

CHAPTER 12

World music and the orientalising of the rebetika

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Before we consider any shifts in the reception and revival of rebetika, it is important to recognise our own shortcomings as observers of a phenomenon that shies away from categorisation and recasts itself anew for each generation. The rebetika, dead or alive, have become a perennial subject of interest and debate in the Greek-speaking world, and this interest itself is worth examining as a cultural and social phenomenon. Changes in the attitude of Greeks to their popular music, like changes in other aspects of Greek culture, reflect the country's peculiar position between eastern Orthodox Christianity and the western European secular tradition, or more simply, between Asia Minor and Europe. As we have seen in recent decades, this cultural ambiguity has not, as one might have expected, diminished with Greece's entry into the European community, rather it has been exacerbated by regional conflicts that have revived historical loyalties along religious and historical lines.

In her insightful study of modern Greek literature "Topographies of Hellenism" Artemis Leontis speaks of the Greeks' tendency to exoticise themselves. "Greeks have regularly sought to recover the primitive element in themselves," she notes. "To compensate for what others perceived as backward behavior or bad blood, they have defined their homeland, Hellas, as their native entopia, their coffeehouse, if you will, in which they are aboriginal customers." (1995: 113). The tendency to exoticise oneself is not exclusively Greek, of course, but Greeks experienced a unique combination of the high expectations of western Europeans obsessed with their illustrious ancestry, and low estimation, based on these same unrealistic expectations and the observations of western Europeans (Holst-Warhaft: 1999, 2000, Herzfeld: 1986). The preoccupation of the modern Greek has been to claim his or her ancient pagan past but to combine it with a Byzantine and Ottoman past and reconcile the diverse strands of his inheritance. The dilemma has never been satisfactorily resolved, and the rhetoric of Greek nationalism or *nationism* (see Tziouvas: 1986, 2-3) has been obsessed with determining the *true* character of modern Greece.

Most attempts to define the spirit of Greekness have made use of folklore, especially folksong, as a yardstick. This was so in the 19th century and it has remained so till this day. Nationalist leaders have been quick to pass judgment on the sort of music that failed to reflect their notions of national identity. During the Metaxas dictatorship, from 1936-1940, rebetika musicians were harassed. Many were exiled to the islands or thrown into prison, and the hashish dens of Piraeus were closed down. This was not merely because the rebetes and their hangouts were seen as disreputable, but because they offended Metaxas' belief in a "Third Hellenic Civilisation" (consciously based on Hitler's Third Reich) that would draw its character from the folk culture of Greece. Amanedhes were also banned (Gauntlett: 1989), during the dictatorship, probably as a response to a similar ban placed on them by Turkey's ruler Kemal Ataturk. Ataturk's ban was part of a general attempt to westernise Turkey, and de-emphasise its "oriental" character.

I will not repeat what I and others have already on the debates that were played out from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century in the Greek press over the relative merits of the music of the *cafés aman*, and the *cafés chantants* (see Holst-Warhaft: 2000, Gauntlett: 1989, Hatzipantazis: 1986, Holst: 1978). What is interesting about the debate is

that it highlights the very ambivalent feeling of Greeks towards their “oriental” past and on how Greek or non-Greek the music performed in the cafes *aman* was considered to be.

Despite the fact that it was, in many ways, a home-grown hybrid, rebetiko was not associated with the ideal *topos* of nationalism, i.e. with the Greek countryside (especially the mainland areas first liberated from the Turks). The regional folk music of Greece, much of which was itself of hybrid origin, was generally defined by association with a particular landscape. The deracinated, urban rebetika, with their foreign derived slang, their shady milieu and anti-authoritarian lyrics were a thorn in the side of nationalists, but for the same reason they were attractive to modernist writers and intellectuals who opposed narrow nationalism, and to working class urban Greeks, many of whom were sympathetic to the Greek Communist Party’s campaign for a more equal distribution of resources.

Among the writers who championed the rebetika was Kostas Tachtsis. His 1964 essay on the zeibekiko (see Holst, 1977: 202-211) offers us a possible explanation for the transformation of the rebetika from a narrow local phenomenon to a broadly popular style. The extreme privations of the German Occupation leveled class differences:

There were no more hungry and satisfied, there were no masters and slaves, everyone was a slave, everyone was hungry, all felt the need to bewail their fate... All the houses suddenly became hashish dens, not literally of course, but in character. Everywhere the spirit of lawlessness prevailed, of constant fear, misery and death. ...

