

## CHAPTER 1

### Music that fell into oblivion

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**Summary:** Among the singers and instrumentalists or composers who may collectively be referred to as rebetiko musicians, there are some who sang for records both in Greek and Turkish. However, the music sung in Turkish is the least known, or recognised, or appreciated aspect of the “rebetiko repertoire”, or music made by Greek musicians who may also be regarded as the popular exponents of the Ottoman tradition. These songs have not been reproduced (in CDs) as part of the revival of the genre in Greece. On the other hand, the same songs and their singers are not known in Turkey either. At least some of such songs and their performers should not escape the notice of musical historiography. We find really remarkable pieces on these recordings. This unrecognised music may be termed as "Music in Exile", borrowing a term from literary studies. This music was really made in exile, since the records in question were made not in Greece or Turkey but in the USA in the 1920s and 1930s. If these 78 rpm records are not reproduced they will eventually fall into oblivion.

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I was a participant in the conference on rebetika organised in 1998 by the Conservatory of Athens University and Nicaea Municipality, and delivered a paper at that event. The subject of my paper was Ottoman-Turkish songs in the rebetiko repertoire. My view was that a Turkish perspective was necessary in order to be able to appreciate the nature of this genre. So I gave an introduction to the songs which had been borrowed from the central Ottoman-Turkish music into the peripheral Ottoman-Greek repertoire, and I showed how they were used.

Now I would like to focus on another aspect, complementing what I wrote in that paper: namely the specific category of songs which were performed by Greek musicians but using Turkish lyrics. However to sketch the general picture I shall first refer to some of the points raised in my 1998 paper.

In the existing literature on rebetika it is not easy to discern precise differences between related genres such as *smyrneika* (Smyrna / Izmir style), *nisiotika* (the style of the islands) and *amanedhes* (the form of vocal improvisation known as “*gazel*” in Ottoman music). Moreover, in the CDs released in Greece and other countries one often finds the examples of still other genres, such as *hasapiko* (dance music), *laika* (Greek urban folk music) and *dimotika* (Greek rural folk music). Hence, I cannot draw a precise dividing line between “rebetika proper”, so to speak, and other musics, and I do not know if this is even absolutely necessary. However, at least in the reception of this music, the term “rebetika” often serves as a general or broad term. For the present purpose I, too, shall prefer to use it as a rather loose term and avoid attributing to it a specified definition. As a matter of fact, the term rebetika is sometimes restrictive, since it seems to impose a specified musical genre. However, a closer look into this music reveals the fact that there are various styles and genres which cannot be isolated from the so-called rebetika. Rebetika is of course an established term and we cannot completely give up using it. When I use the term here, what I mean is “Greek popular music” born in the late Ottoman world.

Incidentally, I also have an objection to the term “Smyrneika”. Greek writers and music editors make a distinction between the Smyrneika style and the Piraeus style. The musicians who developed the so-called Smyrneika style may have been born or active in the area of Izmir [Smyrna], but Izmir was not a musical centre in the Ottoman world. Izmir was always a faithful follower of Istanbul music and style. Furthermore, the earliest

recordings of Smyrneika / rebetika music, or the records which were later regarded as part of this genre, were actually made in Istanbul, between 1907 and 1918.

It is not possible to give an exact birth date for this music. However what we can say is that that it existed for between five to eight decades. Rebetika ceased to produce new songs in the mid 1950s, and began to decline. In the late 1960s and during the 1970s and 1980s there was a revival which brought new Greek singers and musical groups onto the popular music stages of Greece, sometimes reintroducing the old rebetika melodies. This created an interest in old or authentic performances, which resulted in an archiving activity, transferring old 78 rpm records to LPs and CDs. The period post-1970 also saw a growing activity of research on rebetika. Several books and articles have been published in Greece and elsewhere on this subject, although I am not sure if a complete, satisfactory history of this music has been written so far. I feel there still remain things to be said on rebetika.

