

Approaching (Ch)orality: *Agamemnon* (Theatre Organisation of Cyprus, 2021).

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Abstract:

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* was THOC's (Theatre Organisation of Cyprus) first-ever production in 1971 and the play was staged again in 2021, as part of the celebrations marking the organisation's 50th anniversary. The author was part of the creative team as composer and musical director. The article aims to unpack the process of the practice research project and especially considers how the notion of (ch)orality -critical and process-oriented- can help us re-engage with notions of community, identity, and political responsibility in a contemporary staging of Greek tragedy.

It can also be read in conjunction with the sound-paper 'Aurality and (ch)orality in the sonic world of *Agamemnon* (State Theatre of Cyprus, 2021)' which includes recorded excerpts from the choric parts discussed here. (Audio paper submitted for the hybrid conference: Theatre Sound (as) Collaboration. Distributed creations, shared agencies).

Keywords: Greek chorus, polysemic aurality/orality, ritual, politics, contemporary staging, Greek tragedy, choral voice, sonic dramaturgy.

Introduction: Contextual and Methodological Framework.

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* was THOC's (Theatre Organisation of Cyprus/ State theatre of Cyprus) first-ever production in 1971 and the play was staged again in 2021 as part of the celebrations marking the organisation's 50th anniversary. Translated in modern Greek by Nikoletta Frintzila, the tragedy was directed, for the first time in THOC's history of summer productions, by a female director, Lea Maleni.

The Practice Research seeks to deepen our understanding of the Greek chorus in contemporary stagings, examining its complex associations with ritual, community, and democracy. Based on the proposition that 'the choral' forms an indispensable tool in re-imagining the 'tragic',¹ the project aims to re-activate the choral as an alternative way of pursuing a resonance with a contemporary social context and especially our experience of polity and citizenry. The notion of chorality is introduced and applied as a critical process as well as a creative practice. While the investigation centres around my work as composer and musical director, in this instance, the interdisciplinary nature of the project lies in its attempt to bring together several fields of analysis, including performance studies and classics and drawing from voice studies, composition, and music literature. In as much as the focus lies in the sonic/oral/aural dimensions of the work, I have used the term (ch)orality to highlight this emphasis, distinguishing it from other dimensions associated with the performing chorus.

A staging of a Greek tragedy, in the Greek context particularly, is always part of the ongoing debate between the 'traditionalist' and the more 'iconoclastic' and/or experimental approaches. The Epidaurus Festival has been considered central to developments, serving as a 'testing ground' that, in recent years, has sparked debates, conflicts, and intense reactions. As Sidiropoulou notes, 'this heated debate among critics [...] is usually centred around the legitimacy of 'experimentation' versus what are considered 'traditional' readings. How far does one go before they are accused as not understanding the genre enough or not respecting it?' (2018:837). From the theatrical 'epicentre' of Epidaurus and its complex mythologising resonances, the debate expands to a lesser or greater degree to the diasporic and ethnic/national 'peripheries'.

Rhetorics of universality, timelessness, authenticity and 'origins' that have pervaded analysis of (Greek) classics form part of the mythologising nature of the work. Margherita Laera suggests that the myth of the simultaneous birth of democracy and theatre is crucial to these approaches since 'as Nicholas Ridout has demonstrated it "is a persistent narrative which seeks to present theatre and 'democracy' as unanimously promoting the construction of community and the elimination of conflict, disagreement and resistance in society"' (2013: 211). Through her analysis and exemplification in case studies Laera asks: 'While performance remains a working site for negotiating our being-in-common, the principal challenge for those theatre-makers wishing to confront Greek tragedy is: how might it be possible to present it as other, or simultaneously familiar and foreign? How can performance acknowledge and subvert these mythologies?' (pp. 30-31). Alternative approaches and auteur re-imaginings have enriched the ways practitioners and scholars have approached the texts.²

¹ This is an argument I have previously made regarding Jan Fabre's work in Rodosthenous (2017). The choral element manifests in distinct but interconnected ways within these two highly contrasting approaches. Drawing on the Deleuzian concepts of deterritorialisation and minorisation, in '*Prometheus Landscape II: [De]territorialisation of the Tragic and Transgressive Acts of Arson*', I argued that "Fabre reimagines the choral aspect of tragedy in a way that permeates, saturates, and expands the performance into a choral acoustic/visual landscape," a landscape that offers "a contemporary experience of the tragic as a new, transgressive, constitutive, and affirmative in-between." This current exploration builds on that earlier analysis of Fabre's iconoclastic authorship, despite the significant differences in aesthetic and directorial approaches to the classics between the two cases.

² A very few indicative examples include Sampatakakis, Sidiropoulou, Rodosthenous, Zavros, Harrop, Laera, Ridout, Hall, Decreus, among others.

Adaptations and auteur directorial approaches have often radically diverted from the originals in ways that are politically and performatively productive and subversive.³

Based on the results of a European Funded research project, *The Values of Ancient Greek Drama and Theatre in Space and Time: The Present of the values*, Grammatas et al, suggest that a large number of practitioners and audiences in the Greek context, might be more suspicious of iconoclastic and deconstructive re-contextualisations, when they appear to disregard the text completely:

Within this framework, the concept of 'tragedy' is affected by the deconstructive and iconoclastic mindset that has become widespread. The supposed 'subversion' or 'difference' is not based, as it should be, on a corresponding reading of the text, i.e., an original, even revolutionary interpretative contribution to the analysis and understanding of some of its basic parameters (characters, conflicts, relationships, dramatic situations, ideology) [...] Instead, it often resorts to the easy solution of impressing and visual degradation, within which 'tragedy' inevitably loses its content, its reason for being.

(Grammatas et al, 2023: 16)

According to the study, one of the most important characteristics of the works valued by directors and critics and taken into consideration in the evaluation of contemporary stagings is the 'the composition of content and form' (ibid, p.80, p.109).

While far from 'archaeological', Maleni's directorial strategy aimed to delve into a deep understanding of the tragic text, to explore its 'genetic code', conversing with traditions of staging, and to open the space for a reverberation with the contemporary world. This approach, of course, did not reject the possibility of 'the construction of a self-contained universe on stage that bears its own rules and celebrates its own semiology' (Sidiropoulou, 2015: 32). Although the project took place within a state theatre organisation (carrying the additional significance of its anniversary), this also did not exclude the potential for experimentation and/or subversion. Stephe Harrop also makes this point borrowing from Mouffe's 'Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices', where she 'challenges the view that "traditional forms of art cannot be critical" and that "artists should avoid traditional artistic institutions" [...]: 'To believe that existing institutions cannot become the terrain of contestation is to ignore the tensions that always exist within a given configuration of forces and the possibility of acting in a way that subverts their form of articulation' (Mouffe in Harrop, 2018: 109) .

