

CHAPTER 9

***Grekesca, moresca* and dance: musical relations between Venice and Greece**

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Preliminary statement

In this paper I would like to draw attention to a few interesting aspects of the cultural and social melting pot that was Venice in the period of Serenissima Republic.

Tolerance and open-mindedness provided ideal conditions for a unique blending of influences in music, literature, theatre and dance in Venice.

Venice, during the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, was at the height of its cultural splendour and it had the air of a multi-ethnic city, similar to some big cities of the twentieth century. It was characterised by a mix of different – because of their origin, provenance and history – cultural experiences.

The specific evolution of the *moresca* is particularly interesting. It was a dance form inspired by conflict between Muslims and Christians. Present in the whole area of the Mediterranean, it became a sort of main event at Venice Carnival in past centuries.

In this paper I want to examine in particular the historical relations between Venice and Greece. I shall explore the main linguistic aspects of a few musical and theatrical texts, in particular of the *grekescas*, a poetic form set to music. I began with a brief analysis of the historical events that were the occasions for Venice to meet Greek culture, and then I address the roots and the origin of the literary language commonly called *grekesco*. But first I begin with some observations about the *moresca*.

The *moresca*: a mix of cultures, traditions and histories

The term *moresca* originally means war dance against the Muslims (*mori* – Moors). Curt Sachs, in his *History of Dance*, explains that in Spain *morisco* referred to Muslims who decides to live in the country after the conquest and who is then converted to Christianity.

Moresca was probably born in Spain – the first known *moresca* was performed in Lerida in 1150 as a celebration of the expulsion of the Muslims – and then spread in Catholic Europe, with local characteristics and differentiations.

In Italy, and also in other regions of Europe, similar forms of dance were already present before the Turkish invasion. So we can say that the *moresca* substitutes for already existing ritual dances, by which I mean fertility dances, typical of the pagan period, against the gods of evil.

Over the centuries these fertility dances lost the original meaning of the fight that they represented, and they became a representation of the fight between Christians and Muslims.

In the middle of 15th century the *moresca* acquired two different faces: the first face kept the original essence of a religious fight, and became a popular dance usually performed during Carnival; the second face had a new cultured appearance as a danced intermezzo performed during the intervals of plays and theatrical performances.

During the 16th century the *moresca* enjoyed great popularity as a dance intermezzo,

performed especially in the context of theatre having a mythological heroic subject. Because of the weapons that were used, and the realistic representation of fights, the *moresca* was a dance with a great emotional impact on the audience; furthermore, because of its strong rhythmic connotation, it was easily and commonly influenced by popular dance forms.

Due to its popularity, *moresca* also proved suitable for lighter and more comic situations. Artists used *moresca* in their performances in so many different ways that in a certain period the term comes to mean simply a danced intermezzo.

Nowadays, in many European countries, *moresca* indicates a collective dance, danced in double rows, and it has completely lost its original overtones of religious conflict (for instance, Morris dance).

During the first decades of the 16th century, as we have already said, the intermezzos of Italian comedies were performed in *moresca* style. But *moresca* was also performed on other occasions, not only in theatrical performances. In fact it was characteristically the concluding event of many festivals during the period of the Renaissance.

Furthermore, during the 16th century, the Venice Carnival had in its calendar of events many acrobatic games and pastimes based on performance skills: the "*svolo del turco*", the so-called "*forze d'Ercole*", and also the *moresca*, usually performed before the fireworks show by the Nicolotti and the Castellani.

Moresca then continued in existence through the 17th century, and progressively changed its appearance, blending influences from other forms of dance, mythological themes, and symbols of marriage, and this fact created a sort of distance between *moresca* and its original theme of conflict between Christians and Muslims.

At the beginning of the 19th century the Carnival was often really violent and for the people it represented the only occasion in which they could show their dissatisfaction. That is why religious authorities were so careful when authorising public performances such as the *moresca*.

Then, during the 19th century it disappeared also from popular performances.

The *moresca* is still performed in Curzola, a Croatian island located near the Dalmatian coast, and there it has held its original characteristics of war dance performed with swords. At the present time, in Curzola, the *moresca* is danced with a music composed in 1937 by the Croatian musician Krsto Odack.

The Greek community in Venice

More than nine centuries ago the Venetians helped the Greeks in their war against the Normans. The Byzantine emperor Alexander Komnenos promised to Venetian merchants an alliance that would guarantee the conditions of their absolute pre-eminence in the East Mediterranean area, since they would not pay any kind of taxes in that area. This alliance was called Bolla d'Oro (1082).

The alliance was of fundamental importance in the history of the Serenissima because it was the beginning of the great political, commercial and military influence of Venice in the area of the Eastern Mediterranean. And since that time, a lot of merchants began to come periodically to Venice because of their commercial activity.

After the end of the Byzantine Empire (1453), a great number of refugees moved to Venice and settled there. In 1479 there were about four thousands Greeks in Venice.

The most pressing problem that Greeks faced in Venice during the 15th century was the possibility of keeping alive their religious traditions and activities. At first they were

considered schismatic.