The zeibekiko found room to develop, develop rapidly. Suddenly, it was no longer a dance of the underworld, but of a large number of Greeks, mostly those living in urban centers. Many of the songs which were first heard immediately following the war, had been written during the Occupation and differed markedly from the pre-war, heavier “hashish” rebetika. (1977: 204)

The economic effects of the war were, according to Tachtsis, only one of the reasons for the rebetika’s popularity (in the article it is clear that the zeibekiko dance is being used metonymically to refer to the rebetika as a whole). Another was the promotion, by the Germans, of alternative styles of music. Tangos, waltzes, and other forms of light music continued to be composed and listened to by the more “conformist” elements among the Greeks, and to be encouraged by the occupying forces so to give an impression of false optimism to the population of Athens and other cities:

It wasn’t an unusual spectacle to see German vehicles with megaphones driving around the central and suburban areas, waking up the ordinary folk with the inimitable “in the morning you wake me with kisses...”, which in reality was a waking by the kiss of death.... So for the first time these songs were given the title of “light songs” (1977: 205).

In contrast to such meaningless songs, the rebetika offered the suffering population songs that dealt with reality, and not only with a literal but a symbolic reality. They were identified, according to the author, with “the *spirit* of resistance.” Tachtsis goes on to explain that while the Communist-led resistance fighters in the mountains of Greece sang Russian and other imported songs, the Greeks who drank their wine in underground tavernas, listened to rebetika songs that spoke not of the actual situation of the war, but of the “eternal poison of life” (*ibid*).

Whether or not the war cemented the popularity of the bouzouki-based, Piraeus rebetika, there is no doubt that the sort of music played in the *cafe aman* was no longer in vogue by the 1940’s, whereas rebetika of the sort originally performed by Markos Vamvakaris and his associates became broadly popular. Despite the fact that the rebetika of the 1940’s and

1950's preserved some of the characteristics of late Ottoman music in its modes and rhythms, there was a general trend towards westernisation of the genre, with more songs written in major and minor keys, a second voice often added to the soloist's vocal line, and a piano or piano accordion joining the ensembles. At the same time, what was left of the "oriental" in the rebetika was becoming exoticized.

It was Vassilis Tsitsanis, the man who claimed to have transformed the rebetika into the *laika*, who reintroduced the "oriental" into the popular rebetika-style music of the 1940's and 50's. Throughout the history of the rebetika, from Anestis Delias and Markos Vamvakaris to Vassilis Tsitsanis and Manolis Hiotis, there are songs that employ the orient as a metaphor for the exotic, usually the erotic exotic. When Ilias Petropoulos published his "laographic researches" into the rebetika (1968) he divided the songs into categories defined by the thematic content of their lyrics. One category was "Oriental and other exotic songs". Only 21 song lyrics are reproduced in the sections of his book, 12 of them by Tsitsanis. Petropoulos's list is not exhaustive, and includes several pre-war songs by other composers, including the famous "In the Baths of Constantinople" (also called "In the Harem Baths") by Anestis Delias, first recorded in 1936. In this fantasy of a male paradise as in almost all the "exotic" rebetika, the orient and female eroticism are indistinguishable.

The "oriental fantasy" songs may constitute a small proportion of rebetika songs; even as a proportion of Tsitsanis's total output of recorded songs they represent little more than 3%, but among them are some of his greatest successes and they continue to be revived and recorded.¹ The exoticised "oriental" rebetika, most dating from the 1940's and 1950's, are first of all exotic in terms of lyrics. Secondly, most but not all of the exotic songs of Tsitsanis and other rebetika composers are *tsiftetelia*, that is, they are in the rhythm associated with belly dancing, which is one reason for their renewed popularity in the 80's and 90's when the *tsifteteli* craze took hold. They are not generally associated with oriental modes (the song "To kainourio tsifteteli" refers to "Turkish tuning" (*douzeni Turkiko*) but re-tuning of instruments to perform certain modes was a practice that had all but died out in rebetika by the 1930's).

The most famous of Tsitsanis' exotic-oriental songs is probably "Arapines" (Arabian Girls):

Magic nights, nights of dreams
wanton loves, forgotten in foreign lands!
My mind races to the past
to beloved evenings in Arabia!
I speak to you with sorrow, with heartbreak
for all the mad follies I miss!
Lustful, amorous Arabian girls
(n.b. in some versions "black Arabian girls")
with whiskey, with sweet guitars
parties and booze!
Arab girls, with eyes of fire
bodies made like snakes
like sprites.

