

Eugenia Manolidou is a classical composer and conductor, whose work closely engages with ancient Greece. Born in Athens in 1975 she began piano lessons at the age of five. She continued her studies of the instrument at the J. S. Bach conservatory under Ala Chalapsi in the early 1990s. She then focused on composition and orchestration working with Daron Hagen at the Juilliard School in New York (1996-99). During this period she also studied orchestral conducting with Vincent la Selva, director of the New York Grand Opera, while simultaneously continuing her piano studies with the American soloist Julie Jordan. She also studied under Robert Janssens at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Brussels. In 2005 she was awarded a postgraduate degree with a major in the History of Civilization from the Alpine Universität, Zürich. Throughout her career, Eugenia has engaged with ancient Greece, in particular its rich mythology, literature and history.

This interview with Anastasia Bakogianni was recorded at Eugenia Manolidou's home in Athens in May 2012. An illustrated version of this interview is available online at <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2015/manolidou>

Recordings of some of the music discussed in this interview can be found on [Eugenia Manolidou's website](#).

AB. Ancient Greek literature, history, and culture lie at the heart of your musical oeuvre. They permeate the majority of your compositions and open up an ongoing dialogue between past and present. I would like to start this conversation by asking you about how you view your reception of ancient Greece?

EM. I was born and raised in Athens, a city full of history and culture. However, as strange as it may sound, it was only at the age of 19, when I began studying music at Juilliard in New York, that I truly came to appreciate the wonders of ancient Greece. I remember long visits to the Metropolitan museum, usually at least once a week, where I was introduced to the material culture of ancient Greece. Sculptures, friezes, and amphoras suddenly became a part of my everyday life. I began to study in depth Greek mythology and it fascinated me. It was then that I realized that, the more I studied, the more pictures came alive in my imagination. Then, the strangest thing happened; those images created music in my mind. Myths, legends, heroes sort of converted their stories into melodies. All I did was record those melodies on paper. That was how it all began.

AB. Why do you believe it is important to continue this dialogue with the classical past? Do you think that it still speaks to us today?

EM. Absolutely, I strongly believe that the past is inextricably linked to both the present and the future. I believe that a person is not complete without knowledge of his parents, and/or grandparents. Some people devote their lives in search of their ancestors. It is

always important to know what came before. To me, going back in time is the only way to move forward.

AB. In your work you combine narration, dialogue and music to re-imagine several ancient characters, musical models and narratives for a modern audience. Why do you think the creative blending of these elements works? Do you believe that this combination of music and spoken monologue or dialogue brings us closer to ancient genres, such as ancient epic and lyric as well as drama that combined these two elements in performance?

EM. I do believe in the combination of music, speech, acting, singing, and dancing. It is what Richard Wagner used to refer to as the *Gesamtkunstwerk* – the total work of art. We refer to it as ‘opera’ – easier to pronounce anyway! In my work, I like to have part of the story narrated as this makes it easier for the audience to follow and to enjoy the rest of the play. In a way it does bring us closer to ancient genres, but it is by no means the same. The main difference being, I think, that in ancient Greece music did not predominate during the play, rather it accompanied the action discretely. Plato writes that logos should prevail rather than music and if the artist emphasizes the latter then speech may be lost. In my work, I try to maintain a balance: music does prevail, but the story is elucidated through dialogue or narration.

AB. You were educated in the Western classical musical style. Can you tell me more about your musical models?

EM. Many of the composers who wrote music for stories set in ancient Greece had a Western classical music education: Monteverdi’s *La favola d’ Orfeo* [1607], Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* [c.1689], Beethoven’s *The Ruins of Athens* [1811], Berlioz’s *Les Troyens* [1858], Debussy’s *Pelleas et Melissande* [1902] and Richard Strauss’ *Electra* [1909] and *Ariadne auf Naxos* [1912], to name but a few. Ancient Greek literature, history, and mythology proved fertile ground for artists throughout the world. I feel particularly privileged, however, being Greek, since I can claim a special connection to the classical past, its language, and literature.

AB. Your engagement with ancient Greece began with your first studio album *Meanings and Symbols*, composed in 1999 during your time at Juilliard. This contains three compositions that specifically reference the ancient Greek divinities, Zeus, the Nymphs, and Apollo. Why these three in particular?

