

Kyria Koula and the “Votsis March”

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The Macedonian struggle that had begun around 1900, but also the Balkan and other wars that followed from 1912 to 1922, became the occasion for a number of anonymous and authored verses that circulated widely, especially among the popular classes. These verses were usually based on older folk tunes, apart from some that were set to music by famous and semi-famous composers. I first came into contact with the historical songs of this category in Aegina in 1962 when I recorded two songs, "Voulgari sti Kilkisi" and "Mesa sto Çanakkale". The first was sung by an old soldier and the second by 70-year-old Angeliki Chalдайου. Both referred to the period 1912-1918 and borrowed their tunes from folk music.

Several of these songs were released on 78 rpm records of the time. For example, in New York in 1916-17, Kyriaki Antonopoulou (better known as "Kyria Koula") sang with a folk orchestra on Columbia records four patriotic anthems in march rhythm: the Averof, Votsis, Kilkis and Yiannina marches, all of which reference the exploits of the Greeks in the Balkan Wars. She also sang, with the same company, a kleftic table song about the occupation of Yiannina by the Greek army.¹

Εύπνα καημένε Αλή-Πασά,
να ιδείς τα Γιάννινά σου.
Τα πήρανε οι Έλληνες,
δεν είναι πια δικά σου.
Ευζωνάκια παινεμένα
Και στον κόσμο ξακουσμένα.
Εύπνα καημένε Αλή-Πασά,
μέσα από τη χαράδρα
Να ιδείς και τον Εσάτ-Πασά,
τον πήγαν στην Ελλάδα.

[Wake up, poor Ali Pasha, to see your Yiannina. The Greeks took it; it is no longer yours. Young *evzones*, praised and famous throughout the world. Wake up, poor Ali Pasha, down in the ravine Look at Esad Pasha too, they took him to Greece.]

The first generation of immigrants to the USA produced about 35 female singers, with Kyria Koula and Marika Papagika leading the way. I quote here an excerpt from a 1994 American newspaper article by Steve Frangos with information about this remarkable woman, who was known as "America's Canary".²

"Kiriaki Giortzis-Antonopoulos (b.1880-d.1954) was the first internationally recognised Greek singer who had America as her permanent residence. Known simply as Kyria Koula (an abbreviation of the name Kyriaki), this remarkable woman became so popular that between 1916 (or 1917) and 1927 she not only sang at least 199 songs, but also during that decade outstripped all of her opponents in terms of the number of record sales.

In late 1916 (or early 1917) Mrs. Koula Antonopoulou entered the Columbia studios in New York and conquered the recording scene. Singing through a megaphone Kyria Koula recorded 34 songs. The unexpected and unprecedented popularity of her records in the market motivated all major American record companies to start producing Greek records. Kyria Koula was far from being a pawn in the hands of the demanding managers of the American record companies. She was also a great businesswoman (the first Greek owner of a record company). As from 1920 she founded the Panhellenion Phonograph Record

Company in New York, which operated with great success for about seven years, and opened branches in Chicago and maybe elsewhere. In 1927, after the sudden death of her husband Andreas Antonopoulos,³ Kyria Koula, unable to bear her grief, retired for a while from active work. When she recovered, she closed her company and began a new career as a singer (she had a soprano voice) in entertainment centres. In the late 1940s Kyria Koula re-started her label with a slightly different name (Panhellenic instead of Panhellenion Records) but it only operated for a few years.

The following information about Kyria Koula was given to me orally by Panayiotis Kounadis in 1993. According to him, she probably came from Messolonghi.⁴ She emigrated to the USA in 1912. In 1913 Katsaros met her there.⁵ He also told me that during the years when she was managing her second company she was no longer singing herself, but was involved in the production of records by other artists, such as Jim Apostolos.

The vast majority of the songs released under the Panhellenion label were folk songs and dances of the so-called old Greece (Moria–Roumeli). However, the company also dealt with other items, as follows:

Ecclesiastical – Light – Patriotic – Asia Minor (i.e. *amanedhes*, *smyrneika*, *zeibekika*, *hasapika*) – Epirus – Macedonian – Thessalian – Island – Turkish, and also scenes from Karagiozis. According to the catalogue of R.K. Spottswood,⁶ she also sang some anonymous rebetiko songs, such as "Aman, aman Chiotissa", "Vlamaki", "Koutsavaki", "Baglamadhes", "Neo Melachrinono", "Nina" and the well-known *zeibekiko* sung by Marika Papagika, "All of you".

From Spottswood we also learn the names of the 22 instrumentalists who collaborated periodically with Panhellenion. These included Athanasios Makedonas and D. Pongis (violin) – Andreas Patrinos⁷ (lute) – Loui Rassias (santur-cymbalon) – Virginia (piano) and the well-known masters of the clarinet Yiannis Kyriakatis, Thanasis Vrouvas, Antonis Sakellariou, Nikos Relias and Vangelis Vlahos for whom it is claimed, without yet being completely proven, that he was the husband of Kyria Koula before or after Antonopoulos.⁸

One of the finest songs by Kyria Koula is the march that was recorded on disc to celebrate the remarkable feat of the Hydriot sailor Nikolaos Votsis (1877-1934). The grandson of a sailor and fighter in the 1821 War of Independence, Votsis participated in the blockade of Crete by the Greek fleet in 1896. However, his name is principally associated with the first naval feat of the Balkan Wars. On the night of 18 October 1912 (then a lieutenant) he entered the port of Thessaloniki aboard the No. 11 torpedo boat, and with three torpedoes sank the 18-gun Turkish warship *Feth-i Bülend* that was anchored there. In 1920 Votsis became captain of the battleship *Kilkis* that was chartered in Constantinople and later he was appointed commander of the Greek naval forces there, as well as High Commissioner in Constantinople. In 1922 he retired with the rank of rear admiral, but resumed duty after a few months. Subsequently, as commander of the battleship *Lemnos*, he oversaw the rescue of the persecuted Greeks from Asia Minor. There are busts of Votsis in Thessaloniki (near the White Tower) and in his home town of Hydra.