In an attempt to overcome what appears to be a binary between disciplinary and theoretical approaches -specifically the literary vs performance-centric and traditionalist vs experimentalist perspectives- the investigation seeks to introduce a concept that resonates across these divides.⁴ The overall methodological framework was established in alignment with the directorial approach: The PaR starts from a textual and literary analysis of the work which allows a discussion of the dialectic between 'form and content' to drive the definition and a developing 'system of chorality' in compositional and performance practice. This system of (ch)orality is conceived as a dialogue between the textual (original/translation/literary analysis), the performative (including performance traditions and conventions) and the contextual (the way it converses with the historical and sociopolitical context of the staging). The investigation includes a series of sub-questions:

³ Sampatakakis' meticulously articulated discussion of authorial innovations as legitimate 'cultural usurpations' is indicative of this more iconoclastic prism of analysis.

⁴In doing so, the investigation also acknowledges that the 'text' under consideration is not confined to Aeschylus's original writing or even its translation – already always an act of 'betrayal' and 'liberation'. As Goldhill argues, 'all translators are traitors, but some traitors turn out to be liberators who let us recalibrate what matters and see the world from a startlingly new perspective' (2015: 7). The multiple layers of 'ghosting' (Carlson 2003), in the way past performances, developing traditions and interpretations haunt the piece, complicate any attempt to disentangle the 'text' from the ways it has been understood, shaped and attached to the construction of personal, national, ethnic, civic, artistic and political identities over time.

- How can a more complex and nuanced polysemy and multi-layered approach to (ch)orality help us evade reductive, singular and unifying/universalising 'self-serving mythologies' of the chorus identity as a homogenised form of a collective *demos*?
- How can we use (ch)orality to activate a mode of aural attention which overcomes oversimplified catechistic/didactic approaches, but also builds from the semiotic morphology of the text utilised?
- How does the notion of (ch)orality, help re-imagine (theatrically, critically, and politically) the relationship between the individual and the collective?

Chorus as a 'problem' and/or an opportunity in re-imagining the classics.

The chorus presents a significant dramaturgical challenge for modern interpretations of Greek tragedy, reflected in a more recent prevalent tendency, observed internationally, to either significantly reduce the number of its members or eliminate the choral odes completely. Over the years, the chorus has invariably been seen as inconvenient, superfluous, and aesthetically and politically incongruent with contemporary sensibilities.⁵ Audiences conditioned by the aesthetics of realism and verisimilitude find the chorus's unified voice and commentary to be intrusive or distracting from the individual-driven narrative. Laera suggests that the chorus creates an incongruity on an affective level 'whereby the collective figure, especially if speaking as one, is perceived as awkward, generating a sense of unease, but also as intensely fascinating due to its ability to encapsulate the *vox populi* and the participating *demos*' (2013: 132).

The unanimous and homogenised collective has not only accrued discordant political resonances with totalitarian and dehumanising regimes which have plagued history (on both sides of the political spectrum) but also feels at odds with the liberal 'democracies', capitalist and subsequently neoliberalist economies that have developed in the globalised environment, where individualism and market-driven autonomy are emphasised.⁶ At the same time, the chorus has been associated with the power of the unified chanting collectives in protests and political demonstrations, which have questioned and performatively subverted structural and systemic inequalities and regimes of power. Laera exemplifies how several theatre-makers have dealt with 'the sense of awkwardness [which] has given rise to a set of performative and dramatic strategies to cope with what remains, fundamentally, an uninvited guest', (p. 132) through a variety of rather polarised approaches to the collective figure, but also underlines how productive this awkwardness can be: 'any staging of the chorus should [...] engage critically and creatively with this uneasiness and the multifaceted opportunities it offers in performance' (2013: 63).

In her own thesis, Magdalena Zira (2017a) also attempts to move beyond the formulation of 'chorus as a problem' and re-instates the chorus as the locus of opportunities for critical and political engagement with the classics, especially in relation to notions and understandings of 'community'.⁷ She also provides a very clear picture into how the engagement with the chorus has been markedly different in the broader Greek context, as opposed to the rest of the West.

Greeks and Cypriots often feel that they are at an advantage in our treatment of the chorus. There seems to be no awkwardness here, but a tradition of great achievements, since the beginning of the history of well-funded, regular revivals of Greek drama that started in the 1940s and were supported by the political

⁵ For detailed discussions of how practitioners, scholars and philosophers engaged with the Greek chorus, see among others Laera (2011 and 2013) and Zira (2017), Fischer-Lichte (2013), Eastman (2013), Hall (2010), etc.

⁶ Building on Miranda Joseph, Laera suggests that the situation is further complex in as much as 'an insistence on the notion of community is also typical of capitalism, and specifically of advanced capitalist democracies such as those of Europe and the United States' (p.87). 'Capitalism's relation to community is highly ambiguous: on the one hand competition and individualism are encouraged, and on the other conformism, identification with corporate values and brands are essential to its survival' (p.88).

⁷ She also focuses on this in her Chapter in Rodosthenous' (2017) volume, 'Directing Greek Tragedy As A Ritual: Mystagogy, Religion And Ecstasy'.

establishment. Audience members and actors in Greece and Cyprus have a strong perception of what the chorus is, and seldom feel that its presence should be challenged (2017a: 27).

Zira suggests that 'the greatest problem for the contemporary practitioner is the shifting voice of the chorus within the same play' (2017a: 45); this 'essential dynamic of the chorus' [...] 'to shift between a more naturalistic engagement with the action, and a more abstract reflection of it' (Goldhill 2007: 78) is encapsulated and expressed differently in the two main foundational traditions of staging developed in Greece, during the 20th century: Dimitris Rondiris, influenced by Max Reinhardt, established a German-inspired tradition focusing on lyrical choruses with choreography, symmetry, and poetic elements. Karolos Koun, founder of Theatro Technis, broke from this style, and established a form of a Greek Folk Expressionism, introducing improvisation and psychological depth to the chorus, drawing inspiration from folk rituals and the Greek Orthodox liturgy. Koun's approach, once revolutionary, also became part of theatrical tradition.