¹ The exotic orient is reflected in the titles of Tsitsanis' songs from 1939: "Haremia me diamantia" 1939, "Maghissa tis Arapias" 1940, "Arapines" 1946, "Sklaves tou pasa" 1946, "I Maritsa sto haremi" 1946, "Arapiko louloudi" 1947, "To Kainourio tsifteteli" 1949, "Youl Bakar" 1950, "Magissa tis Vaghdati" 1950, "Serach" 1951, "Vavaria" 1953, "Zaira" 1954, "Arapiko tsifteteli" 1958, "I Farida" 1959. Tsitsanis's recorded approximately 330 songs).

This oriental fantasy, complete with whiskey and guitars, suggests Dorothy Lamour in body-paint and veils rather than anything from Asia Minor. Although some of the exotic songs linked harems and exotic women to the arghilé and hashish smoking, they tended to be, like “Arapines”, parodic. Whatever is oriental about such songs is carefully distanced from reality. References to “Arab” or “Egyptian” girls, rather than to the girls from Constantinople or Smyrna who are mentioned in many early rebetika songs is a safe strategy; it ensures the oriental harem girls are not confused with Greek women.

At the same times as Tsitsanis was composing his orientalized rebetika, if rebetika is the right term for them, a singer whose voice was markedly different from singers of rebetika or neo-rebetika began to make his name in the Greek music world. His name was Stelios Kazantzidis. Listening to his 1950's recordings of songs by Aposotolos Kaldaras, it is hard to put your finger on where this difference lies. His voice has none of the raspiness of Vamvakaris, the dry staccato of Tsitsanis, the unsentimental flatness of Bellou. It is closer, in many ways, to the Asia Minor singers in its willingness to employ tremolo and display emotion. Immensely popular in the late fifties and sixties, Kazantzidis introduced a new quality into Greek “laiko” song, one that appealed to a new generation of working-class Greeks. His voice would epitomise the singers of the low-class dives known as *skiladhika*, the haunts of truck-drivers and other nocturnal workers. It was a late-night, heart-on-the-sleeve despairing voice, well-suited to the songs of the day that were called “Turko-gypsy” or “gypsy” not only because of their use of erotic subject matter but because of their preference for the tsifteteli. Accompanied by a toumbeleki and violin, Kazantzidis sounds like the generic middle eastern singer found in nightclubs from Tel Aviv to Port Said. But is he a rebetika singer and if not why not? Was it too oriental for the tastes of the day?

The embracing of rebetika by Theodorakis and Hadzidakis and their incorporation of many of its elements into a new sort of popular music privileged a particular type of rebetiko song and a particular kind of performance at the expense of others. The choice of Bithikotsis, Iotia Lydia and Hiotis by Theodorakis, and the championing of Tsitsanis and Bellou by Hadzidakis, and later by Savvopoulos, had as much to do with Greek intellectuals' perception of rebetika, as with trends in the music itself. There is no need, here, to elaborate the political events that nurtured the flourishing of a new style of Greek music by these and other composers during the 60's and 70's. But it must be recognized that this music existed in parallel with the popular music that we may call late or neo-rebetika and which, I would argue, includes figures like Tsitsanis himself and like Kazantzidis, who stopped making public performances in the mid 1960's but continue to record into the late sixties.

Savvopoulos's identification with the rebetika was part of a broader nostalgia for the earlier rebetika that took hold during the dictatorship, and whose motives were politically and socially driven. These were also years of political upheaval in America, of international outrage at the Vietnam War, of protests, feminism, hippies, drugs, flower power. In 1968 Ilias Petropoulos's *Rebetika Traghoudia* was banned almost before it reached the bookshops, but it immediately acquired a cult following. By the early 1970's, when the music of Theodorakis was banned, when the lyrics of song-writers like Savvopoulos were subject to heavy censorship, and it was difficult to defy the military regime directly, the pre-war rebetika once again assumed their character as songs of symbolic protest. The manghes or rebetes were obviously the pot-smoking hippies of an earlier generation. They fitted neatly into the iconography of the sixties which had arrived, if somewhat late, in Greece.