The most authentic sources of rebetiko are, of course, the 78 rpm records. These records were made first in Turkey,<sup>1</sup> and subsequently in Greece and the USA. To be able to describe the nature and trace the history of this musical genre, all of these records, and the material contained therein, needs to be examined. Regardless of where the records were actually manufactured, a Turkish outlook is necessary to be able to evaluate various aspects of the rebetika. As a matter of fact, a true assessment of the genre requires, if not expertise, at least a familiarity with Ottoman music.

As we know, rebetiko borrowed many elements from Ottoman music: the makams, rhythmic patterns, compositional forms, musical terms, and musical instruments. The *bouzouki*, which seems to have been inspired by the *bozuk* (an Anatolian folk musical instrument, member of the baglama family) is the chief musical element in rebetiko. The bouzouki was devised to be used in the urban Greek popular music that developed at the start of the twentieth century.

The presence of all these musical elements is evident in the rebetiko recordings. However, what is more (or most) interesting is the fact that rebetiko also borrowed *melodies* from Ottoman music, i.e. from the central Ottoman music. As a matter of fact, borrowing – of melodies – is an aspect of the Ottoman musical environment, and it is not peculiar solely to rebetika. As we know, Ottoman society was a multi-national society in which the cultures of various ethnic and religious communities existed side by side. Each community preserved its religious music in its place of worship, and its folk music within its customs and mores. The music of various ethnic or religious communities formed the peripheral musical culture of the Empire, while the music of the Ottoman élite constituted the central culture (urban light music was a branch of the classical tradition). The Ottoman central music was cherished not only by Muslim musicians but also by non-Muslims: Greek, Armenian, Jewish and other communities. The interesting point was that a great number of non-Muslim musicians were active both in their own religious milieux – in church, in the synagogue, etc. – contributing to their local or folk music, and also in the sphere of the central music. This peculiarity led to musical exchanges and borrowings. A very typical example of this process is observed in Jewish liturgical music: Jewish cantors singing in Istanbul synagogues borrowed many Ottoman secular or classical songs and performed them in their liturgical ceremonies, on Hebrew sacred texts. One can still hear religious songs or hymns in Istanbul synagogues that maintain their traditional components.

A similar process of borrowing is observed in the case of rebetiko. Since the rebetiko “community” was interested in urban light Ottoman music, Ottoman-Greek musicians borrowed only popular and folk songs and adapted them to the music of the rebetiko world. This required a re-arranging of the borrowed material, the most prominent aspect of which was the creation of different song-texts that would appeal to the rebetika men and women. The Greek musicians sometimes borrowed more serious songs but popularised and converted them to lighter forms. The difference between the Jewish musicians and rebetiko musicians is that the former re-arranged the secular pieces in a manner to be used in liturgical music, whereas the latter re-arranged the already popular pieces for even lighter performance. This re-shaping is a characteristic aspect of Ottoman

music. Of course, the Turco-Greek war of 1918-22 and the ensuing population exchange, and the inevitable nostalgia it caused for the “lost homelands”, accelerated the ongoing borrowing process. Yet even if that tragedy had not happened, borrowing would have continued to exist in the Istanbul style of rebetika. It is not surprising to see other urban popular songs, if not the same, being used by other non-Muslim communities. We have some cases in which one and the same melody was used by both Ottoman-Greek and Ottoman-Jewish (Sefardi) musicians.

On the other hand, the same process of borrowing-lending is also observed in Anatolian rural folk songs. We find rural folk melodies that are still popular both in Turkish and Armenian folk music with different (Turkish or Armenian) lyrics, some of which cannot easily be attributed to either of the two communities.

What kind of songs were borrowed and how they were used within the rebetiko / Greek tradition can be defined by developing a series of categories. Some of these melodies basically remain unchanged on the 78 rpm records, and the Greek singers performed these songs in a style much the same as that of Turkish music. Yet, others, curiously enough, have been used in quite a varied manner, both with regard to the melodies *per se* and their lyrics, and this process we can call “musical adaptation”. This re-shaping seems to have served the immediate expectations of the rebetiko public, alongside the formal or musical needs of the rebetiko genre. Having listened to about 50 rebetiko CDs and a great number of 78 rpm records, I have established 12 categories indicating the sources of the borrowed melodies. Each category includes melodies belonging to the same genre. However, a second category which distinguishes the melodies in terms of their lyrics is necessary. The latter category proposes to study the melody, isolated from the lyrics, to be able to see the nature of the music in question.