EM. No specific reason. The album as a whole was inspired by the creation of the universe as described in the Orphic Hymns, sacred writings about the origins of the gods and humankind. That was the beginning of my musical journey back into the Greek mythical past, inspired by pure and sincere feelings and by my passionate engagement with ancient Greece.

AB. Why were you drawn into this dialogue with the past and what was the response of your mentors to your engagement with ancient Greece?

EM. I was and still am drawn to it because there is an endless flow of images in my mind and images are my main source of inspiration. Mythology, philosophy, drama, poetry, history, literature fill my soul with melody and rhythm. My mentors were and are content with my feeling of musical fulfillment. In the beginning there was some concern that my engagement with the classical past would not allow my compositional style to progress and evolve. However, when it became clear that my music evolved and matured even though my main source of inspiration remained constant that concern was alleviated.

AB. Your second studio album *Hellenic Hymns* [2002], or *Orphic Hymns* is entirely devoted to songs about ancient Greek divinities and personifications. Is this the result of your choice of model, Rainer Maria Rilke's collection of poetry *Sonnette an Orpheus* [1922], or did you choose Rilke's poems precisely because they are a poetic reception of the Orphic Hymns?

EM. The *Orphic Hymns* album is in a way the sequel to *Meanings and Symbols*. The latter refers to the concept of Orphic literature as a whole, whereas the former is a choice of specific hymns set to music. The genesis of my second album dates back to 2000 when I conducted the *Orphic Hymns* in Vienna, at the Musikverein concert hall. Its President was very interested in that work and suggested that I also read R. M. Rilke's *Die Sonnette an Orpheus* because of the similarities between my work and Rilke's poems. I loved the work and decided to select some of the poems and set them to music. In 2002 I was fortunate enough to return to Vienna to conduct a concert of this work.

AB. Your third studio album *Archetypon* [2004] is divided into two parts. The first section, conceived as a symphonic poem in five parts, deals with mythical pairings, for example Ares and Aphrodite, as well as the relationships between ancient divinities and personifications, such as Erebus ['Darkness'] and Katharsis. The second section is made up of two hymns, one devoted to Alexander the Great and one to Greece itself. How do you envisage the relationship between the mythical and the historical sections? The title of the album in modern Greek means 'prototype', in the sense of a source of inspiration upon which one models an adaptation. Is that representative of your approach to the ancient material?

EM. Exactly. One must keep in mind that all great heroes regarded mythology as the link between past and present. For instance, Alexander the Great often refers to himself as being the son of Zeus – which is impossible and he knew it. But this gave him the strength and courage to pursue his dream, not to mention what it did for his public image. I regard mythology as nothing less than our most ancient past, full of information that needs to be decoded. It is no coincidence that the ancient Greek words for myth, music and mystery all come from the same root-word 'μῶ – μῦώ' meaning to initiate. Myth, music, and mystery are interrelated and one has to be 'initiated' in order to fully appreciate them.

AB. Your next album, *Gaia* [2004], was a recording of your score for your first ballet. The piece was originally performed in 1999 at the Wuppertal Theatre in Germany, but

recorded five years later. The plot of this ballet in two acts involves Prometheus' theft of fire. In your reception of this ancient myth humanity abuses this divine gift and has to be rescued by Gaia and Persephone, who restore balance to the universe. Did you purposefully include a strong environmental message in your reception of the myth? Did you feel that embedding such a message in ancient myth would lend it more authority?

EM. Most of the Greek deities represent forces of nature. Zeus was connected with thunder and lightning. Demeter was connected to nature and the harvest. Artemis was the goddess of the hunt and protector of wild animals. In my opinion mythology itself is founded on environmental messages. All I did was to put together mythological information in such a way that I created a story of origins, and then I composed the music to accompany the action. I am convinced that respecting mythology inevitably means respecting the laws of nature.

AB. Your fifth album *Epos* [2005] is a lyric drama in three acts. You've explained how it was envisaged as a musico-theatrical event modeled on symbols/themes drawn from ancient Greek culture. Can you elaborate on this?

EM. I consider *Epos* a landmark work in my musical career so far. It received the second distinction at the International Competition for Opera Composition Nancy van de Vate, organized in Vienna by Vienna Masterworks in December 2006. It is the work that characterizes my musical style, who I am musically speaking today. Composing the work helped me to expand my boundaries and made me realize that I do actually have a fully realized musical personality.

AB. As a female classical composer and conductor how do you view the position of women in these traditionally male dominated artistic fields?