From the late 1980s, there was a marked shift towards further incorporating folk elements, into the visual, aural, and choreographic aspects of tragic performances;⁸ 'the folk element, [...] in some ways and for some people, became the next step in a narrative of self-definition and search for identity' (Zira: 218). These theatrical traditions became deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of Greek audiences, who came to embrace them—almost through a ritualised 'suspension of disbelief'—as the closest approximation to 'original' practices. The heightened language of a widely accepted 'tragic idiom' along with a ritualistic 'choral' style became established also because they infiltrated the pedagogical and training actor systems in Greece. Alongside folk dance, the Byzantine and traditional lament tradition for the music, 'choreographers trained generations of performers in a combination of physical stylisation and emotional expressiveness, and participation in a chorus became an almost necessary step in actors' training' (p.47).⁹ Since the 1990s, traditional elements and approaches have fallen out of favour. However, even as the theatrical establishment continues its 'search for self-definition' and 'often looking to the West for answers' (Zira: 219), the echoes of these strong traditions persist. They remain central to the ongoing debates surrounding the staging of tragedy, especially regarding the handling of the chorus.

The modern Greek 'success story' of the chorus is now at a turning point. We are currently going through a period in which traditional aesthetic forms and the ideologies that they represent are challenged. It is a painful process because it involves stripping down comfortable convictions and critically facing personal and collective mythologies.

(Zira, 2017a: 244)

⁸Artists such as Kostas Tsianos, and Lydia Koniordou (at Thessaliko Theatre) as well as Sotiris Hatzakis, and Nicos Karathanos among others effectively drew on these folk traditions.

⁹ Arguing the limitations of the Stanislavskian approach and the application of psychological realism in the approach to the Greek tragedy, Dunbar and Harrop (2018), suggest alternative approaches that allow an engagement with our sense of music, rhythm, sound, breath, etc. This non psychological approach reverberates with most more traditional approaches in the Greek context though several newer and more avant-garde directors have pushed in other directions in the last few years. Suggesting that a Greek tragedy should be read as a 'performance score' or even as a 'musical score', Dunbar and Harrop argue that 'although most English-speaking actors will probably encounter the texts of tragedy via translation, they will nonetheless fail to release the full power and energy of an ancient play without a deep excavation of the drama's musical structure' (p.82). Discussing the 'musicality of the chorus' specifically, they note that the dramatists 'developed complex musical/dramatic structures involving the chorus – though different ancient playwrights exploited this element of tragic dramaturgy to different contexts. Musicality dominates the plays of Aeschylus mainly due to the dramatic importance of their choruses (Scott, 1984), who often [...] function as the protagonists of their plays' (p.88).

From Chorus to Chorality: (Re)defining (Ch)orality.

Chorality is the means whereby we allow ourselves the collective hallucination of collectivity. [...] Perhaps chorality is intrinsically part of mass experience because it is a means of bringing the experience of the mass to audibility.

(Connor: 2016, pp.20-21)

Beyond its connection to the Greek chorus, the notion of chorality has been appropriated and discussed in the extensively theorised field of choral music. In his endeavour, Steven Connor expands on its original definition, by considering the 'broader ecology of joint vocalizations' and uses chorality to name 'collective voice acts' beyond the confines of that field. Examples of these include very diverse categories such as 'prayer, children's games, formalized learning processes, and statements of fealty ('I pledge allegiance to the flag'), along with the chants of protest, demand or celebration found in political and sporting circumstances, the murmurs of pubs, crowds, and cocktail parties'; all 'a kind of semi-willed choric quasi-choation' (p.3). The notion of (ch)orality I am working with borrows from the broader understanding and definition provided by Connor and implements the broad spectrum of voicings that lie 'either above the threshold of joint speech, in the direction of music or below it in the direction of hubbub, murmur, and buzz' (p. 3). These underexplored, hybrid spaces of chorality proved highly productive for re-imagining the tragedy on a sonic level.

In approaching (ch)orality, I am also hoping to borrow the distinction Anne Brannys and Edith Kollath make 'between the chorus (as form or formation) and the choral (as a self-critical process) [that] helps to understand its mechanisms' (2023: 50). The approach to (ch)orality here does not aim to provide a unidimensional narrative of community-building that sees tragedy as an idealised version of democratic engagement and an exercise in creating a sense of 'unproblematised' belonging, perpetuating the mythologising narratives which several scholars caution against – including Laera and Ridout.¹⁰ Instead, my use of the term (as a multi-layered, polyphonic performative and critical process) is more akin to Harrop's argument which urges us to consider 'the need for politically engaged re-performance of ancient drama to move beyond comforting narratives of tragedy as inherently community building, or cosily constitutive of social and political unanimity' (2018: 100). Building on Laera and Ridout, Harrop bases her analysis on Mouffe's agonistic theory and 'the premise that "pluralist democracy" depends upon "the legitimation of conflict"' (p.102). *Agamemnon* is especially fertile in this investigation based on several sources, including Fletcher's analysis of the *Oresteia* in relation to Bakhtinian polyphony, which offered a departure point in the framing of the practical investigation (see following section).

The overall aim is to allow the performative (ch)orality to become a catalyst in reconsidering the relationship of the chorus to the ideas of community and participation. In redefining (ch)orality away from the resonances of a mythologised series of connections between tragedy, democracy and community building, the project aims to conceive 'chorality' as an 'agonistic' war-machine: one that starts from the content and form of the text(s), finds resonances between them, but even more importantly, tries to find opportunities where those resonant loci can transmute into spatial, vocal, musical and sonoric performatives, which spread and infect the construct of mythologising traditions and expose them; not in a didactic and obviously presentational and clearly 'distancing' manner, but in a way that invites the audience to the centre of the 'conflict'.

¹⁰ Laera uses several works by Jean-Luc Nancy as a point of reference and a 'warning against essentializing mythologies about community and identity that are so often uncritically attached to revivals and adaptations of 'classical' theatre' (p. 23).

(Ch)orality 1: The voice(s) of the chorus in the tragic text: The chorus in *Agamemnon*.