In 1978, a group of Savvopoulos' young friends, led by Nikos Xydakis and Manolis Rasoulis, most of whom had worked with him in the preceding years, produced an influential record. It was called “I Ekdikisi tis yiftias” (“The Revenge of the Gypsy Style”). Having listened to their songs, Savvopoulos gave the record his blessing and wrote a nice little story about how he had come up with the title for it while travelling to

Thessaloniki on the train. He thought about how he hated “cultured” songs (i.e. the songs of Theodorakis and Hadzidakis), nor had he any interest in the so-called “light” songs. After the war he had heard the archondorebetes like Hiotis with their dexterity but nothing more. The result of these trends in Greek music was that

we had arrived at "French" songs with a bit of bouzouki thrown in. The plebs immediately reacted against this with an oily kind of song that was later named, by the supporters of the purity of the race, as Indian-style, Turko-gypsy style, or gypsy-style. It is the opposite of the archondorebetiko. The archondorebetiko or light popular songs (*elafro-laiko*) are rebetika borrowed from Europe, whereas the “gypsy style” is, as it were, the rebetika borrowed from the East. But it is not the first time that people here have become indignant with, have given the finger to the European, and said, "better the Turks". (1978)

The single example of this turn towards the east that Savvopoulos gives in popular music is Stelios Kazantzidis. The singer whose “gypsy” style was so popular in the late 1950's and early 1960's is re-embraced by Savvopoulos, the song-writer-savant as having rescued the “true” popular song from westernisation and high culture. Now Savvopoulos anoints a group of young musicians who, in their turn, have rescued the music of the 70's by producing a record that is truly “popular” and he himself chooses the title. He is pleased with himself. The title has a nice ring “like a spaghetti western” as he says (1978).

Just what “gypsy style” means is hard to say. Certainly the record is characterized by a predominance of tsiftetelia, and the singing style owes something, perhaps to Kazantzides; the instrumentation, with violin and baglama, sounds like a cross between Smyrna style ensembles and pre-war rebetika.

The record, of course, did not appear from nowhere. If it conveniently marks the beginning of a self-conscious orientalism in Greek music that is still going on today, it also reinforces a trend that had already begun. Most young Greek musicians of the late 1970's and 80's were fascinated by western popular music. They were playing electric guitars, listening to rock bands, borrowing chords from jazz. Via the West, they were also becoming interested in Indian and other exotic music. Most of them were tired of bouzoukis. They were also tired of songs with a strong political or social message. They were experimenting with a much greater variety of instruments. It was an era of foreign borrowings but there was still a desire to write songs that were genuinely Greek. One answer was to revive the erotic fantasies of the “oriental” rebetika.

On their second record (*Dithen*, 1979) the same group of musicians who had made “The Revenge of the Gypsy Style” present entitled “The Manghes Don't Exist any More.” It is a charming eulogy to the “genuine” manghes of Piraeus: “The manghes don't exist any more/ The train ran over them.” Here and in the music of the late seventies and 80's, nostalgia for the past is selective. As Savvopoulos had articulated or prophesied, there was a rejection of the “cultured” songs of the 60's, and an embracing of the oriental in the Greek soul as being more suited to the contemporary mood, and, of course, more “authentic”.

The performance of old-style rebetika begun by groups like *the Rebetiki Koumpania* and the *Opisthodhromiki Koumpania* had concentrated largely on Piraeus-style songs. The reissuing of recordings of early stars, including, for the first time, CD's of Smyrna style musicians, and the interest of rebetika scholars and others in the oriental rebetika² contributed to the re-evaluation of the genre. For the first time young Greeks could listen to

² Panaiotis Kounadis and S. Papaioannou's series of articles on Smyrna style rebetika, published in the magazine *Mousiki* (1980, 1981) were both reflective of the growing interest and possibly influential in strengthening it.

cleaned up reissues of singers and musicians like Rita Abadzi, Dimitris Semsis, Roza Eskenazi and Panaiotis Tountas, and they were amazed by the beauty and virtuosity of the performances. Here was a new wealth of tradition for musicians to draw on. In order to perform the music, during the late 1980's and 1990's, young musicians began to learn instruments that had all but disappeared from Athens: kanonaki, outi, santouri, even ney. They were also encouraged by the phenomenon of World Music to add non Greek songs to their repertoire, including material from their own "oriental" past, but also from Africa or Italy. The popular singer Glykeria recorded sexy modern versions of Smyrneika that sold better than any other songs on the Greek market and gained her an international audience.