In 1498 they asked the Consiglio dei Dieci for permission to found a Confraternità dei Greci Ortodossi [Confraternity of Orthodox Greeks] also called Scuola di San Nicolò della nazione Greca) that would be dedicated to San Nicolò in the church of San Biagio. The Venetian authorities approved the creation of this confraternity.

The Confraternità Greca in Venice was the most ancient and important centre of the Greek diaspora. During its long and glorious history it continuously kept alive its relationships with Greece, and so it influenced deeply the developing of a Hellenic conscience.

It was well organised and conducted by a council, called Banca, and the chief was called Gastaldo (and later Guardian Grande). Its influence in Venetian cultural and also political life grew continuously, and the number of Greeks in Venice also grew during the 16th century.

At that time in Venice there were Greek mariners, merchants, craftsmen, artists, intellectuals and also mercenary soldiers (the *stradioti* – we shall come to them shortly).

At the beginning of the 16th century, Greeks had the possibility of building an Orthodox church in Venice. This happened mainly thanks to the political influence of the *stradioti*, which was substantial, especially after the battles between Venice and the Turks. They were able to start the work of building their own church in 1514. The San Giorgio dei Greci church in Venice is the oldest church of the diaspora period in the history of Orthodoxy. It is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful Orthodox churches in the world.

Later, thanks to the influence of a few Greek intellectuals, such as Giovanni Lascaris and Marco Mussuros, who were friends of Leone, the Greek Orthodoxes obtained the religious independence (of the Venice patriarchate, the Venetian religious authority).

In 1526 in the area of S. Antonin, all the existing buildings were destroyed, in order to create a Greek quarter. And this quarter became one of the most beautiful products of a foreign community in Venice.

In 1797, with the end of Serenissima Republic, the Greek community entered a serious crisis. Napoleon confiscated all the money in the banks, as well as valuable objects and artworks. So Greeks started again to look for a place to move to and settle down. Many of them went back to Greece.

We need briefly to trace the cultural and social importance of these events, and of the presence in Venice of a large number of intellectuals coming from Greece.

We have to say that during the 16th century Venice was considered as the new Athens. Giorgio da Trebisonda, in devoting to the Serenissima his translations of Plato's texts, suggested that Venice was conceived on the same ideals as those expressed in Plato's Laws.

And at the Museo Correr there are many artworks by the *madoneri*, a Greek artistic group of the 16th and 17th centuries. Their *botteghe* (ateliers) in Rialto had been famous since the beginning of the 15th century. And artists from Crete and Cyprus were deeply influenced in their Byzantine productions by Venetian elements.

Neo-Platonists in Venice met the Jewish *cabala* and Persian lyrics. Here they founded schools and clubs. The Venetian: Pietro Bembo started his Neo-Platonist studies in Ferrara, whereas Aristotelians enjoyed great prestige at the University of Padova.

As we have already said, there were many Greek artists working in Venice, and most of them eventually decided to settle in Venice. The most famous are: Antonio Vassilakis

(known as the Aliense) and Domenico Theotokopulos (known as El Greco). It is important to point out that even if the Serenissima Republic was slowly going into decline, the cultural and commercial activities of the Greek community in Venice continued to be notable through the 18th century.

The *stradioti*

We have already noted that because of presence of the *stradioti* the Greeks living in Venice were able to obtain official protection and many privileges. But who exactly were the *stradioti*?

Here's how the 15th century historian Sanudo, describes them:

The *stradioti* are Greeks and they wear broad capes and tall caps, some wear corselets; they carry lance in hand, and a mace, and hang a sword at their side; they move like birds and remain incessantly on their horses...They are accustomed to brigandage and frequently pillage the Peloponnesus. They are excellent adversaries against the Turks; they arrange their raids very well, hitting the enemy unexpectedly; they are loyal to their lords. They do not take prisoners, but rather cut the heads of their adversaries, receiving according to their custom one ducat per head.

The *stradioti*, mounted troops of Albanian and Greek origin who initially entered Venetian military service during the Republic's wars with the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century, were among pioneers of light cavalry tactics in European armies in the early modern era.

These warriors, who had previously served Byzantine and Albanian rulers, initially found asylum and employment in the Venetian strongholds of Napoli di Romagna, Corone, Modone, and Malvasia in the Peloponnesus. Later they were also stationed in Venetian holdings at Trau, Sibenico, Castellonuovo, and Zara in Dalmatia, and the islands of Corfu, Zante, Cephalonia, Crete and Cyprus.

Here's how Sanudo describes their first arrival in Venice:

On 22 April 1482 the first ship of cavalry arrived which carried seven *stradioti* from Corone, who, when they disembarked at the Lido, paraded in their accustomed way before the unaccustomed crowd which marvelled at the speed of their horses and the skill of the horsemen. Their horses are large, accustomed to hardships, run like birds, always hold their heads high and surpass all others in manoeuvre of battle.

It is very interesting to try to identify the nationality of the *stradioti*. An investigation found that indeed many of the names were Albanian (80%), but a good number (about 20%) of the names, particularly those of the officers, were of Greek origin, such as Palaiologos, Spandounios, Laskaris, Rhalles, Comnenos, Psendakis, Maniatis, Spyliotis, Alexopoulos, Psaris, Zacharopoulos, Klirakopoulos, Kondomitis. Others seemed to be of South Slavic origin.