Composed in 458 BC, during a time of political instability and shifting power dynamics in Athens, *Agamemnon* engages with the themes of leadership, justice, and the corrosive effects of power. Forming the first part of the Aeschylean trilogy of *Oresteia*, it is often interpreted as a critique of the destructive consequences of pride and vengeance in both familial and political spheres and more broadly 'as an allegory of the birth of Athenian democracy, a metaphor of the end of matriarchy, and an investigation into intergenerational culpability' (Laera: 102). The tragedy set just after the conclusion of the Trojan War, centres around Agamemnon's return to Argos. His wife, Clytemnestra, ultimately avenges the sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia, to the gods by killing Agamemnon and Cassandra, his captive Trojan princess and prophetess. In the ancient play, the chorus is composed of the elders of Argos, who reflect anxiously on the fate of the city, as they witness the unravelling of their leader's house.¹¹

As I delved into what many scholars deem as the 'most complex persona of all tragic choruses' (Fletcher, 2014: 62), my practical investigation started to revolve around the function of the chorus and how it could inform our understanding of the elusive notion of (ch)orality. Aeschylean choruses are of a special nature that differentiates them from the other two major tragedians, primarily because in Sophocles and Euripides, the chorus rarely adopts an active role in the dramatic conflict. As Schein discusses, '[i]n Aeschylus [...] the role of choruses is more diverse: the so-called 'protagonist choruses' of the *Supplikes* and *Eumenides* act in the manner of a major character, and in other plays too, including *Agamemnon*, the chorus sometimes intervene, or conspicuously choose not to intervene in the action at critical moments' (2009: 378). The chorus' dramatically agential role is further complicated as its typically unified voice departs from traditional forms of collective expression:

We do not expect a tragic chorus to be divided in its opinion, but this one is. In the face of disaster, and especially when it needs to make a decision, it fragments into indecision and multiple voices.

(Fletcher, 2014: 62)

One of the most important functions of the dramatic chorus since antiquity was 'a concrete theatrical realisation of a central concern of the [newly founded Athenian] democratic ideology: the constant tension between the individual, the aristocratic hero and the collective, the community, represented by the chorus' (Zira: 156). Goldhill identifies this tension as one of the structuring principles of tragedy (2007: 47). *Agamemnon* forms a useful dramatic example of a dynamic investigation of the mechanics of democratic polity, perhaps even more acutely than other tragedies because the chorus so uniquely departs from more traditional forms of chorality. The political dimension of the tragic text is very much expressed in the paradoxically contradictory nature of the choric 'voice': a form of textual chorality that appears in form and content. In this case, in particular, the 'choral' is not only important insofar as it provides an antithesis to the individual (of the aristocrat/protagonist) but crucially because it incorporates a spectrum of negotiations of individuality within itself.

Judith Fletcher looks at the chorus' text in the *Oresteia* as a particular case of Bakhtin's heteroglossia and discusses the ideas of textual 'polyphony' and 'silence' in relation to tyrannical and democratic regimes. As she indicates, 'studied as a series, the choral odes reveal the increasingly shattered unity of a conventionally unified persona' (p. 57). Polyphony is part of the constitution of the *Agamemnon* chorus, as the first two *stasima* and especially the *parodos* incorporate/interpolate a variety of other people's voices. This strategy, which we might accept as conventional in the function of the chorus (as narrator), 'devolves', according

¹¹ A casting decision was made early on to re-imagine the original all-male chorus into a more diverse representation of the *polis* (in terms of gender, age and disability).

to Fletcher 'into an intrusion of unbidden internalised voices in the third *stasimon*, and finally, as separate voices in the murder scene' (p.62).

In tracing the journey of this 'socially heterogeneous group', Fletcher notices their gradual move through different types of polyphony to their complete silencing in the *exodos*. And while this 'heteroglossia, to use Bakhtin's term, might be freighted with democratic ideals'(p. 57), Fletcher argues that the increasingly fractured and silenced voice of the chorus indicates the effects of a tyrannical regime which Aeschylus parallels and juxtaposes to the discourse afforded through the advanced code of a legal system as expressed in the democratic institution of the Athenian Areopagus (established at the end of the *Eumenides* to resolve the cycle of violence that permeates the trilogy). This is a tragedy deeply engaged with paradigmatic shifts, emerging ideological frameworks, and evolving systems of governance, citizenship, and participation that the Athenian audience was beginning to grapple with. Rather than offering simplistic resolutions, it explores a dynamic process of negotiation, finding its apogee within the tragedy's 'choral' dimension.

The unconventional approach to the collective voice of the chorus which culminates in its fragmented dispersion around the scene of the murder and the inaction in the face of an act of violence, appeared as an opportunity to 'sonically' explore a resonance with the contemporary world surrounding the staging. The feelings of confusion and discombobulation experienced by the Argive chorus under the tyrannical regime did not feel foreign to the ones experienced by citizens of many a contemporary Western democratic state, driven by economies of neoliberalist agendas, the amalgamation of wealth in the hands of the privileged few and the corruption of governments. This sense of alienation also resonated with an audience still cautious and uneasy in the lingering shadows of the pandemic, standing at the threshold of a post-truth world shaped by developing discourse around 'new realities,' critical questions surrounding evolving geopolitical landscapes, borders, refugee identities, and ongoing international conflicts and warfare; like their Athenian counterparts (and the Argive chorus), very much alert to the abuses of power and corruption among the powerful elite especially as engendered in this in-between stage of transitioning: a space filled with internal contradictions and 'acts of justice that are simultaneously acts of injustice' (Schein, 2009: 398). Acknowledging a prevailing waning faith towards and disillusionment with a democratic legal system of justice that fails to hold the people in power accountable for the corruption and misuse of authority, my overall aim was to build a sonic world that centralises that climactic moment and the processes of (ch)orality that build to it, in order to raise questions around citizenry, polity, participation and accountability in our contemporary versions of 'democracy'.

Accordingly, using Fletcher's analysis as a point of departure, the *macro-structure* of the musical dramaturgy is designed to move from homophonic musical textures to increasingly polyphonic ones that gradually build to the moment of the 'climactic' choral silence that ensues at the moment of the murder. 'Silence' was conceived as the aural metaphor for inaction; the only thing that unites the chorus in the moment of an otherwise complete fragmentation: nobody intervenes to stop the murder even if they believe they should.¹² The musical composition engages with the chorus not as a separate, singular and distant commentator (or 'ideal spectator') to the 'main story' of the protagonists but as a polyvocal group that holds the power of an active agent: either as a potential ally to the machine that propagates the corrupted 'state' they so vehemently complain about or as one that unsettles/destabilises/undermines/questions and calls the state out for its impunity.

