

Tabachaniotika: The Cretan rebetika

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The primary intention of this presentation is to provide a preliminary (and perhaps elementary) frame of investigation for the particular song genre of *tabachaniotika*. A song genre, whose first steps in discography, coincided with those of *rebetika* and as far as chronology is concerned, with some of the most crucial events in modern Greek history. Naturally, since it a genre of fundamentally ethno-musicological interest, it is open to debate, interpretation and of course further research.

Introduction and context

As it is the case with almost the entire body of Greek folk music, Cretan music survives to the extent it does, through it's own people being the carriers of a living tradition. Crete has throughout its history experienced practically all the major civilizations and cultures made available at any one time in the central-eastern Mediterranean. The Arabs (830-961), the Venetians (1211-1669), the Ottomans (1669-1897) and of course the Byzantine Greeks. These cultures and civilisations have left their vivid marks which can be still witnessed today, on countless occasions as far as the art and culture are concerned. The official name of Crete in the post medieval years (roughly between 1400-1700) was Candia derived from the Greek Handax-Handakas, which was derived itself from the Arabic Al-Chandak. The Venetian port in Chania, medieval castles throughout the island, the mosques in Rethymno and Ierapetra, some Arabic land names scattered loosely throughout the island, are all tangible relics of that past.

What about music though? Folk music is not being transcribed usually. The only instance of transcribed music is that of the church, the Byzantine psalm. Like I said, since the administration of the Island changed hands many a time and since no records survive to present day it is difficult to classify with certainty the origins of song and melody. With regards to verse, which accounts for 50% of Cretan song (the other half being music), evidence is much clearer and illuminating. Cretan verse merged two elements in creating the quintessential unit of traditional/folk poetry: the *mantinada*. The merging of *dekapentasyllavos* and rhyme. The *dekapentasyllavos* was named as such by Byzantine authors sometime in the 12th century in order to describe a somewhat less noble form of verse that was associated with the masses. The rhyme, on the other hand arrived in Crete with the Venetians, and at that time was the single most fashionable Occidental (western) poetic model. We know for a fact that prior to the Venetians rhyme did not exist during the Byzantine era with the exception of a hymn or two.

Essentially, there are two main schools of thought claiming custody over *dekapentasyllavos*. The Latin *versus quadratus triumphalis* on the one hand and the more popular approach to poetry, the combination of ochtasyllable and eftasyllable, on the other. This of course goes far beyond the scope of this presentation; additionally I feel that after so many centuries of being in constant use by the Cretan people it is only fair to treat it as an endemic Cretan phenomenon.

So far this might have seem like too long an introduction but the presence of the *mantinada* was so dominant that it literally determined the *tabachaniotika* song genre.

About *Tabachaniotika*

Tabachaniotika or *manedes* are being defined in essence as non-danceable songs found throughout the urban surroundings of Western Crete mainly in the port-cities of Chania

and Rethymno. The word “*tabachanedes*” literally means tannery or leather processing factory; the *tabachana* were the residential quarters of the factory workers. These songs developed mainly throughout the second half of the 19th century up until the late 1930s and fused the existing local Cretan Muslim element as well as influences from the Asia Minor tradition (the very roots of rebetiko as such) and subsequently with rebetiko in its crystallized form. Parallel to Smyrna and in contrast with the already liberated mainland Greece, Crete was under Ottoman administration for the entirety of the 19th century. This was absolutely crucial in shaping *tabachaniotika* musically and thematically. One parameter that remained constant however is that of the use of *mantinada* as the sole medium of verse in Cretan song writing.

Before moving into examining and presenting select *tabachaniotika* repertory it is necessary to devote a short section to the Cretan Muslims.

The Cretan Muslims

As it is the case with countless topics sensitive in portraying an unspoiled unity with the Greco-Christian past, and promoting the demonisation of the Islamic/Turkish element, the subject area dealing with Cretan Muslims or *Tourkokritikoi* as they became known, does not evade misinterpretations and misrepresentations. To start with, who were the Cretan Muslims?

In their vast majority they were indigenous Cretan Christians of either Greek or Venetian descent who were forced to convert to Islam, even as late as the 19th century in certain instances, in order to cope with the increasingly unbearable life conditions gradually introduced by the Ottomans. As far as their everyday life, language and cultural habits were concerned they remained as Cretan as before.

This allowed for a great number of Cretan Muslims to excel in composing melodies and lyrics within the music idiom of their time that are currently considered absolute gems. One of the greatest Cretan Muslim composers whose work represents a milestone in the history of Cretan music is Mehmet Beys Stafidakis: the composer of the “Stafidianos melody”.¹ Stafidakis was himself a wealthy raisin merchant and was the only sizeable vineyard owner in the province of Chania (hence the name Stafidakis). He was born in 1878 in Chania and was married to the beautiful and wealthy Cretan Muslim Fatmeh descendant of the Vergeris family (Venetian feudal lords). He was a renowned fun-lover (party-animal) who would commence the party/feast by singing the melody himself composed over a *mantinada*, the first of which was always dedicated to his beloved Fatmeh.

