

CHAPTER 18

Censorship in Rebetiko from 1937 onwards, and a specific case involving Tsitsanis and Vamvakaris

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Let us start with a brief look back into historical aspects of censorship issues in Greece:

During the centuries of the Ottoman empire a remarkably liberal approach existed, with no official censorship. Later, with the establishment of an internationally recognised Greek State (1830), Greek Press was already relatively widely accepted and no censorship applied. The situation did not change and carried on the same way into the 20th century. Generally speaking, Greek public life did not suffer under censorship for centuries. As regards music itself, not even thoughts of controlling music in any possible way came up, all the way into the first third of the 20th century.

With the beginning of the 20th century, the international record industry made its first breakthrough into the Greek speaking market, producing a relatively large amount of recorded material of Greek interest. Recordings were taking place not in Greece itself (it had been considered an undeveloped market) but in cities like Istanbul or Smyrna and covered all music genres popular at the time, including of course rebetika or “proto-rebetika”. After the military events that ended up with a substantial expansion of Greek territory but also with the inflow into Greece of a very large population expelled from Asia Minor, which included of course the vast majority of musicians and interpreters of Greek origin that survived, the known procedure continued in Greece, for material of Greek interest. In the year of 1930 a factory, belonging to the British Gramophone Group, was established in Athens and the management was passed over to a Greek commercial group.

From the early Istanbul / Smyrna recordings and up into the 1930s, no censorship problems occurred. Only control exercised was by the Industry itself, but the guidelines had been to promote exactly those numbers that were likely to bring best return on investment. The repertoire covered two main branches: the so called “light” music, with operette – like or dance songs of direct European influence and the local / traditional music including “rebetiko” or “proto-rebetiko”. And this latter branch was, in terms of production percentage, much larger than the former.

Let us now take a closer look into the musical and sociological events in Greece in the period we have been examining so far:

Knowingly, Greek musical tradition is an oriental one, from ancient times on. But starting perhaps in the 18th century. an initially small part of the Greek society commenced looking towards the Western civilization in all aspects, including of course music. This tendency grew bigger with the years and in the 20th century the “Western” oriented part already makes out a significant percentage in the big cities. It is thus understandable that this part of the society is not at all happy when kinds of music like the Smyrneika style or the proto-rebetika songs are gaining publicity and strength. Indeed, in more and more parts of the cities the gramophones play more and more of the “oriental” type of music, especially as the refugees from Asia Minor are gradually integrated into the Greek life.

Another important parameter is the increasing use among the low-life of drugs and related stuff. And this is mirrored directly into the content of song verses. A significant part of newer or older songs is dealing with this aspect and the good or the bad associated with it.

Under these circumstances the conservative, solid bourgeoisie easily correlates refugees and other, non – integrated parts of the society with both drugs and orientally influenced music. There has always been sporadic criticism in the press against “oriental” music, already from the 19th century, but there have been positive statements too. However, especially after the inflow of about one million refugees from Asia Minor in the then small Greek state, the dislike among the “Western oriented” established society increases more and more, as we enter the second and especially the third decade of the century.

In the press we often see comments where Asia Minor refugees are urged to shake off “the music of Arabs, Persians and other Barbarians [!], music that has been thrown out even from Turkey itself”. (Kemal did indeed try as hard as he could.)

Another comment, from the year 1917, signed by a well known poet of the time: Describing his feelings when listening to those songs of the Orient, he wonders:

Who is this crying Greek? Who has put those lowly wails into his mouth?”. He then goes on asking for “ruthless chase of the Turkish musical state established within the free Greek state and for the pitiless taxation of the santur, the “Asian piano”. Every import of music records from Smyrna should be prohibited. Orientalists will perhaps mourn over the chasing of a music so passionate, but I suppose that the very passion of this music is the barbaric element in it, a non-structured passion revealing a nomadic and fatalistic race full of grief and not capable of expressing something clear about her misery. And in the end, to speak clearly, the presence of this music in Greece is not a matter of racism or of good taste but one of public security.

The man directly associates the songs he dislikes with plain crime, and he is not alone in this direction. Other scholars, on the other hand, were fond of the popular songs of the time, the rebetiko that is, or at least tolerated them. Manolis Calomoiris, one of the best-known Greek composers of the 20th century, although having studied in Germany and Austria, thus being totally Western oriented, had said: “If I had to choose between *amanes* and foxtrot, I would definitely go for the former”.

But no-one, of course, tolerated drugs or crime. So from the triangle “rebetiko music–drugs–crime” that was responsible, according to the public opinion, for the musical decadence of the society, the only element remaining uncontrolled was the rebetiko music.

So, what could have been easier than just imposing a ban on rebetiko, it is that simple. But here we should not forget that we were (still...) living in a liberal society. A ban on songs was somewhat difficult to digest. And suddenly, something happened that changed things dramatically: in the year of 1936 a dictatorship was established in the country, under the leadership of the almost legendary Ioannis Metaxas.