The tension between the 'individual' and the 'collective' is at the centre of the investigation as the creative process seeks to unearth clues from the text which problematise the expression

¹² In as far as the musical dramaturgy is trying to invite the audience to the heart of the conflict, this moment of silence and inaction at the climax, allows for a fracture, a fissure in the clear separation between the fictional universe and the 'real'; a fracture which is primarily felt viscerally and opens a space of 'crisis': a space that involves an active process of interpretation.

of this relationship in the form of a simplistic binary. As Steven Connor suggests 'there may be an implicit relation between the individual voice and the collective voice it may seem to convoke, such that every individual vocality has a connection to a phantasmal chorality' (p.3). The idea of (ch)orality as an aesthetic and political signifier proved to be at the centre of the text; a system we could borrow from the *morphology* of the text to compose the aural world of the performance.

From Textuality to Aurality.

The Oresteia has been discussed extensively as a particularly complex example of a multi-layered text built on a meticulously crafted system of signification. Goldhill presents a very detailed analysis to argue a clear relationship between content and form at the heart of that system. The correlation functions to establish intricate relationships between the narrative, mechanisms of power and control and the linguistic forms of expression employed. Speeches (and odes) are frequently self-referentially *about* speaking (or singing), often indirectly thematising 'the heuristic gap between signifier and signified, listener and speaker' (Goldhill, 1984: 68).

The trilogy interweaves a variety of textual devices to communicate with the audience: metonymic references, connections to and resonances with mythical fragments and 'omens', various metaphors, riddles, and mantic prophecy, are but a few examples. However, beyond those devices of 'cryptic' or often esoteric language that relate to the 'mythical microtext', there is an abundance of lines/sentences, Goldhill argues, which are built through tautological constructions, intentionally evading a clear meaningful argument, explanation or thesis. Sentences constructed based on this idea of 'narrative tautology' (p.33) tend to be built on cyclical structures and evade the arrival at the desired *telos* or a clarity in meaning; they are impregnated with possibility, which is open to interpretation, almost hovering with the spectre of potential signifiers to be attached to. While this inability to take a clear stance connects dramaturgically to the fear and apprehension experienced by the chorus in confronting their predicaments, it also creates a rather special form of a semiotic system: a rather multi-layered 'open text' which connects to an active process of interpretation based on various types of 'proof'/*τεκμαρ* (evidence). This textual system provided opportunities for 'musicalisation' (especially through the cyclical structures it utilises), but also for a form of (ch)orality that very clearly aligns with a more postmodern, post-Barthian approach to semiosis: a sonic dramaturgy that invites the audience to an act of co-authorship.

The idea of 'evidence' will become increasingly central dramatically in *Agamemnon*.¹³ The reluctance of the chorus to be convinced by aural evidence is interspersed throughout the text but is especially poignant first in their inability to understand and believe Cassandra's prophetic pronouncements, before she knowingly accepts her fate and enters the palace to join Agamemnon, and even more so their incredulity to the actual sounds of the double-murder that consequently takes place inside. In fact, at this climactic moment, questioning the credibility of 'aural' evidence as an inadmissible form of witnessing and knowing is used by some chorus members as a reasoning for the subsequent inaction. During the murders,

[s]ome are for breaking into the palace, others want to send for help, and others to form a committee to assess the situation. One of them expresses his opinion in the form of a vote: "I vote [psêphizomai] for some sort of action" (Ag. 1351). Another determines that *groans are not sufficient evidence* (tekmêrioisin, 1366) *that the king is dead*.

(Fletcher, p. 66, my emphasis)

¹³ But also, the *Oresteia* trilogy; Fletcher also capitalises on the importance of *tekmêria* in her argument connecting the Argive chorus with the silent jurors in the *Eumenides*.

Following Lebeck who suggests that the 'movement from enigmatic utterance to clear statement, from riddle to solution dominate the structure of the *Oresteia*' (1971: 2), Fletcher also notices that the connections between different parts of the trilogy 'are [...] part of a dynamic semiotic system', wherein 'images from the symbolic register gradually move from abstraction to concrete reality' (p.61).

This unsettling undecidability/ 'indecidability' (Lehmann, 2006:101) that accompanies navigating the aural layer of the dramatic universe in the search for 'proof', is an inherent aspect of the text, present in both its content and form. The morphological idiosyncrasies of the text were embraced in the effort to create an independent auditory semiotics; an extension of an invitation to the audience to attend to the sonic world of the performance: to listen differently, to experience and decipher it as an equally significant and affective layer in the polyphony of theatrical means. This pursuit for effectuating an 'aural attention', linked to George Home-Cook's notion of actively 'stretching' (2015: 2), also resonates with Harrop's agonistic aim to avoid 'a mood of unanimity or closure' but instead 'acknowledge and accentuate the open-ended questioning provoked by ancient plays,' as well as Fisher-Lichte's view (inspired from Peter Arnott) of 'Athenian audiences being trained to "listen conflictually"' (Fischer-Lichte in Harrop: 112).

The space opened between the 'abstract' and the 'concrete' in the intricate textual mechanics of 'chorality' in the tragedy, becomes a central driver in the next step of building the sonic world and the aesthetics and politics of a polysemic aural/orality.

(Ch)orality in practice: *Stasimon* 2.

The second choral ode explicitly exemplifies the idea of bringing together form and content, abstract and concrete, sound image and meaning, which helps with the transition from textuality to aurality. The chorus opens the *stasimon* by considering the nature of naming in language:

τις ποτ'ωνομαζεν ωδε;

The question, which I set in a slow homophonic texture as an introduction to the rest of the ode, appears in the modern Greek translation as:

Ποιος μοίρασε άραγε έτσι τα ονόματα και σ' όλα βγαίνουν αληθινά;
(Who handed out names in such a way that they come true?)

The chorus pose the rhetorical question to highlight a connection between Helen's name and the disaster for which she is held responsible.¹⁴ In the original text, explains Goldhill, '[t]he reason for this perfect naming [...] is a punning etymology, 'έλενας έλανδρος ελεπτόλις'¹⁵ and the resulting 'play on words indicates the use of the signifier as a sound image linked now to one, now to another, signified' (Goldhill, p.60). The modern Greek translation explores a similar punning connection between Ελένη (Helen) with ανελέητη (merciless).

