

Recent Recordings

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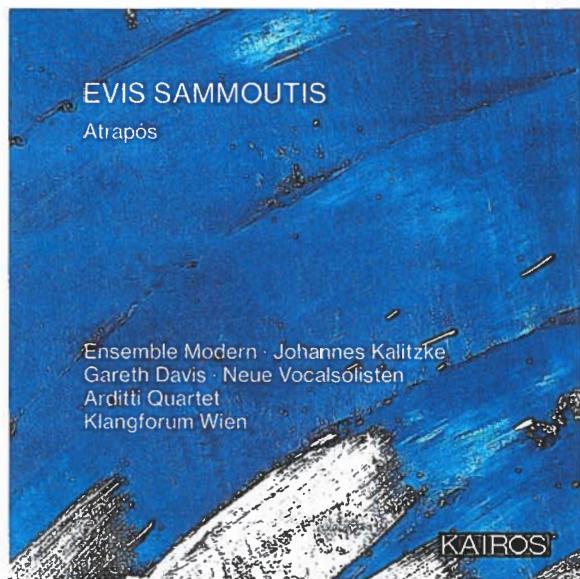
Ensemble Modern (cond. Johannes Kalitzke),
Gareth Davis, Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart, Arditti
Quartet, Klangforum Wien

Evis Sammoutis: Atrapós

Kairos, 0022050KAI, March 2025

The first monographic CD of music by composer Evis Sammoutis (b. 1979), released earlier this year by the Austrian record label Kairos, includes five recent works charting the compelling development of his musical language. Originally from Cyprus, Sammoutis was educated in the United Kingdom (at the University of Hull and University of York), studying further with leading European composers and at the Ircam cursus (2006). He has taught at Ithaca College and was recently appointed as a professor of composition at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. All five works on the CD are live concert recordings (and in fact world premieres) recorded at a variety of locations in Cyprus and Germany over a period of more than sixteen years, from 2006 to 2022. The Greek word *ατραπός* (*atrapós*) means “pathway,” and one may see these recordings as illustrating key steps in his compositional development.

Sammoutis, like many composers of his generation, takes inspiration from different twentieth- and



twenty-first-century aesthetic currents that might have been considered incompatible a few decades ago. Composers of the *école spectrale* like Gérard Grisey are a clear influence; in all of Sammoutis's work one can observe its features as identified by Grisey in a late essay, particularly the “integration of all sounds (from white noise to sinusoidal sounds)” and the “re-establishment,” now framed within a wider acoustical context, “of the ideas of consonance and dissonance as well as modulations.”¹ The spectral fascination with varying levels of harmonic tension and the incorporation of sonorities ranging from unisons and overtone chords to complex clusters is found in Sammoutis's

music along with the kind of dense and vividly coloured musical textures that one might associate with the music of Helmut Lachenmann, including a wide range of extended playing techniques.² *Secret Garden* (2018) for a “Pierrot plus percussion” sextet (performed elegantly by members of Klangforum Wien) illustrates this combination particularly well: complex and virtuosic textures animate a succession of audible pitch centres, some (like the initial G) largely hidden or masked by an active and chromatic surface, others (like the D heard near the middle of the piece, from 2:34) more explicit and later even grounded by a powerful bass. The intricate surface is one way that Sammoutis’s composition echoes the artwork of Arshak Sarkissian, which Sammoutis cites as his inspiration. *Secret Garden*’s striking virtuosity of instrumental gesture is tied to a sensibility for harmony and timbre (and the threshold between the two).

The most recent of the five compositions, *In Darkness* (2022), was commissioned by the Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart and Amsterdam-based bass clarinetist Gareth Davis as part of a project to encourage research and understanding of Parkinson’s disease.³ This unusual assignment led Sammoutis to create a setting for five voices and bass clarinet of the anonymous text of the song “In Darkness Let Me Dwell” (1610) by John Dowland (1563–1626). A classical guitarist by training, Sammoutis describes a long familiarity with Dowland’s lute songs and a particular affinity with this setting’s “deep melancholy.” The opening seconds are timbrally arresting: the bass clarinet’s breathy fluttetongues and multiphonics unfold over an ethereal backdrop featuring *bouche fermée* voice, air sounds, and harmonicas muted with a handkerchief for an “extremely high undefined sound.” This unexpected but effective combination is the first indication of the originality and care with which timbres are melded throughout the piece. Sonic techniques include “kulning” (Scandinavian herding calls), overtone singing,

