

CHAPTER 2

An approach to playing violin in rebetiko

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This essay started as an attempt to compile some sort of bibliography on the subject of the violins heard on recordings of rebetika. Not fluent in Greek, I am limited to English language sources and the help of some very generous friends, but it's painfully apparent that not much printed information got rounded up. The prize of the search was Lisbet Torp's magnificent book on the violinist Salonikios.¹ Sleeve notes on LPs and CDs were also helpful, particularly those of Dr. Martin Schwartz² and David Soffa. More unpublished information came from the Detroit record collector Dino Pappas, in his carefully handwritten (and sometimes wonderfully rowdy) notes accompanying cassettes of 78-rpm classic-era rebetika and demotika music, and in personal communications until his death. Some of his famous collection is resident now in Athens, possibly accessible to persons interested in the Greek, Turkish and Armenian music of Greece and Asia Minor. [See Bibliography.]

But barge we now ahead to fill up a page or two, with the intent of helping fellow Anglophone violinists or fiddlers to ingest some of this magnificent music. Apologies to scholars – this is written by a practical musician who chases good tunes, tries to play them as their inventors did, and whose hands speak Greek better than his face.

For a good introduction to the general concept of rebetika, see the bibliography. There are gems of understanding there, not the least from the pen of our wily Ed Emery. Many of these gems have bibliographies of their own, adding up to a long inspiring winter of reading by the fire. Preferably with some of Dino's breathtaking records for further inspiration.

Well, assuming one can pull tunes out of a violin to some extent, how does one go about playing rebetika? Enter here my old friend Jack Kalionzes: "Forget reading and writing about playing music. What good will that do? Either you're going to play it or listen to it, otherwise forget it – writing isn't going to help. You have to realize, with all those scales and arpeggios and crescendos... Greek violin has things in it that aren't even NOTES. Get next to some of those singers with the rubber band voices. Pay attention to them, and just figure out how to do that on the violin."

What is rebetika violin?

Some folks define rebetika as the music of the bouzouki-wielding Piraeus musicians of the 1930s. Others include music from Asia Minor, notably Smyrna. Some of the Smyrna musicians were musically educated (Ogdontakis, Peristeris, Tundas), and they tended to have larger bands, different instruments (violins, outia, kanonakia et al), more elaborate orchestrations and more melismatic singers. The pioneer studies of these styles call them the Piraeus and Smyrna schools. Good enough.

But you rarely hear violins and bouzoukia together – those Piraeus and Smyrna schools didn't overlap very much. Occasionally great results did arise from overlaps, for instance on Yannis Papaioannou's recording of *Pende Ellines Ston Adi*, where the bouzouki seconds the violin as an outi normally would.

And 'rebetika violin'? I wouldn't waste much time searching ethnomusicological literature for perfect definitions of a distinct style. The violinists who recorded on rebetika songs did what they knew how to do, and that ran the gamut of what Greeks did with violins in folk (demotiki) and popular (laiki) music. The most distinctive rebetika

instrumental style was invented by the bouzouki and baglama players of the Piraeus school, right there on the spot. Most of the violin players ventured much further afield and had occasions to play a wider musical spectrum.

I submit that to play rebetika violin, one need just listen to and absorb a significant number of rebetika songs (like bluegrass, it ain't rebetika without the singing), and then apply violin parts that follow the idiom and do no harm to the musical style.

The way they play in Greece and Asia Minor.

Even in the 'classical era', there was crossover by musicians between dimotika (village) and laika (city, including rebetika) idioms. The same suspects show up playing violins on all sorts of recordings. Remember that record companies were out to sell product to multiple audiences, and that as part of the 'factory', musicians would be called on to speak all the musical languages they possibly could. As an example, Andreas Tsekouras summoned a band, including the superb violinist Kyriakos Gouventas, for a concert at the 2002 Hydra gathering. It followed his all-encompassing talk on the Epicurean ideal and development of Greek popular music from the 19th century to the present. The cast of exceptional musicians and singers he assembled was able to provide an illuminating example of the many strains and styles coexisting within and without rebetika.

Quoting Martin Schwartz again, "In the early part of this (20th) century, Greek musicians of Turkey performed Turkish and Greek music and hybrids thereof. The Greek musicians of Asia Minor were also well acquainted with music of Romania, Italy, and European music in general".³ We should not imagine that the violinists on the old recordings were the products of cultural isolation – they were eager to assimilate whatever music they came across, as a way to expand their audience.

The recordings of Semsis and Ogdontakis show them both to have been exceptional players, particularly in their elaborate solo dance pieces, syrta, tsifte tellia, karsilamades. But in accompanying singers, their lines were less elaborate, perhaps sometimes due to hastily written arrangements, played a few times for the recording session and never repeated? Many of those recordings include a little flourish by the violin for dessert, where the player unlimbers elegant decorations and agility. By comparison, the recordings of Marika Papaghika were made by a band that performed regularly together, with various violinists.⁴ She even owned her own nightclub on Long Island, and recorded songs of many styles including rebetika from 1918 to 1929. Her violinists (Zoumbas, Naftis, Gretsisi, Makedonas) were also excellent players, naturally of varying styles, but the ensemble playing was very well integrated.