Votsis's feat in Thessaloniki quickly became a song, and was circulated so widely that it passed into popular tradition. In his book *Folk Songs of Thessaly*⁹ Th. A. Nimas lists it among the so-called "historical" songs.

The only known performance on record of "March Votsis" is that of Kyria Koulas, released by Columbia in late 1916 or early 1917.¹⁰ The violin part is played by Athanasios Makedonas, the lute by Andreas Patrinos and the santouri by Stelios Melas. On the B-side of the record is the "March Averof", played by the same artists. This is a rare disc that I was lucky enough to acquire in the late 1970s and which today is in the record library of the Archive of Music Folklore.

The text of the "Votsis March" consists of 18 verses divided into three six-line stanzas. The melody repeats itself in each stanza. The verse is rhymed and follows the iambic fifteen-syllable meter. The unknown person who wrote the lyrics is probably the same person who composed the melody. So far I have not been able to locate their name, but it is possible that it is buried somewhere in a forgotten source and will surface some day.

Finally, here is the full text of the song, taken from the recording.

The Votsis March

Τιμή στην οικογένεια, που έκανε το Βότση
τον άξιο το λεβέντη μας, γενναίο πατριώτη.
Που μπήκε στο ενδέκατο, μικρό τροπιλοβόλο.
Και το Φετίχ Μπουλέν χτυπά, και το βυθίζει όλο.
Οι Τούρκοι όταν άκουσαν, τέτοια βοή μεγάλη
Ύστερα π' ανεθάρρησαν, τους ήρθε παραζάλη.

Και το πρωί σηκώνονται, τρέχουνε και ρωτούνε
Που είναι το Φετίχ Μπουλέν, ζητούνε για να δούνε
Μα εις μάτην ερευνούν, εις μάτην το ζητούνε.
Τρέχουνε και στο Καραμπουρνού, και τον Πασά ρωτούνε
«Τζάνουμ' εμείς προσέχαμε, απ' τη μεγάλη ντάπια
Ένα δελφίνι είδαμε, με δυο μεγάλα μάτια.»

Ήταν δελφίνι αφύσικο, και στην κοιλιά του ο Βότσης
Ο άξιος ο λεβέντης μας, γενναίος πατριώτης.
Πού 'βγαλε την απόφαση, ήρθε στη Σαλονίκη
Και άρχισε ο στόλος μας, την πρώτη του τη νίκη.
Ζήτω του Βότση μας παιδιά, νέο θαλασσοπούλι
Ζήτω εις τον Κανάρη μας, και νέο Μιαούλη.

Honour to the family, who made Votsis
Our worthy *levantis*, a noble patriot.
Who commanded No. 11, a small torpedo boat.
And hit the *Feth-i Bülemd* and sank it.
Among the Turks, when they heard the news, there was a great clamour,
And when they recovered, they were bewildered.

And in the morning they got up, and ran, and asked:
"Where is the *Feth-i Bülemd*", and they tried to see.
But in vain they searched, in vain they asked.
They also ran to Karaburnou, and they asked the Pasha,
"Janum, we were watching, from the big *dapia*
We saw a dolphin, with two big eyes."

It was an unnatural dolphin, and in its belly was Votsis,
Our worthy *levantis*, a noble patriot.
Who took the decision and came to Thessaloniki
And gave our fleet its first victory.
Long live our Votsis, boys, the new bird of the sea;
Long live our Kanaris, and the young Miaoulis.

NOTES

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1. USA Columbia E 3609, "Neos Ali Pasas" (Yianniotikos).
 2. Steve Frangos, "The image of Greek music in America", in *The Greek American*, December 3–9, 1994, p. 15. "Kyriaki Yiortzi Antonopoulos (circa 1880-1954) was the

first internationally successful Greek female vocalist who made America her permanent home. Known simply as Madame Coula (Coula being the diminutive for Kyriaki) this one woman proved so popular that between 1916-17 and 1927 she recorded at least 199 individual songs. No other Greek female vocalist sold as many records from 1916 to 1927 as Madame Coula. [...] In late 1916 or early 1917 Coula Antonopoulos entered the New York City studios of Columbia Records and conquered the Greek recording scene. Singing through a megaphone Mme. Coula recorded thirty-four songs. While we do not always know which instrumentalists played on each song we do know Athanasios Makedonas played the violi, Stelios Melas was the santouri player and Andreas Patrinos accompanied on [?] laouto. Mme. Coula's first song was "Elenaki karsilamas" (Columbia E3324). The unexpected and totally unprecedented success, in terms of overall sales, of these records prompted all the major American record companies to immediately begin releasing Greek music."

3. They had a daughter, Paraskevoula, who also became a singer.
4. Information from Ilias Volioti-Kapetanakis (*Αδέσποτες Μελωδίες*, Athens, 1999, p. 480).
5. Yorgos Theologitis-Katsaros (1898–1997). a popular singer from Amorgos. Between 1919 and 1941 he recorded more than 60 songs in the US.
6. Discography of all the 78's recorded in the USA prior to 1940.
7. Probably a pseudonym of Andreas Antonopoulos, the husband of Kyria Koula.
8. Information from Panayiotis Kounadhis, 1993.
9. Vol. 1, Thessaloniki, 1983, p.109.
10. I owe my information about the record to Charalambos Pouloupoulos, of fond memory.

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Translation: Ed Emery