In setting this *stasimon* to music, I pushed the aural connection to an extreme: I slowly built an ostinato of a developing contrapuntal/polyphonic choral texture, aligned with the aggressively accusatory tone of the ode and taking inspiration from the meter and polyrhythmic structures of a pyrrhichios dance.¹⁶ This ostinato was composed vocally with two

¹⁴ As Goldhill notices, this instance of 'naming' is rather important as Helen has not been named thus far in the tragedy, only referred to as 'woman'.

¹⁵ Translated as 'Helen, destroyer of men, destroyer of cities'.

¹⁶ A dance connected with war in Ancient Greece which is believed to have evolved in more contemporary traditional folkdances performed in Greece today. Pontian 'warrior dances, [and especially] Sérta, are derived from ancient war dances called

main aims: to introduce a variety of words and short phrases that sonorically connect Helen's name to the merciless disaster caused, but also meta-linguistically to the 'act of speaking', 'naming' or 'telling stories' and 'spreading rumours'.¹⁷

Νενελεει, ναι ναι λει, ναι λει ναι ναι, λεν'Ελενη, Λεν[Ε]Λενε, Λεν'ανηλη, Λεν'ανελετη

(Nenelei, ne ne lei, ne lei ne ne, len Eleni, len[E]lene, Len anilei, Len aneleiti (they say; you merciless woman, Eleni))

The motifs in the developing ostinato work at the level of semiosis, but also the level of the (more abstract) folk-like musical sound the style borrows from. In their repetition and polyphonic layering, in fact, the goal was to use the choral utterances to create a sonic/vocal space of oscillation between abstract and concrete. 'Νενελέι' and 'ναι ναι λεί', are homophones in Greek, but the first spelling suggests an abstract folk vocalisation, whereas the second a series of words; in transliteration: 'yes, yes, he/she says'. Treating the vocal utterance in this state between the verbal and non-verbal, allows it to remain in a state of flux: 'its very constitution as floating signifier *undercuts as it makes possible* each attempt to reduce the over-determination, the openness' (Goldhill, p.78).¹⁸ This 'play' with the sonic categories (on an aesthetic level) is conceived so that it actively unsettles them and deploys the productive space in between them to pose questions around the hierarchies that different types/forms of soundings and voicings potentially pertain to. The space the voice occupies in this enunciation (between language and music) makes it difficult to compartmentalise/categorise in our reception (in terms of semantic and/or affective weight), and this ambiguity offers opportunities to employ the aesthetic articulation to heighten our perception and awareness of what we deem 'significant' and what we do not.

The musical setting utilises the 'by-product' of the modern translation in the acoustically re-iterative 'λένε' ('they say') to aurally bring further attention to the meta-narrative and self-referential idea of the act of speaking/telling/naming and the multitude of meanings re-iterative citations and voicings might attract. The chorus sustains this developing contrapuntal choral ostinato while individual members break in and out of the group to speak the text of the *stasimon*. Fragments of the introductory rhetorical question also resurface, now appearing in three-part harmonies sung by members of the chorus (the 'collective' homophony progressively breaking up into smaller groups). These fragments appear to 'float' rhythmically, as they seem to impose a new meter on top of the established 7/8, and semantically, as in their re-iteration they invite a range of potential meanings: the phrase 'Who handed them out in this way' could refer (beyond the initial 'names'), to the pains, woes, and catastrophes that the chorus recounts throughout the *stasimon*. The further condensed version of the 'refrain' (Ποιός, άραγε, ποιός; Who indeed, who?) could again relate to the metanarrative question that the persistent 'λένε' raises: Who constitutes this implicit 'they' (the subject implied in the verb λένε) who spreads the rumours, recounts stories, names the culprits? Whose authorial voice is embedded in the cyclic voicings of the chorus as they re-iteratively legitimise blaming 'the woman', thus far unnamed in the tragedy?

This choral ode provided a 'way in' the developing musical language for the rest of the stasima. The compositional language constantly plays with the boundaries between semantically concrete and abstract vocalisations (έναρθρη και άναρθρη φωνη) and reveals a variety of relationships between them, possibilities for emergent meanings and affects. The *stasima* where through-composed to create a general sense of entering a 'ritual' spatiotemporal frame [that initially separated them from the more narratively-driven episodes], but also an affective vocal 'overload': a ceaseless, nagging, ever-evolving choral vocality that incorporates complains and accusations that never stop until the moment of crisis, when they appear to be

Pyrhichios, thought to prepare soldiers for war by performing in advance the movements that they would use in combat. [...] Sérra's tempo and movement are particularly aggressive and very physically demanding (Liddle, 2016: 59).

¹⁷ The chorus refers to this; Λέγανε οι παλαιοί, line 750 ('The old folks used to say').

¹⁸ Goldhill on Clytemnestra's 'manipulation of the signifier' in the 'carpet scene'.

ineffectual; a ritualistic form of a constant lamenting murmur which exists in and beyond language, which simmers polyphonically under every word and perhaps allows words and thoughts and arguments to shape from its indistinct 'mass' of quasi-echoic sound as it takes on shapes and 'refrains' that are cited repeatedly – semantically indistinct at the beginning but formulating and surfacing concretely over time. The resulting form of (ch)orality attempts to build on the textual analysis of the sliding signifiers in *Agamemnon* in a way that poses questions around political responsibility, by allowing vocality to further extend the semiotic and affective spectrum of choric expression by tapping into the *choratic*.¹⁹

The developing musical universe is built on a compositional language that mixes minimalism with byzantine influences, diverse traditional elements from Balkan and Middle Eastern modes and *melismas* in order to support the directorial vision of a more geographically open and diachronic space/time rather than a specific 're-topicalisation'. This also allows for the incorporation of improvisatory, and further non-verbal, instrumental-like vocalisations that intend to increasingly blur the lines between voice and instrument, back-ground and foreground, the individual and the collective.

Politics of the in-between; (Ch)orality and instrumenta(li)sion.

The polyphonic instrument, or choral 'hyper-body' (Connor, p.19) that the chorus transforms in for each of the stasima is not an aesthetic 'abstraction' devoid of semantic weight nor of political significance.²⁰ As Alex Nowitz suggests '[t]he more the voice submits to the deterritorialising force of music by offloading the linguistic components of language, the more it becomes a musical instrument' (2021: 135), but '[o]perating beyond linguistic semantics, always implies a political dimension' (2021: p.132).