During the 1990's, in popular nightclubs and discotheques, young Greeks danced to western music for the first part of the evening and to tsiftetelia after midnight. The tsiftetelia craze of the 1990's may have owed as much to MTV as it did to Asia Minor music, or the Bosnian War, in that it was a chance for young Greek girls to move like the gyrating bodies they watched on the screen. But it also marked a continuation of the "Revenge of the Gypsy Style". The associations of the Gypsy or "oriental" style had always been erotic, hedonistic, unpolitical. For young Greeks who wanted to have it both ways: to be thoroughly modern and western, and yet hang onto something that was unwestern, the discotheque tsiftetelia were ideal.

Parallel with the tsifteteli craze came more creative fusions of Greek and "oriental" or Asia Minor music. Musicians from Thessaloniki, Patras, and other regions of Greece began performing music with what had once been familiar but had since become exotic instruments. In 1998, a conference was held in Piraeus on the influence of the Asia Minor refugees on Greek music. Turkish musicologists attended, and music was performed by ensembles of young musicians who were studying Turkish instruments. Young Greeks began travelling to Istanbul to learn to play Turkish music. A shop in Athens began importing instruments from Turkey. Moreover in Turkey itself, there was a growing interest in rebetika.³ And in the United States and Europe, ensembles of mixed Greek and Turkish musicians began performing "oriental style" rebetika together. Unlike the deliberate recreation of "orientalized" Greek music of the late seventies and eighties, this new music often old music performed by young musicians. It was another form of revivalism, if more eclectic than the first waves of revived rebetika.

But how widespread is the acceptance of the oriental in the Greek music. An article published in the English language newspaper *Athens News* in April 2001 suggest that not all Greeks are content with the current turn towards the Levant. The author first applauds the fact that demotic music was played on the Athenian radio stations for Easter. Hearing it, he notes that Greeks are trapped between "incessant waves of Western pop junk and Levantine pop trash". Greek island music, on the other hand, reminds him that "we are not just in some odd corner of the European Union, condemned to live a Euro-fuelled, culturally uniform existence". (*Athens News* 20/04/2001, p. A11). The demotika are:

Greece's only genuine musical identity. Musicologically and morally, they are far superior to the adulterated, drug-deadened Turco-Arabic fare which, beginning with the infamous *rembetika*, passes for Greek music today. Who in his senses would prefer the product of Piraeus hashish dens to the pure, bracing air of Epirus or the sapphire blue of the Aegean Sea, both reflected in their respective musical traditions? But when you're drugged, you cannot exercise your senses correctly.

This begins to sound remarkably like the rhetoric of Metaxas's Third Greek Civilisation. The "sunny island ditties" please us, according to the author, because they "break out of the deadening Mixo-Lyidian bouzouki mode – in which the do-re-mi scale is replaced by the mournful C-D-Eb with its attendant effects on the mind – into something more refreshing and familiar". Leaving aside the fact that the author doesn't seem to know he is

talking about the regular European minor scale rather than any weird and mind-warping oriental mode, the tirade is interesting because of its rehashing of precisely the same vocabulary employed in the debates about cafe aman music and rebetika for more than a century.

At precisely the same time as our correspondent was lamenting the orientaling of Greek music in Athens, The World Music Institute of New York held a festival of Greek music at the New York Town Hall. One night was devoted to folk music from Macedonia. Another to music of the Black Sea and Constantinople, and a third to the rebetika. The inclusion of a half a concert of Istanbul music in a festival of Greek music would have been surprising even ten years ago. If there had been such a segment it would have been referred to as “Smyrna style” rebetiko, as if Smyrna music was a distinct musical entity and not under the influence of the musical currents of the cosmopolitan metropolis to the north. And in the World Music scene, the most popular Greek artists and bands, from Savina Yiannatou to Kristi Stassinopoulos and Mode Plagal have all capitalized on World Music’s preference for exotic over European sounds.

How much is what Greek artists do these days dictated by the World Music market, which has embraced the rebetika, especially the so-called “oriental rebetika”? And how much is it likely to be affected by the rhetoric of the journalist that appeared in the *Athens News*? Now that the oriental is in demand, there is bound to be a pendulum swing, so long as Greek music is still plagued by the sort of identity politics that has dominated discussion of almost every aspect of Greek life since the foundation of the Greek state. The on-going fascination with the so-called oriental rebetika and its influence on modern Greek music is probably only another chapter in the ambivalent history of Greek popular music.

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