

Don't look back

by Kersten Glandien

in M Karikis (ed.), *MORPHICA*. Brussels: Sub Rosa. 2009

“Don't look back”,

the old imperative of the artistic Avantgarde, seems to have lost its footing; however enthusiastically we quote, use, praise and copy those 20th century movements, their fundamental impetus – a belief in the future - has evaporated. A new century stretches out in front of us, but we lack the aesthetic vision to fill its void. Now that all musical material apparently has not only been invented¹, but is, technologically, at our fingertips, artistic claims of progress have fallen silent, and the aesthetic conventions of innovation, originality and authority have given way to an exploration of new technology that recycles fragments from the mass of already existing sound works: that vast artistic body of creations stretching back into the distant past and across continents into other cultures. Far from being able, or inclined, to project into the future - or to invent new materials - we have become concerned instead with the challenges of Now, desperately trawling through the debris of past and present art in search of our own artistic voice and purpose.

On his semionautic² travels, Mikhail Karikis also goes back, far back, to the cradle of Western art - which coincides with his own cultural roots. He discovers the ancient figure of Orpheus, that magical singer whose music charmed gods and animals alike - and which gained him access to the underworld that he might return his love to life; on the single condition that he not look back. Deprived of retrospection, Orpheus makes a potent metaphor for the avantgardist break with the past, and in recent centuries has become an allegory for music itself: *La Musica*³. He was centre stage at the triumph of that Baroque genre-fusion: the birth of Opera⁴. All these Orphic connotations seem intriguingly relevant to Karikis' *Orphica* project, despite his very contemporary take on the Orpheus trope.

Far from the enchanting singer of myth, Karikis' Orpheus is not the bringer of alluring melodies, his voice seldom carrying easily. Throat-clearing, vocal stumbling, hesitation, breaks, cracks, choking noises, stuttering and stammering, combined with short melodic sequences, form the main elements of his vocal repertoire. But his aim is not vocal virtuosity or improvisation. His vocal timings and timbres - untreated or treated - are tightly bound into the intricate sonic texture of the composition, in which voice fragments are combined with other sonic debris and bound into the weft and warp of electroacoustic particles.

In composition Karikis finds his strength. In digital postproduction he constructs sonic planes from isolated or rhythmically repeated sounds, where single melodic sequences

undergo constant change through variations of timbre and space - effected either by changes of sound source, or processing - thus creating difference in sameness. The sonic texture of the composition is constructed from samples (acoustic or electronic, found or recorded live) and shards of New Electronica noise, and relates, with its multitude of source materials and processing techniques, to the current *clicks & cuts* aesthetic; the melodic sequences, on the other hand, carried by voice and acoustic instrument samples (spinet, harp, violin, cello) clearly bear a distinct sense of history. The two different aesthetic styles fold into one another and create a vital tension in the composition.

Although based on the Orphic myth, with song titles like *Meanades* and *Argonauts*, this project is held together, in a somewhat Baroque manner, by a distinctive emotional orientation⁵: an intense Orphic longing; a declaration of love in its many different moods. Each of the album's 12 songs and instrumentals, rather than advancing a narrative, seems to explore a particular emotion. The few words of sparse and gnomic text often lose themselves in nonverbal emotive noises, or melt into the countless facets of the composition, creating associations rather than stories - as in the final part of *Asterix*, where the use of a documentary recording evokes a touching memory of togetherness. Moods range from wide and powerful to close and intimate – but are all tinged with ardent sentiment.

In the immanent aesthetic tension between story and emotion, electroacoustic composition and voice, a Baroque sensibility shines through that extends into the visual and performative components of the project. Educated in fine art and architecture, as well as music, Karikis designs his own integrated imagery. The black and white drawing on the front cover of the CD shows Karikis' head morphed into the Orphic instrument: two giant ear-tipped horns protrude from each side of his face; his vocal cords, depicted as strings, extend from his throat, through his head, and then high above it, to complete an allegorical lyre. Fragile organic growth spills from one of the horns and continues to flow – now in colour – into the inside of the booklet. These rhizomatic spatial images, sunk into a contrasting dark background, also find their way into live performances where they are projected onto Karikis' body and the stage behind him, virtually swallowing him. The lonely singer, standing on an empty stage becomes part of a rich virtual *mise en scène*. Occasional props in the form, for instance, of a feathered half-mask, or garments made from colourful, or shiny, material, complete the look, adding theatricality to the project's Baroque quality. Kariki's demeanour in performance seems to understate the visual display. As the electroacoustic material is played back through speakers, he traces his vocal part live over it. Static, facing forward, he delivers the song in an almost introverted way, often with his eyes shut. A rhythmical

swaying back and forth of the body, and frequent precise movements of arms and masked head give accent to his physical presence.

It is the whole package that makes Karikis' work intriguing: composition and voice, visuals and sound, body and soul. The fusion of different genres, today often achieved through collaboration between artists from different disciplines, Karikis encompasses in himself and his various talents. Encouraged by new technologies, such fusions are certainly a current trend, and in all likelihood the shape of things to come. By playing around with the set pieces of different genres, cultures and times, artists, incidentally and in the midst of today's artistic stasis, are not only finding, their own voices, but also, inadvertently, creating the future.

¹ See Heiner Goebbels: *Prince and the Revolution*, in: *Argument* 175, May 1989

² Nicolas Borriaud: *Postproduction*. New York 2002, p.12

³ See Michael P. Steinberg: *Blinde Oper oder Orpheus kehrt zurück*. In: Josef Früchtl & Jörg Zimmermann (eds): *Ästhetik der Inszenierung*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 2001, p. 226

⁴ Claudio Monteverdis: *L'Orfeo*, 1607

⁵ Gilles Deleuze: *The Fold. Leibniz and the Baroque*. London/ New York: Continuum, 2006