and released in 1996 by Panivar Records in Crete.

*Cretan Dance* is structured as an invention that consists of four different sections. Each one introduces a separate short melodic motif, taken from the original tune. The motifs were recomposed and elaborated in order to generate either distant views of the original melody, or new regular or irregular rhythmical passages. More specifically, the duple time of the original dance has been expanded many times by introducing different duple time forms, such as 6/8 or 4/8. In addition, various rhythmical irregularities, such as 7/8, 3/8, etc. appear on the work’s timeline in order to cover some of the phrasing needs of the composition. Figure 9 shows the structural plan of *Cretan Dance* and the main motif material used and developed in comparison with the respective motifs of the original tune.

Figure 8. Transcription of the original Syrtos dance

A

Motive 1

♩ = 70

accel.....

*ppp* — *mp*

*p* < *mf*    *pp sub.*    *pp sub.*

B

Motive 2

*tr*    *tr*

C

Motive 3

D

Motive 4

Epilogue

Recapitulation of previous motives/Dematerialisation

Figure 9. Cretan Dance. Motifs and structural plan

The work opens with the initial original motif, transposed one perfect fifth higher. The original motif can be divided into two smaller sub-motifs (m1.1 and m1.2). The second sub-motif was extended using fast chromatic notes around the tonic (pitch D), in order to create a continuous drone effect. The tonal harmonic character of this first section (bars 1–16) has been “blurred” by using three chromatic clusters. This particular sonority **was applied in order to set a harmonic surface for m1.2, as discussed above. In terms of further development, the initial motif appears to be gradually expanded by adding a number of pitches at each of the five consecutive times that it appears during the first section of the piece. The same development process has been applied to m1.2, which appears to be varied in different registers of the piano. In terms of rhythm, as mentioned above, the duple time appears in various forms, interrupted occasionally by rhythmical irregularities such as the 5/8 and the 3/8. This compositional process was applied in order to enlarge or to shrink the rhythmical periods of the original tune. Figure 10 illustrates the rhythmical elaboration of section A.**

Bars:	1	2-3	4	5-6	7	8-9	10-11	12	13	14	15-16
	2	6	2	6	2	6	3	4	5	2	3
	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8	8

Figure 10. *Cretan Dance*. Time signatures

The second section of *Cretan Dance* covers bars 17–31. Here, a tempo change has been applied ( $\text{♩} = 80$  instead of the initial 70) in order to increase the overall tension. Initially, the music material of part A has been developed further at the new tempo for five bars (17–21). At bar 22, the second motif of the work appears (m2). Looking more closely at bars 22–23, it can be noticed that the specific motif appears in its original form according to the folk tune, but not at its original length. It is interrupted by a new entrance of the same motif, transposed a perfect fourth higher (to bar 22). This technique can very often be found under the name “tzakisma” in the lyrics of numerous Greek folk songs where a line of text appears in its half-length form, followed by the same line of text in full length.<sup>2</sup>



Figure 11. “Tzakisma”

The development of this material continues for another seven bars where both motifs (m1 and m2) are combined to form the final texture of the section.

During the third part of the work (bars 32–55), the next motif (m3) appears four times (bars 36, 42, 50 and 54) in its original tonal form, without any transposition. In addition, a modal countersubject was composed to accompany the main melody. As the whole work’s development is still in progress, the m3 motif is transposed one octave lower at each repetition, creating a descending trajectory, which connects the next section of the work. Figure 12 shows the m3 motif as it appears at different piano registers.

Figure 12. *Cretan Dance*. M3 motif

<sup>2</sup> The same practice can also be noticed in vocal masterpieces of Western culture. For example, the beginning of Mozart’s *Ave verum corpus* is constructed following the same principle (*Ave, Ave verum corpus*).



The peak of *Cretan Dance* can be heard during the third section of the work. Here, the melodic material is based on the fourth (and last) melodic motif (m4), which presents itself at the bass register of the piano. At this particular section, a more drastic tempo change occurs ( $\text{♩}=160$ ) in order to embody the fast, dance-like character of the original tune. So as to further increase the tension of the passage, the melodic material is doubled in octaves. In terms of development, as the main melodic material appears repetitively, it has been augmented<sup>3</sup> by incorporating additional pitches and rhythmical values to the original melody, to keep both the melodic and rhythmical interest to a high standard. For this reason, rhythmical irregularities such as 7/8 and 5/8 times were used, in combination with the original duple time of the dance. The figure below shows an extract of the augmented melody described above.

#### Motive 4 - Melodic & Rhythmical Augmentation (Bars 56-72)



Figure 13. *Cretan Dance*. Melodic augmentation

The epilogue of the work takes place in bars 75–92. This section functions as a recapitulation of the main musical ideas exposed and developed during the previous parts. The tempo of the work gradually gets slower ( $\text{♩}=50$ ). This change contributes to the generation of a more abstract texture, where the four fundamental melodic motifs appear for last time. At this point, it should be highlighted that the harmonic sonority of the chromatic cluster, which was introduced at the very beginning, reappears in order to let the melodic phrases fade out.

To summarize, Cretan culture appears to have inspired many significant composers of the 20th century in different ways and aesthetic directions, depending on the decade and personal compositional language. During various periods, Cretan history has been characterized by strong cultural diversity. This important cultural heritage seems to pass from one mind to another, often acting as a starting point for compositional thinking and for the creation of important musical works. This is obvious in both the masterpieces of the past (Skalkottas, Mitropoulos, Constantinides, etc.) and the works of the younger generation of composers up to nowadays. In terms of the three solo works presented and discussed in this paper, the reflection that occurs around how cultural background influences and affects, unintentionally and intentionally, the creation of music and further artistic thinking is indeed remarkable.

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<sup>3</sup> Messiaen, Olivier. 1956. *The Technique of my Musical Language*. Translated by John Satterfield. Edition Musicales, p. 18.

## Kretos kultūros elementai šiuolaikinėje kompozicijoje

### Santrauka

Komponavimas man visada buvo daugiau nei kūrybinis procesas. Kūriniai – tai veikiau *skulptūros*, pertvarkančios ir personalizuojančios laiką pagal asmeninę logiką ir sampratą. Augau šalyje, kuriai būdingos stiprios Rytų tradicijos ir kartu vakarietiški elementai, todėl sunku įsivaizduoti, kad Graikijos (ypač Kretos) kultūra nebūtų prisidėjusi prie mano kompozicinės kalbos raidos. Nacionaliniai elementai, kurie neabejotinai paveikė mano požiūrį į muzikos komponavimą, buvo liaudies muzikos atlikimo manieros, ritmai ir harmonijos – tai tie elementai, kurie labai dažnai naudojami kaip pirminė muzikinė medžiaga ir derinami su šiuolaikine kompozicine mintimi siekiant sukurti naują skambesį ir struktūras.

Straipsnio tema – viena mano kompozicinių tyrimų sričių, orientuota į graikų kultūros elementų (modusų, tradicinių ritmo modelių, harmoninių laukų ir kt.) tyrinėjimą šiuolaikinėje kompozicijoje. Šiame darbe demonstruojami Kretos muzikos tradicijai būdingi bruožai: tiek originali jų forma, tiek ta, kuri buvo panaudota kaip pirminė mano kompozicijų muzikinė medžiaga. Pagrindinis straipsnio akcentas – kelių kompozicinių bandymų analizė siekiant minėtas nacionalines idėjas įtraukti į savo asmeninę kompozicinę kalbą ir taip sukurti individualią Kretos tradicijos perspektyvą šiuolaikinėje kūryboje.