EM. There is still prejudice against women in the creative arts. Female composers and conductors have to fight very hard to establish themselves. I have experienced this myself, especially in the beginning of my career when I came up against this bias. Eventually though, I just stopped worrying about it. I let my work and my performances speak for themselves. After all it is the work that matters, not the gender of its creator.

AB. A number of your compositions focus on the theme of athletic victory, as for example in the album *Epos* and in *Two Cultures, One Spirit* composed for the Beijing Olympic Games [2008]. Why have you felt so drawn to ancient Greek lyric and victory odes? And do you model your compositions on Pindar's epinician hymns?

EM. The work *Olympic Symphonic Concert - Two Cultures, One Spirit* premiered at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Together with *Epos*, I consider this to be one of my most important works so far. Conceptually, it exhibits the dialectic of variety and uniformity, as it shuttles, back and forth, between the particular and the universal. Specifically, it acknowledges difference as a given, and then creates uniformity out of difference. This is illustrated in the way in which the composition subordinates Hellenic and Chinese cultural differences to the Olympic ideal. Although composed with

a specific event in mind, it transcends spatial and temporal constraints by giving voice to the perennial longings of humanity for peace and friendship. Thematically, the composition is inspired by Pindar's brilliant Victory Odes, which celebrate the victors of athletic competition. They celebrate the perfection of the human form, the joy of contest, and the honor of victory. With its artistic antecedents in the lyricism of ancient Greek antiquity, the composition introduces its audience to contemporary verses echoing the distant past.

AB. How do you mediate in your music and in performance the importance given to the ancient Olympic Games as a model for the modern games?

EM. I don't think that this can be accomplished through music, however much I wish that it could be! In ancient Greece, athletes competed for glory. In the modern games values are a little bit more complicated... In the works that you mentioned, my goal is to emphasize the importance of taking part in the contest and not of winning. In my music, attention is paid to the preparation of the athletes and to the everlasting fame that they win.

AB. You have also composed music for children's CDs based ancient Greek history and mythology, including adaptations of the Homeric epics and titles such as *Alexander the Great: The Living Legend* and *Hercules: The Real Face of the Great Hero*. Is your work for younger audience intended to communicate ancient culture to younger listeners? How do you approach it differently from your work for adult audiences?

EM. Well, children in ancient Greece were taught Greek history and mythology in their early years. Unfortunately, today not so much attention is given to these topics in Greek schools. Originally I decided to record these works for the benefit of my own children. I even involved them in the recording of some of the dialogues and we had lots of fun doing that. When I realised how much their friends and even their parents enjoyed listening to these stories, I decided to have them commercially released as albums. The fact that modern-day children still appreciate stories from ancient Greece gives me great pleasure.

AB. Talking of audiences, you have performed your work both in Greece and worldwide. What has the response been to your engagement with ancient Greece?

EM. I am glad to be able to say that the response has been very enthusiastic. Ancient Greece is admired and appreciated across the world. Many of its stories, myths, and heroes are familiar to audiences and this makes it much easier for people to enjoy my work. I want to share my admiration of the ancient Greek past with the people that come to my concerts. Every concert is a challenge. I hope to demonstrate the importance of engaging with the past so that, armed with this knowledge, we can move confidently into the future.

AB. How do you interpret your journey back into the past and what did you bring back for the present? Do you feel that your approach to the ancient sources has evolved since your first album and if so how?

EM. I certainly hope so! I research more now before I begin composing and I try to investigate the philosophical issues more deeply. I believe that my engagement with the past makes me a better person and a more self-aware artist.

AB. How has your reception of ancient Greece intersected creatively with the other kinds of work that you have done?

EM. It has not only had a major impact on my music, but on my personal life, too. Reading ancient Greek philosophy has helped me to deal with problems that I encounter in my own life. As far as work is concerned, it has and still does help me to create the images that constantly ‘sing’ in my mind. This is the creative impetus that makes my music happen.

AB. Do you have any future plans to engage further with the classical past?

EM. I have just finished my second lyrical drama called *Pisanella – the Girl from Pisa*, which is modelled on a theatrical play by the Italian author Gabriele d’ Annunzio. It is inspired by historical events that took place in Cyprus in the thirteenth century. It may not be ‘classical’, but it does belong to a bygone era. Just a different time in the past!

Find out more...

[Eugenia Manolidou’s website](#) contains more information about her work as well as news about forthcoming performances.