The *stradioto* language and the *grechesche* (*grekescas*)

The language commonly spoken by *stradioti* was probably a mix of different dialects and languages, such as Greek, Dalmatian, Venetian and Albanian.

Documents show that many surnames of *stradioti* progressively changed since they underwent a kind of Italianisation. And the surname Stradioto is still, nowadays, common in a large area around Venice. This is just one of the elements that show how *stradioti* were progressively integrated in the Venetian social structure.

This brings us, finally, to the *grekescas*, which were polyphonic compositions similar to

other popular songs (*giustiniane, villanelle, vilote*) typical of that period.

The presence of these polyphonic vocal works (for 4 or more voices), which are written in a curious language that blends Venetian and Greek, usually called *grechesco* (*grekesco*), is particularly interesting. They are present in the production of a very famous Venetian musician: Andrea Gabrieli (1510–86). He was able to mix in his “*greghesche a 4, 5 e a 7 voci*” (about twenty compositions) the characteristic style of French and Flemish polyphony together with the new *grekesco* language.

Gabrieli, who wrote many important compositions, played the organ in the basilica of San Marco from 1564 till he died. He was influenced by Willaert and he created his own style that was an evolution of the polyphony typical of Willaert.

Adrian Willaert (1490-1562), Flemish composer, was chapel-master in San Marco. This was one of the most desirable jobs in Europe at that time. At his school many musicians of that period, including Gabriela, studied and developed an original style.

Almost every textual part of the *grekescas* is taken from a work by Antonio Molino, il Burchiella, a merchant, actor and playwright, who was able to play the viola, the lirone and the liuto. He founded, together with Giovanni Armonio, a music academy.

The importance of Antonio Molino derives from the fact that in 1561 he wrote an epic poem – the style is an imitation of the style that Ludovico Ariosto used in his *Orlando Furioso* – about the *stradioto* Manoli Blessi, and it is written in *grekesco* language. This poem was printed in Venice and its title is “*I fatti e le prodezze (=braveries) di Manoli Blessi strathioto*”.

At the beginning of the 16th century all the actors were expected to be able to play comedies, play instruments, sing and dance. Furthermore, dance, not just music, was one of the required skills of the comic actors of the Commedia dell’arte.

One of the most typical character of Commedia dell’arte, Brighella spoke many languages badly, and he would speak Greek to try to be clearly understandable.

We should also cite Tzanes Koronaios, who wrote a long epic poem in *grekesco* language, that talks about the famous *stradioto* Merkourios Bouas. Probably Koronaios was a *stradioto* himself, and also a friend of Bouas, coming from Zacynthos.

Grekescas were composed not only in Venice but also in the *domini da mar*, the territories reachable only by boat. For example, Giulio Schiavetti, a musician who worked in Sebenico, wrote a few *grekescas* in his main work “*Di Manoli Blessi il primo libro delle grechesche*” (1564), a group of polyphonic compositions (for 4 voices) in the style of French-Flemish polyphony.

In order better to understand what *grekesco* language was, here’s a list of a few terms that clearly derive from Greek:

chyarazza – *lady*
glicchi – *sweet*
psicchi – *soul*
cardia – *heart*
paracalosse – *please*
glossa – *tongue*
geros – *old*
ommati – *eyes*
mana – *mother*
prosopo – *face*
saranda – *forty*
thora – *now*

tiflos – *blind*
pedi – *baby*
aspame – *we go*
gligora – *soon*
spathia – *sword*
tipota – *nothing*

And there are many other examples. The list is not long but it is substantial.

Reflections

There are many other aspects of the musical relations between Venice and Greece that need to be deeply studied and carefully considered. However, in this ambit drawing conclusions is often really difficult. So, I just would like to suggest a few ideas for future studies and research.

For example it would be very interesting, trying to understand if rhyme, unknown before, was introduced in Crete and Cyprus, during the 15th century, thanks to the influence of Venetian culture.

And, since we are talking about Crete, there are clear examples of Venetian influence in the *mandinadas*, a common musical form in the island, and not just because their name is similar to Istrian *mantinjade* and Venetian *maitinade*, but also because of linguistic similarities.

And, almost undoubtedly, the violin was introduced in Crete thanks to Venice.

We might also think about the close resemblance between a few instruments such as the *colascione* and the Spanish guitar, that were commonly used to compose popular songs (*giustiniane*, *villanelle*, *vilote*) in Italy, and instruments such as the bouzouki and tambouras, not to mention the Turkish *tchegour*.

Last but not least, there are many Venetian popular songs that in their text refer to wars or battles that involved Venetian soldiers in Greek islands, in Crete, in the Peloponnesus. “Vilote adriatiche”, a popular song currently in the repertoire of the musical group Calicanto, talks about a soldier who deserted from the Venetian army to go back to Venice, to meet again his woman, during a battle in Negroponte (present-day Euboea – Chalkis).

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Paper presented at the Hydra Rebetiko Conference, October 2003

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