The Metaxas regime had all the characteristics of a national-fascist regime of the time. Weeks only after take over of power, the regime supplies the legal background for controlling practically everything in public life, by establishing the so-called Ministry for Press and Tourism. But even before this ministry had the time to prepare or pass any relevant legal procedures for a control of musical records or anything at all, the first case of prohibition of a song appeared: The Barbara case.

One of the most well known and brilliant composers of the Smyrna school rebetiko, Panagiotis Tountas, “composed” a song under that name: The music was stolen from a popular Romanian folk song, unknown in Greece but of an easily acceptable musical pattern. A friend, a professional translator, has provided the translation of the locally added lyrics:

When darkness falls, our Barb’ra

Spends all night trawling
In Glyfada by the waterfront
Catching fish, big fish

Every evening in her hand
She holds a rod for fishing
And waits for it to twitch
To see what she has caught

And now an eel, a veritable stud
Was very well equipped
To give our Barb a prick
Her lightning rod to wriggle

Barbara did not lose her head
Grabbed hold in both her hands
And squeezed it tight --
She shook with joy and laughter

Watch out Barb'ra girl
And get your satisfaction
An eel like that with such a head
Won't often come your way

Look out, dear Barb, don't let go
Slipping through your fingers
To disappear back down again
Keep that head in a good firm grip

She tucks it away inside her creel
And shrieks with pleasure, saying:
"I have the art, I have the skill
and every fish I will make mine

All night I'll wait for my big fish
My big and juicy fish
To come and bite
And watch as the line stiffens".

The sexual innuendo is obvious. What needs explanation is that Glyfada is a sea resort near Athens where certainly one can go out fishing (trawling too) but, it also was (and is) full of night clubs, tavernas etc. suitable for other kinds of trawling. The song quickly became the hit of the time. No corner in Athens without the song being played. And of course the case was repeatedly reported in a negative way in the press.

For the first time in history of Greece, a song was prohibited. In the Athenian press we read:

Following a direction from the Minister of the Interior, the Piraeus Police Directorate has communicated a circular to all local departments by which the use of the musical record "Barbara" is prohibited. Individuals singing this song or playing it on gramophones will be prosecuted.

Days later, records from the shops were confiscated and the composer, singer and legal representative of the record company were brought to court, where they have been condemned to fines.

This spontaneous reaction of the “Minister of the Interior” could have been an isolated case, likely to have happened in many societies even of Western Europe of the time. Unfortunately though, it was meant to radically change musical and social history of our country for ever. Very soon after this single case of prohibition, numerous police activities of record confiscations and similar actions start to accumulate, until finally the lawsuit for a drastic and organised control of every aspect of public life in Greece has been worked out by the “Ministry of Press”. I will not enter into details but will focus on music only:

Mandatory law No. 1619 / 1939, Art. 21:

Before any recording activities an application for record permission is to be submitted to the Directorate for Enlightenment of the Populus in the Ministry, supported by copies of the verses and the music sheets of the song to be recorded. The application is forwarded to the relevant committee composed of the Director for Enlightenment, an official from Inland Press Department, an official from the Enlightenment Department and two artists experienced in popular and folk music. [...] The committee has to produce a judgment and to this purpose it may ask for performance of the song by the artist, musical director and instruments planned to appear on the record. The committee may prohibit the recording altogether or ask for modification of either the verses or the music of the piece, in order to give the permission, in case the submitted elements are contradictory, fully or partly, to the morals of virtue or decency, corrupt the artistic sense of the People or falsify the authentic spirit of Greek tradition...

This was the beginning of a new era in the rebetiko scene. It was serious; these people really meant it. And indeed, the whole scene in Greek musical life changed, like it did of course in every other aspect, too. All established artists of the time had to abide accordingly, the result being that all songs touching important social or other problems disappeared, and of course it was exactly this kind of songs that had given rebetiko the style we know so well. From now on there was only space for harmless love songs or songs of “joy” and of ideal societies with no problems at all.

From the side of music, not many things changed in the so called “light” music, since it was Western oriented already. But in the rebetiko scene, we start observing a slow but steady turn of orientation towards Western rules. The solo instruments (bouzouki and baglama) were retained, since for many years already they did not support oriental intervals. But more and more, “primo secondo” harmonies are introduced in place of traditional oriental monophonic / unisono melody, other well tempered instruments like accordion or even piano are spread, the guitar as an accompanying instrument gradually learns chords more complicated than mere major and minor schemes, even diminished chords appear.

All these changes had started before censorship already. But the new situation accelerates the Western penetration and creates a positive climate towards the “modern” approach. It is also remarkable that practically not one artist from the old schools reacted, with only one exception, the big Smyrna School componist Evangelos Papazoglou, who never submitted one single song for approval until his death, several years later. It is interesting, here, to see how Markos Vamvakaris reacted to the new situation. In his autobiography he says: “I started writing what they wanted me to write. I modified my writing, to abide by the rules.”