The following are my 12 categories:

1. Istanbul folk songs with Turkish lyrics.
2. Istanbul folk songs with Greek lyrics.
3. Izmir folk songs with Turkish lyrics.
4. “Kantos”, in other words Ottoman pop (night club entertainment) songs. This was a new genre born in the late Ottoman period, in the nineteenth century.
5. Folk songs from various regions of Anatolia (some of which are rural folk songs).
6. War songs.
7. Instrumental pieces, especially “tsiftetelli tunes”, performed with Greek words.
8. Instrumental zeybeks.
9. “Aranagmeleri”, or instrumental interludes between songs.
10. Gazels / amanes / vocal improvisations sung with Greek words.
11. Gazels or /and / amanes sung with Turkish words.
12. Popular classical or semi-classic songs, or other songs incorporated into the classical repertoire of Ottoman music.

However detailed this classification may be, it is still not sufficient to indicate the nature of the borrowings. For the Ottoman impact on rebetika one can find more complex examples. In some songs one observes a process of amalgamation, or simply a mixture, which begins with the “aranagmesi” (instrumental section) of a particular song, borrows the first line of a different vocal melody but creates an original or original-looking refrain. In others the rebetiko musician borrows the basic theme of a certain song but develops it with his own variations. One can also distinguish a further category in which the main theme seems very familiar to Turkish ears and is reminiscent of a well-known Ottoman melody yet a closer examination may show that the two songs are not identical.

For a typical example, compare the following melodies: (a) Roza Eskenazi, “*Tserkesian Woman*”, in “*Armenians, Jews, Turks and Gypsies in Old Recordings*”, ed. Petros

Tabouris, *The Greek Phonograph*, The Greek Archives 634, FM Records, Athens, 5201364706347, vol. 8, song no. 16; and (b) an Istanbul folk song (“*Suya iner tavsanlar / Yine oldu aksamlar*”) in *makam saba*. The two melodies are not identical note for note but show great similarities.

It is important for music lovers who are interested in the history of rebetika to identify such songs and compare their Turkish and Greek versions. (I prepared three cassettes juxtaposing various rebetika songs or “loan-songs” and their Turkish versions, and presented them to the organising committee of the conference in 1998.) A more extensive study would be likely to bring out many other loan-songs. Original rebetiko melodies – in other words melodies created by Greek musicians designed for the rebetiko world – must be separated from the borrowed songs.

In the above categories, Ottoman-Turkish songs performed using Greek lyrics, and instrumental pieces performed as vocal compositions with Greek lyrics, are the most common. We should not be misled by tunes sung to Greek words. Whatever the language is, the melody itself should be considered. Most particularly the rural folk songs with Greek words should be dealt with particularly carefully by folk music researchers. At least some of such pieces may have been the Greek versions of older melodies belonging to a particular region in Anatolia, which might have slipped into oblivion, rather than those composed for the rebetiko world. This group of songs may have been rearranged for the rebetiko world. In such cases, the term rebetiko seems to be functioning as an alienating agent – alienating the music in question from Anatolia.

It should be noted that many of the leading Greek musicians included in the rebetiko genre were brought up and received their musical training in Istanbul, Izmir and various towns of Anatolia. They are among the best musicians of the genre: Andonis Dalgas, Roza Eskenazi, Rita Abadzi, Evangelos Papazoglu, Marika Kanaropoulou (from Bursa), Agopios Tomboulis, Lambros Leonarides, Yannis Dragathis and many others almost always made Greek music but in Istanbul style. We know enough about their musical career. The point here is something else.