It is interesting to compare modern Greek violin, as represented by players such as Kyriakos Gouventas or Stathis Koukoularis, with the best of the classical era recordings, leaving amplification effects out of the equation. The elaborate gracings of the older generation seem tighter and more subtle, while current practice in Greece and Asia Minor includes wider gracings and tonal shadings, gulps and slides, in general more florid or exaggerated. Not to mention the cello effect of the fifth string sported by Mr. Gouventas.

How did they learn?

Current American practice for learning idiomatic music of various cultures (Virginia and Tennessee included) is centered on the existence of week-long 'camps' where students receive detailed examples, instruction and sometimes music transcriptions from cultural insiders. But the classical era violinists had no such luxuries – at best, an apprenticeship with a working musician.⁵ The prime requirements were a good ear and good memory, in addition to the ability to play the instrument. Dr. Schwartz describes Tountas (who also 'discovered' Roza Eskenazi): 'As a youth he traveled widely and studied folk music of many peoples'. The travels included Africa and Europe. He also describes Spiros Peristeris (another Athens recording director and excellent mandolin-guitar-bouzouki

player) attending an Italian night school in Constantinople, and becoming ‘chief mandolinist in a prestigious Smyrna string ensemble’.

Lisbet Torp tell us that Salonikios had a father and a grandfather who were makers and players of violins. By the age of ten he himself was a promising musician; in his early teens he was playing for the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire; until he was 36 he was on the road playing through Asia Minor, Persia, Palestine, Egypt and Ethiopia, with long intervals in Constantinople. ‘Semsis had a very good ear for music and he had picked up various musical styles and large repertoire in the various places which he visited during his travels’.⁶

From Texas-Mexican culture comes another anecdote, as I recall, from the accordionist Narciso Martinez. Yes, yes, this isn’t rebetika, but here’s one example of how ear musicians learn. In a nearby town there were brass band concerts on weekends, and Martinez liked the music and hoped to learn to play it. He had a compadre with a good memory who would sit on a hillside with him and listen to the concerts. Afterwards at home, said compadre would whistle each tune repeatedly (after one hearing!) until Martinez had worked it out on the accordion. Greek musicians call such untutored learning ‘stealing’.

Anglo fiddle vs Greek

Anglo folk music is full of examples of unschooled fiddlers with abilities ranging from crude to very good. In early American commercial recordings, fiddlers’ abilities ranged from the sublime to the ridiculous – the recordings sold mainly to their peers and local audiences.

There appears to be a difference between that down-home music and the offerings of the recording companies operating in Greece at the same time. Some recorded rebetika music was technically simple (although musically very powerful), and was composed and played by unschooled musicians. But most of that was in Piraeus style (singers with bouzoukis and an attitude) and rarely included violins.

The Smyrnaica where violins or liras were present was arranged and performed by more polished performers, and the recording companies apparently made a policy of obtaining the best possible violinists. So much so that Dimitris Semsis and Ioannis Dragatsis (Ogdontakis) acted as recording directors for Columbia, and Semsis for HMV as well. Each of them appears on literally hundreds of recordings, of a wide variety of music and songs. A question arises: were there other violinists of their caliber or near it, who were not recorded in this era for failure to pass these gatekeepers?

An Anglo or American fiddler venturing from safe old traditions into Greek playing is in for some big, but certainly not superhuman, changes. Follow the examples of Semsis and Tountas above, and of Walter Starkie (do read *Raggle Taggle* sometime), of Arthur Smith playing the blues, and of Stephane Grapelli entering the jazz world: unfurl those ears, and address the following transitions.

From a few comfortable major, minor or modal scales, to the Greek and Asia Minor canon of *dhromi* (roads) with names, whose notes aren’t all available on a piano, and whose intervals include wide gaps and might appear eccentric to a newcomer. Sometimes you drive those roads differently uphill than down.

From tunes comprised largely of strings of sixteenth notes, to more complicated phrasing with individual decorations on practically every note, and meters looking like the old socket wrench sizes 7/8 or 9/16.

From a fixed left-hand position, to a very mobile acquaintance with all the higher positions. Remember before the advent of amplification, singers and violinists frequently used high ranges to penetrate crowd noise and reach larger audiences.

And even the players who are proficient at Irish airs or the blues, which include some improvisation, are faced with the lifelong challenge of improvising respectable taximia. Essentially, our musical pilgrim makes the transition from fiddler to violinist, and then learns one or more new musical languages, and preferably, somewhere in the process, Greek itself. Do pay close attention to those singers! And singing some melismatic songs in that language might well be a salutary learning process.