[I will now play the Stafidianos melody on the lute]

The Stafidianos melody was recorded twice in the 1930 by two prominent Cretan musicians Antonis Papadakis and Giannis Bernidakis both of whom collaborated (each one at a time) with the single most important 20th century *tabachaniotika* composer, Stelios Foustallierakis.

Stelios Foustallierakis

Stelios Foustallierakis was born in 1911 in Rethymno. He started learning the *boulgari* at the age of ten and by the time he was 15 he was touring all over Crete playing in weddings and celebrations of all kind. He never became a professional musician and preferred instead to practice the profession of watchmaker in order to support himself. In 1934 he is forced to move to Piraeus in search of a better life. He started working as an assistant in a watchmaker shop. It was there he was acquainted to all the major rebetika figures, at Giorgos Batis’s taverna in Karaiskaki Square. Markos Vamvakaris, Panayiotis Tountas, Yiannis Papaioannou, Stratos Payoumtzis, Bayaderas, Tsitsanis all of whom played a pivotal role in Foustallierakis’s recording career. His playing and virtuosity were making such an impression that his “*mpoulgari*” joined the other bouzoukis hanging from

the wall inside the Batis taverna, each instrument known by its nickname, Marigouli, Koula, Gyftopoula, Tsingana, Gero-Mangas, amongst them the *bulgari*, the one that belonged to “Stellaki from Crete”. Foustallierakis spent only three years in Athens which nonetheless proved to be sufficient for him to enter the recording studio and release several records of his renditions of *tabachaniotika*. The influence he drew from rebetiko is evident. One need only listen to Foustallierakis’s version of “*Oso varoun ta sidera*”² to realise the degree of compatibility between the two schools of music.

Oso varoun ta sidera

This particular song is one of a number of pieces that underwent numerous appropriations by performers and transcended geographical boundaries. The traditional melody was first recorded, predating Foustallierakis, around 1910 in Istanbul with lyrics that include variations of a Smyranean song called “*Varytera ap’ta sidera*” The same song, with different lyrics, was sung and recorded in the US by the great rebetissa Marika Papagika.

[Costas joins me to play “*Oso varoun ta sidera*”]

Tabachaniotika and instrumentation

You heard me mentioning earlier an instrument oddly called *bulgari*. The facts surrounding this elegant little instrument are more closely affiliated to myth than fact.

It is the instrument that encapsulated the contribution of Cretan-Muslims to the music of their land and later the instrument that defined *tabachaniotika*. Yet, no one is in position to claim how it even got its very name; “*bulgari*”. *Bulgari* in Bulgarian means of Bulgarian origin. Since there is no recorded interaction between Crete and Bulgaria one is lead to believe it is a name already in use at the time by the Ottoman Turks.

Most theories nowadays tend to agree that it is indeed a type of *saz* brought to Crete by the Ottoman soldiers that in time underwent a mild metamorphosis. According to legend the first *bulgari* in Crete was constructed by Cretan Muslim luthier, Abdul Kalimerakis, it is a rather convincing story but completely unsupported in terms of hard evidence.

The instrument you saw me playing is the Cretan lute or *laouto*. Although it shares the same name as the renaissance instrument found throughout central Europe and is also mentioned in *Erotokritos* (the Cretan 10,000 verse epic poem by the Renaissance poet Vinzenzos Kornaros) little is known regarding the exact origin of the instrument. The only peculiar fact is that this particular type of instrument is geographically secluded in Greece.

Rhythm and melody

The music of Crete is simple and complicated at the same time. Complicated, because although it might sound accessible initially it becomes increasingly complex when attempting to study it and perform it. It is a modal music, it makes effective use of melodic recipes with little or no use of harmony. When harmony is applied it is kept to a minimum in order not to alter the authentic character and colour of sound. One quite distinctive feature of melody, which increases significantly the aforementioned complexity, is that melodic themes are profoundly long. The Stafidianos melody in particular, when performed at the standard slow tempo it is usually performed, has an average duration of ninety-five seconds. Needless to mention, it is a fairly time consuming process to memorise the melody in the first place prior to performing it on an instrument.

Musicologists argue ruthlessly whether the *makam* approach should be employed as the analytical tool in understanding *tabachaniotika* and the music of Crete in general.

There are countless objections to this claim founded on purely musicological grounds that often lead to dead ends and are of little or no use to music lovers. The Stafidianos Melody

for instance does not reflect any one particular *makam*. As far as folk musicians are concerned they have a purely empirical approach towards their own music and do not classify their compositions *makam*-wise.

As regards rhythm, the entire rhythmic repertory of Cretan music is structured over 2/4 or 4/4 time signatures. This might appear quite simple and straightforward yet there are countless subtleties to it. Cretan music tends to stress the offbeat on every occasion, making it more interesting for both the listener and the performer. *Tabachaniotika* are no exception yet the rhythmic pattern generally resembles more that of *tsifteteli* stressing particular accents and giving it therefore the very distinctive eastern Mediterranean feel.

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NOTES:

¹ “Stafidianoos skopos” performed by Foustalieris. See: <https://youtu.be/BODJvKMuDkM>

² “Oso varoun ta sidera” [Όσο βαρούν τα σίδερα] performed by Foustalieris. See <https://youtu.be/LQda4Bbd4Kg>