a range of different vibratos, and singing or blowing into corrugated plastic tubes which aim the sound or are whirled above the head for an airy effect. On the bass clarinet, Davis has a shifting relationship to the ensemble, sometimes reinforcing its texture, sometimes standing out as a soloist with explosive scales and punctuations. While Sammoutis follows the poetic text throughout, explicit musical reference to Dowland’s song is rare until the end of the piece, when the distinctive melody of “till death, till death do come” (11:56) is echoed throughout the vocal ensemble. This quote, however, is blurred by shifting Lutosławski-style realignments of the melodic cell and singing through the tubes as the ensemble crescendos to a triple-forte climax. The voices are cut off suddenly and replaced by whirling tubes alone (12:22), an eerie projection of the overtones of an E spectrum setting up a return of the opening line, “In darkness let me dwell.”

The framing of the work as a response to the ravages of Parkinson’s disease brings poignancy to the seventeenth-century text. In his preface to the score, Sammoutis reflects on family members and friends who have suffered from the disease and observes how they may feel imprisoned or entombed, “trapped in a body that no longer responds the way it used to.” In this context, the work’s shifting timbres and sound production techniques, ranging from delicate to forthright, can be heard as a struggle against this restriction and loss. Music theorist Joseph N. Straus has argued that, in its “disruption of traditional notions of beauty,” modernist music has claimed and valorized disability as a fundamental part of its aesthetic compass: “The most characteristic features of musical modernism—fractured forms, immobilized harmonies, conflicting textural layers, radical simplification of means in some cases, and radical complexity and hermeticism in others—can be understood as musical representations of disability conditions.”⁴ Sammoutis’s *Хоропаšia – Echopraxia* (2006) for string sextet, the

earliest of the five works collected here, also addresses aspects of neurological disorder. The psychiatric condition *echopraxia* is a kind of involuntary imitation, often associated with Tourette's syndrome, autism, or schizophrenia. Performed by a string sextet made up of musicians from the Ensemble Modern (Frankfurt am Main), the composition foregrounds the passing of physical gestures between instrumentalists to create complex imitative textures susceptible to quicksilver changes. Imitation and interaction have, of course, always been part of string chamber music, but the metaphor of echopraxia rethinks them in a new dynamic. While the work starts with textures involving all six string players, they eventually break into fragile subgroups that seem to compete with one another to take over the full ensemble. Moments of stasis (completely absent at first but emerging and becoming longer as the piece progresses) may change entirely in an instant as a new gesture cascades across the instruments. The string quartet *Πίες – Rhymes* (2012) is similarly virtuosic, gestural, and rich in diverse timbres, an acknowledgement perhaps of the expertise of the Arditti Quartet (to whom the work is dedicated) in extended string techniques. Individual sections of the work seem to be free-standing timbral miniatures, often (like *Echopraxia*) premised on the “processes of multiplication” (as described by Salvatore Sciarrino)⁵ The composer’s deep engagement with timbre is also evident in the album’s three-movement final work, *Engravings* (2013) for large ensemble. The outer movements, “Chalcography” and “Xylography / Lithography” refer to the materials used in traditional engraving methods (copper, wood, and stone respectively). Talking about the material of a sounding body is, scholars have observed, one of the principal ways we describe timbre⁶ “Chalcography” begins with an intense texture that evokes the hardness and malleability of metal, constantly transforming but harmonically fixated on the single pitch G. In the last movement,

there is a shift in timbral focus from the drums, bowed strings, and marimba (all suggesting the materiality of wood) to a “cooler,” “harder” timbre with extensive use of the brass, metallic percussion, and pianos, culminating in a fading overtone chord over a lingering bass G.

Marco Fusi, Charles Deluga, Lei Liang

Lei Liang: Six Seasons

Kairos, 0022054KAI, October 2024

Mivos Quartet

Lei Liang: Six Seasons

New World Records, NW80840, June 2023

Two recent CDs—by Marco Fusi and the Mivos Quartet—offer alternative versions of a recent composition by Lei Liang (b. 1972), *Six Seasons* (2022). The work is unusual in its straddling of the categories of electroacoustic, mixed, and improvised music: what the composer calls the “living score” of the work is a collection of curated recordings emerging from an extensive collaboration with oceanographer Joshua Jones of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at