While I am borrowing from the tradition of a folk-like aural tapestry to build the musical universe of the stasima, the 'instrumentation' is rather unconventional. The instrumental tessitura consists of two main components/colours: A piano track and the soundscape we labelled the 'block of sound'.²¹ Both of these acousmatic sound elements were pre-recorded and emanated from the speakers on stage, in opposition to the live, non-amplified voices of the chorus. 'The block' was composed out of an over-imposition of several recordings of melodicas and accordions (instruments based on breath/air production) to provide a contrapuntal texture to the mechanical, percussive and well-tempered piano sound. The two pre-recorded sound elements together were also envisaged to intentionally parallel (emulate and augment) the spectrum of possibilities produced by the choral voices (i.e., percussive attack and sustained tone). 'The block's' air-sustained drone that microtonally moves (or tunes) in and out of focus created a disorientating feeling. The drone sympathetically resonates with the musical language of the *mirolói* (the lament) and the elements of religious and folk rituals which infuse the choral writing. However, the sound texture of the piano, a rather 'domesticated' polyphonic Western instrument, is rather jarring both in the context of the folk-like sound-world the music borrows from and the open-air theatre context. The alienating quality of the instrumentation here is aurally significant: the rather machinic-sounding piano aims to help further deterritorialise the aggressively percussive choral polyphony into an almost comparable 'instrument'. The choral voices intermingle with the piano and create an assemblage which seeks to both delineate and problematise the separation between the two polyphonic enunciations. The two appear to be part of the same machine.

¹⁹ Referred to here in relation to the notion of 'chora' Julia Kristeva borrows from Plato's *Timaeus*, defined as a 'space' not logically comprehensible- where 'logos'/meaning/language has not quite formed.

²⁰ This fantasy of the collective voice-body produced by the choric voice, is an 'acousmatic' entity separate (or beyond identification) with any of the individuals who produce it, the voice of an 'invisible Man' (sic). It is a 'hyper-body' suggests Connor, with multidimensional political implications relating to its corporeality and materiality both in terms of time and space.

²¹ For a more extended discussion of 'the block' as well as sonic examples, please listen to related audio-paper.

Harrop's proposition of the agonistic spatialisation of the stage and the political implications of that practice, are indicative of our approach to (ch)orality through the (re)deployment of amplification practices.²² She explicates:

Not only the written and spoken texts of plays, but also the spatial dynamics of Athenian tragedy may have been permeated by agonistic principles through which ancient performers were able to embody both the unresolved political struggles of ancient tragic drama and – by extension – the anxieties and uncertainties of their own (p.103).

Further considering the aural space(s) occupied by the resulting (ch)orality on stage, we reconfigured the more conventional stereo placement of the speakers on either side of the orchestra to a singular speaker bundle at the back of the perforated scenographic structure representing the 'palace'. This helped practically with achieving a balance between amplified sound and non-amplified voices, but also suggested beyond the initial significant hierarchy (between amplified and non-amplified), a potential political connection between the two 'instruments'. If the pre-recorded sound of the piano emanates from behind the palace to 'conduct' the live voices of the chorus, perhaps the 'instrumentalisation' of these voices refers to a more significant metaphor about their culpability in the cycle of corruption and power abuse sustained by the 'State'.

(Ch)orality, ritual and political responsibility; legitimising vs. subversive performative re-iterations.

Stasimon 3 is the last choral ode before the climactic murder scene. The chorus expresses fear, confusion and undecidability:

Γιατί, γιατί, συνέχεια σαν μπάστακας, ο φόβος αυτός στην καρδιά μου που νιώθει αλλόκοτο κάτι συνέχεια εδώ, γύρω γύρω με φέρνει, τραγουδάει προφητείες. Ποιος τον κάλεσε; Ποιος τον πλήρωσε; Πού είναι το θάρρος μου;

(Why, why, like a constant burden, this fear lingers in my heart; my heart sensing that something strange is happening here. It circles around me, singing prophecies. Who invited it? Who paid for it? Where is my courage?)

The setting of the choral ode begins, again, with a folk-sounding vocal ostinato *vovaĩ-ana [...thrice] vovaĩ-vavaĩ* (*nonai-ana, nonai-nane*) which lies closer to the abstract end of the signifying spectrum of orality, though also conceived (in its persistent cyclical iteration and metric 'anomaly' in a peculiarly stressed 9/8) as an aurally iconic articulation of the never-ending 'fear' the chorus refers to. By the end of the *stasimon*, (and following the pattern of moving from 'abstract to concrete') the non-verbal vocal motif will also be revealed to echo the final words of the chorus:

Εύχομαι στο τέλος ένα ψέμα να 'ναι.

I hope in the end it will all be revealed as a lie.²³

This ode also makes a significant self-referential statement to 'the act of singing':

Μα εγώ από μέσα μου λέω ένα τραγούδι στενάχωρο για Ερινύες. Η ψυχή μου το λέει, ποιος της το έμαθε;

(But inside me, I sing a sorrowful song about the Furies. My soul sings it—who taught it this song?)

²² Amplification is another point of contention in the yearly arguments elapsing from stagings of classics (especially in relation to the Epidaurus festival), which seem to revolve around issues of authenticity, respect, sacredness etc.

²³ Unless otherwise indicated, all the translations from the modern Greek text into English are mine.

The phrase, connects the act of singing this song of fear to a 'learnt behaviour' and seeks to attribute responsibility to somebody: 'who taught me (my soul) this song?'

Fletcher notices that each one of the odes 'features some kind of gnomic statement about the nature of justice' (*dikē*) (p.63). Not unrelated to that, I observed a recurring motif in the modern Greek translation of the text, which revolved around the persistent question of political responsibility. The specific formulation of a question with the same interrogative pronoun (*ποιος*; who?) appears rather regularly across the stasima (i.e. *Who* invited it? *Who* paid for it? *Who* handed out the names', *Who* has taught me this song', *Who* will bury him, *Who* will cry for him', etc...). The inability to take personal responsibility/action and the search for someone else who would provide the solution and act on their behalf, seems quite central in the enunciations of the chorus. This textual 'refrain' which connects to the idea of political responsibility (and civic participation) became a focal point in the musical dramaturgy (and informed the choices in setting the text across the *stasima*). It is re-iterated in a variety of different points in the score, but compositionally achieves its climax here, in the third *stasimon*: the last time the chorus will sing before the central moment of 'inaction'.

