

Ross Daly: "I've always seen music as something we learn with other people"

By Victoria Charalambous

The Irish multi-instrumentalist, composer, teacher and creator of the term "contemporary modal music" talks to "A" about how the village of Houdetsi became a crossroads for musicians from all over the world, his "instrument-centered" approach and his quartet's performances at "Half Note" (21-23/1).

In the summer you celebrated forty years of the Labyrinth Music Workshop. How did Houdetsi become a meeting point for artists from all over the world? "

Labyrinth" started in 1982 in Heraklion, Crete. In its first form we were a group of young people looking for new sounds through traditions that came from the wider area of modal musical idioms. This area is very large, extending from northwest Africa to the western provinces of China. In 1999, an old friend of mine from my years in Chania, Roussos Kypriotakis, was elected mayor in the mountainous region of Heraklion prefecture. This municipality was small, but it carried a very weighty name, as it included the village of Nikos Kazantzakis. So, the mayor felt an obligation to put special emphasis on culture and at the same time I wanted to leave Athens where I was living at the time and return to Crete. What made Houdetsi a meeting point was the very nature of our work at Labyrinth, as it is international rather than local in nature. We brought some of the most important musicians of modal music, not only to play a concert, but to spend a whole week in the company of a group of students, sharing knowledge and experiences. For many of our students it was the only way they could have such an experience.

On what vision was this musical community created?

I have always seen music as something we learn together with other people who feel the same love for it as we do. Of course, different people have different preferences in music, but in essence we all recognize that music is one and that it is bigger than each and any of us. No one will know all of its "secrets" and so the best we can do is to help each other get as far as each of us can. "Labyrinth" is a space where we all share our knowledge, our visions and our love for music. It is that simple and the whole concern of those of us who organize it all is to maintain that very simplicity and, believe me, that takes a lot of effort and hard work. Often things of this type, which start very simply as something that meets a real need, along the way become loaded with unnecessary and even irrelevant things and lose their way. That's why

keeping it simple is probably our top concern. With the term "community" I would certainly agree. For this very reason we chose a village and not an urban center as our location.

You have also dedicated much of your work to saving traditional musical instruments.

Ever since I can remember I have been fascinated by musical instruments. They are living organisms and in each of them there is a whole world that invites me to discover it. As an "instrument-centered" person, whenever I wanted to engage with a particular musical tradition, it was necessary for me to get to grips with an instrument, usually a stringed one. It was never enough for me to deal only theoretically with a musical idiom. I have always needed an instrument as a means of learning its music. So, as an "instrumental-centered" person, I wandered into several different traditions and concerned myself with many different instruments. I can say that the instruments themselves are among my most important teachers.

What do you find to be the essence of the Cretan musical idiom?

Every musical tradition is directly related to the natural elements of the area from which it originates. Cretan music is mostly a music that originates from the Cretan countryside and thus, in its original form, reflects the very nature of that area. Cretan music today, however, has been urbanized in a somewhat awkward way and this has resulted in it becoming distorted and, unfortunately to a large extent, losing its way rather. I feel particularly fortunate to have even caught the "tail-end" of another much more substantial era of Cretan music in which the music with the natural environment and the way of life of the people perfectly matched. Today, unfortunately, I cannot say that the same is true. Both the natural environment itself and the music are being altered in an ugly way that results mainly from a "modern" and very superficial way of life that has now been adopted by the whole world as the legitimate standard.

Of all your collaborations over the years, which has been the most defining?

Each of these collaborations was (and is) a unique and unforgettable experience and, frankly, it is not possible for me to put them on a scale and evaluate them comparatively. I have been very fortunate to have been given many opportunities to work with many very rare and special musicians. From each of them I learned valuable things that defined my own path in music and in life in general. I can only feel immense gratitude towards all of them.

How do you write music today? Is it a solitary process or something you share with your partners?

Composition is not something that is not confined to a specific time-frame. Rather, it is an open-ended process that has different stages. I might write a piece that is quite specific and seemingly complete. But when we work on it together with my colleagues, ideas always emerge that usually significantly enrich it and sometimes change it radically. It would be completely foolish of me to stick to the original form of the piece exactly as I first thought of it and not be open to the ideas and suggestions of my colleagues. Each piece of music is something alive that has its own course in life. It may start with a certain person but its evolution certainly does not stop there. In the case of my own compositions, apart from myself and my direct collaborators, other musicians have performed them from time to time who I sometimes don't even know. They often have very beautiful ideas that I haven't thought of and which become an important part of the piece's journey through time.

Any record plans for the future?

Recording as we knew it no longer exists, and there's no point in fooling ourselves by repeating practices from past decades. First of all, recorded music is no longer a marketable product. Of course, if we want to be honest, we have to admit that it never had any particular economic benefit except for those who we call "commercial artists". I have detached the concept of recorded work from any economic considerations. I take it for granted that it will cost me to implement it, rather than that I will have some financial gain. As strange as this may sound, I like that because it means that what I record will seek to appeal only to the ears and hearts of my listeners and not to their pockets. For some time now I have been preparing many recordings, which will be included in a book that will be published in 2023

What quartet will you play with at "Half Note"?

Joining me in these performances will be Kelly Thoma (Lyra), Pavlos Spyropoulos (double bass), and Bijan Chemirani (percussion). All three have been my partners for many years and on many levels. Kelly Thomas, in addition to being my wife, is also the person who knows my entire repertoire much better than I do. We have been playing together every day for over 20 years and she participates in all my ensembles. She has created her own sound and compositional work and, apart from my personal fondness for her, I believe she is one of the best musicians I know. Pavlos Spyropoulos has also been working with me for many

years and is a particularly important partner of ours at the Labyrinth Music Workshop as he is the conductor of the Mito Orchestra which is based at Labyrinth. Bijan Chemirani is the son of Djamchid Chemirani from Iran who, in addition to being one of the foremost musicians of his homeland, has been a very valuable collaborator and personal friend of mine for over 30 years. I met Bijan as a young teenager and have seen him develop into a master musician of immense talent and range. Also with Bijan we count 25 years of working together.

Who will be the guest musicians you will play with on these nights?

On Saturday evening (21/1) Vassilis Rakopoulos will be with us with his guitar. Vassilis cannot be easily classified into any specific genre of music. Of course, he has origins and studies in the area of jazz, but he himself has a much wider range as he is a free and restless spirit who sees music with a very open mind and with a strong interest in new experiences. On Sunday's program (22/1) Taxiarchis Georgoulis will be with us on the oud. Taxiarchis, although very young, has developed into one of the best oud masters that I have heard. We have been playing together for several years now during which time he has also been teaching at the Labyrinth Music Workshop. On Monday (23/1) we will be joined by Giorgos and Nikos Papaioannou with violin and cello. Giorgos and Nikos are brothers and are among our closest and dearest partners and friends. Both have a very wide musical range and wherever they participate they give a very distinct and special color and sound. Both of them, in addition to being top instrumentalists, are excellent composers.