My interest in the present paper is the *songs performed by Greek musicians with Turkish words*. Although categories 1, 3, and 11 in the above list include pieces performed by Greek musicians with Turkish lyrics, the pieces that fall into this category were not the main point of my 1998 paper, and hence remained unexamined.

Now, let me introduce this music, the conditions in which it was produced and the identity of its musicians.

Most of these records were made in the USA and Greece, and have not been included in the CD re-issues released in Greece and other countries, although some of such songs were sung to Greek texts they have not been included in the CD re-issues. This is not unreasonable because a Greek music publisher cannot necessarily be expected to reproduce tunes sung to Turkish lyrics in their rebetiko output. However, the practice of including all of the Turkish songs set to Greek words in the rebetiko repertoire, while at the same time excluding similar kinds of music and performance solely because the words are in Turkish, isolates the song-text from its melody. This is a deficiency, at least in research if not for commercial music companies.

On the other hand, these records and their musicians are not known in Turkey either, since the musicians moved to the USA and Greece in the 1920s and 1930s, which represents a long time gap. Furthermore, perhaps not surprisingly, none of these musicians featured on the main stages of the musical life of Istanbul or Izmir when they were living in Turkey. They all appealed only to the Greek sections of Istanbul, Izmir or other cities when they were living in Turkey.

The question is: should we not include this music – i.e. the songs with Turkish words performed by Greek musicians – in the rebetiko repertoire? One can immediately hear the objection: rebetiko is by nature Greek and its songs are always sung to Greek words, hence music in Turkish words belongs to Turkish music and these musicians should be regarded as part of the Ottoman tradition.

The truth is that the music in question is an exceptional case; it stands on the borderline between the peripheral rebetika and Ottoman-Turkish central music. It is neither exclusively Greek nor exclusively Turkish. So whose music is it? And who were its audiences in the United States? It is not easy to identify the audiences. We may assume that the songs sung by Greeks with Turkish words were addressed to both Turks and Greeks living in the United States at the time. Some of the records were released by Parsekian, an Armenian or American-Armenian producer, which may indicate that they also appealed to the Armenians living in the United States.

Apart from Parsekian (also the name of the record company), the records released in the United States were produced by Odeon, Columbia and Victor in the 1920s and 1930s. I would now like to introduce some of these musicians.

The most interesting of these Greek musicians is **Achilleas Poulos**. Although I have many of his records in my personal collection I know nothing about his life. Most probably he received musical training in the Istanbul area and moved to the United States in the 1920s (the opening line of one of his songs is “*Neden geldim Amerika’ya*”, “Why did I come to America?”). Achilleas was a remarkable musician who could sing many different Turkish songs in various styles ranging from classical and semi-classical to light-entertainment tunes. He also sang beautiful *gazels* (vocal improvisations) in both Turkish and Greek. His Turkish recordings (naturally he sang with Greek words too) in my personal collection would occupy at least two CDs.

**Marika Papagika**, a well-known female singer, is another Greek musician who recorded Turkish songs in addition to Greek ones. Unlike Achilleas Poulos, Marika stays closer only to the folk or popular genres of Turkish music. One of her Turkish records is particularly interesting: “*Çanakkale içinde vurdular beni*” (I was shot dead in Chanakkale / Dardanelles). This is a very famous song in Turkish folk music. It is so popular that for many years it has been taught in music classes in primary and secondary schools. It is a folk elegy about a young Turkish soldier who died in the First World War during the Battle of Chanakkale (Dardanelles, 1915). The song is not converted into a light melody, as is the case with many rebetiko songs; it is a serious performance. Her record is also the oldest recorded performance of this song in Turkish music, and in my country nobody knows this. Marika Papagika made this recording immediately after the Turco-Greek war (Columbia 59818, USA, 1923), and the fact that the singer is here addressing a Turkish audience is striking at that date. It seems Marika, this Ottoman-Greek musician, stills feels herself a part of the Ottoman tradition. Marika made three other Turkish folk music records in the USA: “*Ben yarimi gordum*” (“I’ve seen my darling today”, a *karshilama*, a kind of dance tune) in 1922 (Columbia E - 7171); “*Sendeki kashlar bende de olsa*” (“If I had such beautiful eyebrows as yours”), an Aegean folk song (Columbia E-5272, USA, 1923) and “*Sinanai / Shinanay* (Columbia E-5283, 1923).