'Who taught me this song?' becomes a refrain as a group of chorus members returns to it over the course of the ode.²⁴ The repetition of the question arrives at a frenetic climax when a group sings the word *ποιος* (*who?*) on the longest vocally sustained harmony in the performance, held on top of the underlying folk-like ostinato.²⁵ The clash between the ever-present elongated question and the incessant vocal ostinato is aurally significant beyond the narrative level; it questions the re-iterative form of cyclic voicing (somewhere between language and music; speech and song) itself as a form of learnt behaviour. How implicitly culpable for the perpetuation of this inculcation of fear (and the hierarchies it supports) is the chorus because of repeating/citing a form of ritualistic voicing which seems to evade an attributable authorial origin?

This performative legitimisation of an ideological regime that is re-iteratively inscribed in voicings to sustain particular hierarchies (individual/collective, man/woman, etc.), is inextricably bound to the political dimension of the choral voice and its connection to ritual. Ritual re-iterations are capable of subverting but also conforming to the status quo. While there is something liberating in the 'unleashing of the machined voice' (Nowitz, 2021), and the taping into the affective space of the *choratic*, I am suggesting that here, concurrently, the opening up of the spectrum between the speaking and the singing voice, exposes the resulting hybrid (ch)orality as semantically/politically complex. The opening of the vocal spectrum (singing/speaking/instrumental) in combination with the folk-like traditional soundings and religious resonances of the stasima further suggest that this choral soundscape which seems to challenge the phallogocentrism of the 'State' might be permitted to exist, constrained within ritual forms the hegemonic machine can control and 'conduct' (from 'behind the palace').

At the same time, the performative nature of the voicing undercuts the concretisation of that hierarchy through the unfolding 'eventness' of the emergent (ch)orality. While the acousmatic pre-recorded instruments emanating from the palatial speakers re-iterate their monolithic sonic material, the choral voice is already always in a processual state of flux.

Brannys and Kollath suggest that

the essential characteristic of the chorus is not obedience or the taking up of an allotted place within a predefined structure, but a potential for resistance against any appropriation that is formed by its contingent dynamics. Contingency describes the processual and the accidental, which appears on the

²⁴The musical setting is based on a development of the theme which underscored the narration of Iphigeneia's sacrifice in the *Parodos* (in that case sung by female chorus members alone and without words) but also the introduction of *stasimon* 2 (*Who* handed out the names?), creating musically a connection between the search for this 'invisible other' who is responsible.

²⁵ The sonic clash that is formed vocally at the climax references indexically the instrumental 'block of sound' that has been lingering almost like a spectre of an invisible character, emanating from the 'palatial' speakers.

threshold between being and non-being and could unfold in entirely different ways. It denotes the incalculable and unpredictable, which crosses intentional actions and at the same time takes the free choice of decisions into account (event and action contingency) (p.49).

The chorus members adhere to a score which grants them a degree of improvisation within the 'repertoire' of the (ritualistic) structures they perform. On one level, this affords the voice the possibility of re-doing and 'citing' differently. On another level, the ethics of relationality are made manifest in the staged (ch)orality as every voice develops in relation to other voices and the act of listening intensely while voicing. Applying Dufourmantell's definition of 'gentleness', Brannys and Kollath explicate how 'listening, turning towards and searching for a connection are some of the most important competencies of the chorus. Not only despite, but because each voice is different. A tender, listening chorus connects with otherness [...] without wanting to dissolve it in the collective' (p.56). There is a constant negotiation of the individual within the collective/ensemble; a performative negotiation that redefines the relationship between the individual and the community beyond archaic notions of uniformity.

It is in the 'eventness' of the performance that the audience become witnesses to the interpersonal ethics of (ch)orality, as the chorus embodies the interdependence that exists in the act of sustaining a voiced community; by voicing and listening at once; inside and outside; me and we; plural-singular; an experience of being and presence that is absolutely phenomenological and at once political. It is in that event of the choral voicing that the possibility for the subversion of hierarchies is *sensed* as possible. If (ch)orality manifests as the expression of a communal 'tenderness and relationality' (ibid., p.55), even as it is voicing conflict and dissent, then maybe it does hold the potential to become subversive.

Conclusion

This article aims to unpack how a contemporary staging of Greek tragedy can successfully navigate the intricate balance between tradition and innovation, through its engagement with the chorus, but more significantly through a notion of (ch)orality which is critical and process-related. It attempts an in-depth engagement with the text and its morphology to allow the surfacing of a form of chorality which is performative and productive in reframing its connection with a contemporary audience.

The sonic dramaturgy interrogates the politics of rituals and the ways forms of (ch)orality might be pointing to new questions about contemporary democracy and the tensions between the individual and the collective. The sound world of the performance is layered with aural clues, just like little shreds of *tekmeria*, pieces of 'evidence' that the audience is presented with (mirroring the textual dramaturgy), to ask how involved the chorus might be in the cycle of corruption. More importantly however, the resulting musical dramaturgy is asking the audience to attend to the sound-world in a critical manner and aims to make them aware of their process of reception as it brings in conflict two strong poles of attraction: their participation in a *methexis*-inducing ritual and a meta-ritual interpretative endeavour. The choral open text that is composed in the in-between/hybrid mode of choral utterance attempts to offer interpretative clues; not to impose singular didactic meanings but to offer possibilities for interpretation.

A more polyphonic and critical approach to (ch)orality is employed, utilising various tools from tradition to challenge tradition, constantly engaging in small deterritorialising battles against it. The level of empathetic engagement and immersion, inherent in traditional notions of *methexis* and *catharsis* (and the accompanying ideas and senses of communal identity and unifying belonging), is present as a pole of attraction, but constantly and concurrently questioned; this is how the 'conflict' is performatively (re)situated in the processes of performance and (auditory) reception. Through the dialogue and feedback-loop between the resulting visceral/affective experience and the interpretative quest, the project aims to invite the

audience to 'participate' in the world of the play/performance, as critically 'emancipated' listeners (to borrow from Jacques Rancière's 'emancipated spectator') and to reconsider their own place in the perpetuation of ideologically significant re-iterations of community performatives.

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