

CHAPTER 19

Seven Poems

Jim Potts

Greek Music

The salty tang of sea-ports;
The *belle-laide* voice of Bellou:
Rebetic.

Bellou's Birthday Burial

29 August 1997 (died 27/8/1997)

"A Communist"

"A gambler"

"A jail-bird"

"A Lesbian".

Irrelevant remarks —

A vitriolic reputation.

In recent years,

Abandoned,

Penniless;

Peddling her own cassettes

In Kolonaki Square,

Like she once hussled

Rizospastis.

Wounded by a British shell

In December '44.

Wounded by indifferent friends

In the years before she died.

She accused them all, and cursed,

How she cursed her *koinonía* ,

Complained of colleagues

Who'd deserted her,

Blamed all of those who didn't care.

Embittered and in pain,

The black fish swarmed around her:

She died of cancer of the throat.
The salty voice long silenced —
The greatest voice in Greece, for me.
The burial's today —
But not beside Tsitsánis —
No space for her last wish.
“Everything's a lie”, she sang —
Then left; through one of life's two doors.

Iannis Xenákis: 29.5.1922- 2.2.2001

Xenákis preferred to be photographed
With half his face in shadow.
A British shell
Exploded,
Took one eye
And half his face.
I can feel the wound within his music,
Sense the loss, the long nights of pain,
The sentence to death and the exile,
While he relives them all again.

Stavrula's Father

He became a Communist
In Metaxas' time.
He never changed his mind.
Then came the Nazis; more tortured friends.
Whole villages burned, murders and reprisals.
The Civil War they fought and lost.
He retreated over the border.
But Tito's path was not his own;
He went further North, to the land of Gottwald.
He was given work and welcomed there.
Unswervingly pro-Moscow,
Even after '68; he never wavered once.
He dreamed of Greece,
Even after years in jail,
A politico in Corfu....
But he missed the fruit,
Water-melons most of all.

One day the Czechs imported some —
A Bulgarian lorry brought them in,
Twenty-five he bought at once,
Kept them on his balcony,
In spite of the dust from the smoke and coal.
Every visitor was handed one:
“Páre karpouízi, síntrofe!”
He sunk his teeth into the cold, sweet flesh,
The crisp red juice of memory,
The gush of juices, the life he’d lost.
He devoured it with passion,
Swallowed the black seeds of exile,
Gulped them down greedily.
Black seeds. Red melon.
He was refuse everywhere. Unwanted rind.
Unable to leave the mines of Ostrava,
Forbidden to set foot back in Greece,
His lungs and nostrils filled with coal dust.
When he died, far from the sea,
His only daughter changed her mind.
Stavrula smiled, and learned to sing.

***“Na ta poume?”* Christmas Eve, 1983
Popular Market, Thessaloniki, Greece**

Christmas Eve, a Saturday;
Children with triangles,
The traditional carol.
”Na ta poume? Na ta poume?”
Under the weight of a barrel-organ
From Constantinople
The refugee’s nephew stoops and wobbles,
The relic strapped like a cross to his back;
He staggers along from shop to shop:
“Na ta poume ? Na ta poume ?”
Not for him to turn the handle,
To sing the tune his uncle grinds:
He thumps and taps the tambourine,
Palms the membrane so it squeals and moans,
Does oriental dances by the butchers’ stalls,

In the coffee-shops and *ouzeris*;
The old refugee, long since retired,
Like the listening butcher, the backgammon players,
Still inhabits The City, still walks its streets,
Only stops staring into the middle distance,
Lets hand stop winding *laterna* handle,
When groups of young Thracian gypsies,
Magpie musicians, faster on their feet,
Always eager to steal a trick,
Sneak round in front, beat him to the best-filled shops,
Playing shrill shawms and beating drums, laughing
As they overtake him
To an audience with coins to throw, —
But they warm no hearts, nor steal the show.
Though the cumbersome barrel-organ must stand outside,
Greeks are glad to see it still alive,
Still decorated in the same old way:
The *laterna* with its Constantinople label.
It may be cumbersome, but it's melodic;
The folk-songs have been harmonized:
Byzantine pins on a Roman cylinder.
The shawm players may make much more noise,
Pied-pipers with their wooden oboes piercing through the din
Of the market-dealers' Christmas cries:
But they can't negotiate all the notes
Of "*Kalyn iméran árchontes*".
They have not walked his Calvary,
The Calvary of the Great Idea.

Greek Identity

It was a Conference on Rebetology:
Much talk of Turkish influence,
Oriental modes
And Vamvakáris.
I asked about *Kantádes*,
The Ionian Islands, Italian links.
Were they any less Hellenic?
— It wasn't all monophony
And Turkish "*Aman*" wails.

Why had they been *privileged*,
In the histories of the nation?
The Greeks knew how to harmonise,
To use well-tempered scales.
Polyphonic harmonies
Mandolins, guitars,
Preceded *bouzoúki*, *baglamá*
In Modern Greece, it seems:
So why were they any “*less Greek*”?
The question was “*too big*”.

Gaida-Man

The wizened old gaida-man,
Crumple-legged on the pavement,
Tobacco-leaf skin scarred with patches of red,
Playing his bagpipe. Made by hand, played by heart.

A frail seventy-five, a Thracian from Evros;
He spoke broken Greek; his tongue may have tripped
But his fingers were nimble,
The music ecstatic from his squeezed sack of breath.

We gave him four thousand drachmas
For sharing his art,
For giving a glimpse —
The last life-breath of “folk”.

Theodorákis 1974 (Seven Years Later)

So the Junta has finally fallen.....
The bouzoukis go wild in the streets.
As if expecting the ‘*Christos Anésti*’
Crowds are gathered in the midnight squares.
The poets light candles with the people,
Pass the message to whomsoever they meet.
And each flame is a song of freedom
For so long only glimpsed from afar
Flickering on some distant shore.
Cupped hands now keep it burning,
Carry it back to the mountains and islands

Never again to be extinguished; —
A beacon, brighter than ever before....
All these little gifts of God!

Addis Ababa, July 1974

Zagóri

Nicholas Nínos, the folk clarinettist
Played the Zagorissian dances
Like nobody else before or since,
With Manoúsis, Mitsos and Bekáris
On tambourine, violin and lute.
People came from miles around,
Crossed rivers, gorges, bridges, mountains
By mule, by donkey; climbed *kalderíma*.
The villages with *panigýria*
Opened their doors and opened their hearts.
In the days before the electric lamp,
The amplifier, the microphone,
Before the road, the bus, the car,
In the villages of high Zagóri,
From Monodéndri, from Dílofo,
From Aspráγγελos, Tsepélovo,
They danced till late to the *taxíma*,
Long before they were recorded.

*With thanks to Alexios Vasdekis (retired cheese-producer,
aged 79, from Vitsa and pre-Nasser Egypt).*

It's a round spinning world (song version, *Zembékiko*)

It's a round, spinning world we live in
And the legs of the table
Are not of an equal length;
As we reach out for the cup,
It crashes to the floor.

It's a round, spinning world we live in
And the eyes of the madmen
Who'll inherit the earth

Look down in despair
Through their doors in the sky.

In the good old days of Metaxás (song)

The Director of Enlightenment
Didn't like my song
He's forbidden the recording —
Says the words are wrong.

I refused to let them censor it
So now I sing in gaol —
I'm singing for the prison guards,
No one dares go my bail.
My songs are all prohibited
When I'm free I can't perform
The day will come, just mark my words,
When I'll take the world by storm.

From the book *Corfu Blues*, Ars Interpres, Stockholm, 2006

http://arsint.com/book_j_p.html