The following are the names of some of the other Greek musicians who also sang songs with Turkish words:

Konstantinos Marcelos (active in the US);

Lefteris Melemenlis (sang Anatolian folk songs for the Favorite record company in Turkey, then moved to Greece and continued to make Turkish-language records);

Demetrius Evstathiadis (active in Greece);

Theodores Demirtzoglu (Anatolian folk songs, active in Greece);

Kostas Gandinis (probably active in the US);

Virginia Maridou (probably active in the US);

Demetrius Evstathiadis (active in Greece);

Olga Douly (active in the US).

None of these names is known in Turkey.

**Roza Eskenazi**, probably the most famous female singer of the genre, sang just a few pieces in Turkish, but in many songs she included Turkish words here and there. Roza was born in Istanbul, and appealed to the Greek section of the city. In 1953 she visited Istanbul and made a record of a “*huzzam turku*” (a Turkish urban folk song in *makam huzzam*), “*Eminem’e babasi chikolata almıs*” / “My Emine’s father bought her chocolate”), probably with Turkish musicians. This record was included in a CD released in 1998 in the United States entitled “*Women of Istanbul*” (Traditional Crossroads, produced by Harold G. Hagopian, 1998, USA). In the enclosed booklet we find this information: “This recording is not known in Turkey as it was recorded for a New York based label (Balkan) whose producer happened to be in Istanbul during her stay there.” The same album was also released in Istanbul by Kalan Musical Productions the same year.

These are the records I have seen and listened to so far. There may be many more that I have not been able to access. Apart from vocal pieces we also find instrumental pieces (*taksim*s, instrumental improvisation) on the records released in the United States, which might have appealed both to Turkish, Greek and Armenian audiences.

The reproductions of old rebetiko records on CDs, and also ensuing research on this music, have revealed many aspects of the genre. Yet this present aspect of the rebetika still remains unexplored. Songs sung in Turkish are the least known, or recognised, or appreciated aspect of the “rebetiko repertoire”, or music made by Greek musicians who may also be regarded as the marginal popular exponents of the Ottoman tradition. These songs have not been reproduced (on CDs) in any country since the revival of the genre in Greece. At least some of these songs and their performers should not escape the notice of music historians. We find really remarkable pieces on these recordings.

The Ottoman-Greeks who had to emigrate to Greece in the 1920s and 1930s continued to make music in a country where they were not born: they made music in exile. However, the music made in the United States requires a different attribute: “Music that fell into oblivion”.

As long as these 78 rpm records are not reproduced they will be doomed to gather dust in obscure archives, eventually being excluded from history. The purpose of my paper is to draw attention to this remarkable repertoire.

## NOTES

1. Cemal Ünlü, a researcher of Turkish 78 rpm records, presented a paper in 1998 at the conference in Athens in which he gave a list of rebetika or other records appealing to the Greek population of Ottoman Turkey.

## MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Four songs by Greek singers who sang in Turkish

1. ACHILLEAS POULOS: Vocal improvisation in *makam acemaşiran*:

“*Kimseyi dil-teng-i-âzâr etme, sultanlık budur*”

Lyrics: Nazîm (XVIII century poet)

Victor V-76000 A.

2. ACHILLEAS POULOS: Vocal improvisation in *makam nihavend*, with Greek words:

“*Tin teleftaia mou stigmî*”.

Victor 68900, USA

3. MARIA PAPAGIKA:

“*Çanakkale içinde vurdular beni*” [“I was shot dead in Çanakkale”]

Columbia 59818, USA, 1923.

4. MARIA PAPAGIKA: Aegean folk song in Turkish:

“*Sendeki kaşlar bende olsa*” [“If I had such beautiful eyebrows as yours”]

Columbia E-5272, USA.

*Music that fell into oblivion*

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