So Greece had to live with control on music, both melody and verses, from 1937 on and well into the 1970s and 1980s. My generation grew up with this scheme. It was only in recent times that censorship first fell into disuse and then was officially removed.

The biggest of the musicians that stamped the new style of rebetiko under censorship is of course the legendary Vassilis Tsitsanis. The ingenious composer and interpreter of

rebetiko was a native of Central Greece, having no relation at all with the refugees. He visited Western music schools in his youth and developed a style that has become typical of the new rebetiko. And, he was one of the “artists experienced in popular and folk music” the Mandatory Law 1619 speaks of. According to his own formation, “Metaxas had gathered us there to erase bemols from the music sheets submitted to the committee for approval.” What does he mean by that?

As we said, typical rebetiko music was already being performed with well-tempered, Western scales. But despite this, typical oriental modes such as *ussak*, *kurdi*, even chromatic modes such as *hijaz*, *huzzam*, *nihavent*, etc. did not disappear. They just changed their names and were all designated as “major” or “minor” accordingly. But in order to keep the structure of a *hijaz*, for example, a sharp or flat sign had to be introduced so that the three-half-tone interval is created. Well, it is exactly these signs that Tsitsanis was erasing from the musical text in order to make it look Western, according to his opinion at least.

Now we can turn to a specific case where Tsitsanis recalls, many many years later, an example of his work. It is registered in a TV production of the year 1975, signed by Costas Ferris, the famous film director. The production is centered on Tsitsanis and Ferris puts some questions regarding Metaxas regime and the censorship. I have of course officially to thank Costas Ferris for letting me refer to the episode.

Well, Tsitsanis openly admitted, in this production, that he was acting as a “censor” of music at that time. And he gives the following example: I cite:

“Look, Costas, this Metaxas censorship was really necessary after all, it was positive for the music. My job was to help my colleagues correct their melody, by rubbing off the bemolia, so as to pass from the censorship.”

“What is exactly this Bemolia, Vassilis?”

Grasping his bouzouki, Tsitsanis continued:

“Markos had submitted a song for approval, by the name of ‘Alaniara’. In a specific passage he was singing ‘Kathe brady tha SE perimeno’. This SE was one half tone higher than it should. This is a bemolia. So I corrected it, striking off the sign, and the song was granted the approval.”

“So you are saying that the Metaxas regime wanted to make the songs more Western influenced, “European” so to speak.”

He smiled and answered:

“More Greek, I would say.”

For Tsitsanis the “Greek” way was the Western minor scale, not the chromatic one. Lowering the pitch of this critical note by one half tone makes the mode a minor rather than a *nihavent*, since it turns the chromatic tetrachord into a diatonic one. Neither Tsitsanis nor Markos (who simply obeyed) were aware of this theoretical background but both knew exactly what they were doing.

This is the episode, as recorded by Costas Ferris. However, I have my strong doubts:

The record we are discussing was issued in the year 1935 (the exact date is not known, but the relevant catalogue numbers of the record company are known). Given the fact that the “Barbara” song was banned in September of this year, a very brief time span of less than three months remains between the time the sheet music was said to be submitted for examination and the date of release of the ready recording. This time span is much too

short and, what is more, in the beginning the control of recordings was limited to confiscation of existing records from the shop shelves, whereas preventive censorship (control of sheet music etc. before recording) only started in 1939, so the whole episode should be questioned. In any case, what really counts is Tsitsanis' negative attitude against "oriental" modes, a fact repeatedly stressed by him, and the readiness of Markos to abide by the rules: the critical note is not raised in the record.

The big mistake of Tsitsanis is that he was not aware of the fact that Greek traditional music belongs and has always belonged, to the big family of oriental musics. And, peculiarly enough, no-one knew by then. With one big exception, the great Simon Karras, a researcher who has proved beyond doubt that traditional folk music of Mainland Greece, Asia Minor and other Greek speaking regions) together with ecclesiastical music are the two parts of a whole, that of course belongs to the family of oriental musics. But while the educated ecclesiasticals knew more or less about the theory behind it, the traditional musicians of Greek folk music did not know even the names of the modes they were playing.

So censorship was established and stayed for quite some decades. Very few years from 1937, World War II broke out and for five years there was no musical production in Greece. After the war there has been a small interval of less than one year, where censorship was forgotten, but immediately thereafter it came back. Now there was another parameter the government was very keen on: the communist issue: Nothing should remind of the civil war among governmental troops and the communist-oriented illegal army. So rebetiko died sometime between the late 1940s and late 1950s, but censorship went on until well after the re-establishment of democracy in 1974. Today there is no censorship of any way, thank god. But the quality of today's music cannot compare to the time rebetiko was alive, even under severe censorship.

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