Who were the violinists of rebetika?

A rummage through my 30-year collection of recordings turns up just 14 names. Certainly there were more, but a great number of records were made crediting the singer or bandleader, and leaving the violinist (and the rest of the band) anonymous. Most named here are found on small American labels, while most of the hundreds of recordings produced in Greece feature one or the other of the two Greek giants, Dimitris Semsis ('Salonikios') and Yiannis Dragatsis ('Ogdontakis'). As noted elsewhere, they (like George Grachis in Chicago) were the recording directors, and organised the bands and chose the musicians who made the recordings. Below is a listing, with names of some of the singers they accompanied, and the names of their labels.

It would be a joke to represent this list as more than a small sampling of the whole body of recordings with violins or liras, made in the years before 1940. And I leave it to others to determine what's rebetika and what's not. Remember these violinists played all sorts of music.

Lambros Leonaridhis (lira) (Constantinople)	Roza Eskenazi, Dalgas, Marika Politissa	His Master's Voice, Odeon, Columbia
Athanasios Makedonas	Marika Papaghika	Victor
Alexis Zoumbas (Epirot)	Marika Papaghika	Victor
Vangelis Naftis	Marika Papaghika	
Dimitrios Semsis (Macedonia) 'Salonikios'	Roza Eskenazi, Rita Abatzi	RCA Victor, Orthophonic, His Master's Voice
Ioannis Dragatsis (Smyrna) 'Ogdontakis'	Nouros, Dalgas,	Decca, Odeon, Columbia, Standard, Victor, Orthophonic
Nishan Sedefchian		Kaliphon, Columbia
Kemani Memdouli Bey		Columbia
Nick Doneff (Bulgaria)	(Marko) Melkon Alemsharian	Kaliphon, Metropolitan
Alexis Zervas	(Marko) Melkon Alemsharian	Panhellenic, Balkan
St. Lazarou	Yiota Lydia, Stellakis	Columbia
Anti Loris	Angela Palagoudi	Kalos Diskos
Andreas Poggis		Kalos Diskos
George Grachis	Marika Papaghika, Angelo K. Stamos, Katsani (Mourmouris)	Greek Record Co. of Chicago

NOTES

1. Lisbet Torp, *Salonikios – The Best Violin in the Balkans*, Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 1993.
2. CD *Greek-Oriental Rebetika Songs and Dances in the Asia Minor Style, 1911-1937*, Arhoolie Productions, Inc., El Cerrito, California, 1991.
3. Dr. Martin Schwartz, CD, *Greek-Oriental Rebetika Songs and Dances in the Asia Minor Style, 1911-1937*, *ibid*.
4. David Soffa, CD, *Marika Papaghika, Greek Popular and Rebetic Music in New York 1918-1929*
5. Fivos Anoyanakis, *Greek Popular Musical Instruments, 'Teacher and Pupil'*
6. Lisbet Torp, *Salonikios – "The Best Violin in the Balkans"*

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- Holst, Gail, *Road to Rembetika*, Denise Harvey & Company, Lambrou Fotiadi 6, Mets, Athens 407 (1975).
- Petropoulos, Elias; Petrides, Ted; Schneider, Sara; Papadimitriou, Sakis; Dragoumis, Markos; Butterworth, Katherine, *Rebetika – Songs from the Old Greek Underworld*, Athens, Komboloi (1975)
- The e-mail list of EEFC (the East European Folklore Center) includes some discussion of rebetika, with valuable pointers to further sources. On the Web at <http://www.mindspring.com/~ginbirch/eefc/>, registration required.

DISCOGRAPHY

- AMALIA!* (Amalia Bakas) Old Greek Songs in the New Land, 1923-1950, Arhoolie CD7049, Arhoolie Productions, El Cerrito, CA (2002).
- RITA ABATZI, 1933-1938 – Rembetissa*, Heritage HT CD 36, Interstate Productions, East Sussex, England (1996).
- MARIKA PAPAGIKA*, Greek Popular and Rebetic Music in New York 1918-1929, Alma Criolla Records, Berkeley, CA (1994).
- GREEK-ORIENTAL REBETIKA*: Songs and Dances in the Asia Minor Style, Folklyric CD 7005, The Golden Years: 1911-1937, Arhoolie Productions, El Cerrito, CA (1991).
- THE DINO PAPPAS COLLECTION*: in the basement of the Association for the Protection of Intellectual Property (AEPI), a royalties organisation, at Frangloklisia / Samou 51, a 10-minute cab ride from Maroussi metro station. Phone number 210 685 7494. Sotiris

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Lykouropoulos is in charge [sotlyk@aepi.gr]. As far as Ed Emery knows (and thanks to him for this entry), the archive is open to the public.

YOUR FRIENDLY LOCAL RECORD STORE: Treasures untold await, in the form of reissues of old recordings, and some lovely new ones. Rumors extol the virtues of one 'Mikrasiatika'.

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