Greek Folk Music

Mitsi Akoyunoglou-Christou, MT, MM, PhD Candidate
Maria Apostoliadi-Le Bouter, MA
christou@otenet.gr

Mitsi Akoyunoglou-Christou, MT, MM, (BA and MM from Michigan State University) is a PhD candidate at Ionion University in Corfu. As a music therapist she is currently working with patients with severe brain injuries. As a musician she teaches piano, performs, runs piano master classes, composes music for the theatre, gives lectures on music education and music therapy to elementary school teachers, and is the artistic director of the Citrus museum summer festival in Chios.

Maria Apostoliadi-Le Bouter has a MA in Music Therapy (Royal College of Music & Drama, University of Wales), a Piano Diploma (National Conservatoire of Athens) and Certificate of the Artistic Piano Education Course “Martenot” in Paris. As an MT, she has worked in schools for autistic children, in Medical-Education Centers in Wales, in the Public Psychiatric Hospital of Athens, in the Women’s Drug Detoxification Unit of “18 Ano”. She lives and works in Paris as a piano teacher and animator of children’s music groups in Cultural Centers and Associations.

Introduction

The traditional music of Greece is a threefold affair, engaging poetry, music and dance in narrating the history of the country through the ages. It consists mainly of compositions by unknown authors and composers, and its roots can be traced back to the byzantine period as well as the antiquity.

The word “music” originated from the nine muses of ancient Greece, the goddesses of music, poetry, dance and drama - in other words, the patrons of arts and literature. The word, Μούσα (mousa), is derived from the Dorian dialect’s verb, Μῶ (mo), that means to ask, to investigate; accordingly, mousa means “to know” (Michaelides, 1989).

The Greek people, through the triptych that the folk music tradition consists of (namely text, melody and movement) express deeper feelings at various social occasions individually or in groups, on occasions of joy and sadness, as well as in moments of philosophising life itself (Spyridakis & Peristeris, 1968). Thus, folk music has accompanied every aspect of a person’s life: work (farming, livestock-farming, or other rural occupation); social events (birth, marriage, death, feasts); and spiritual life.

In general, Greek folk music may be divided into two main classifications: the music of the mainland and music of the islands (Chianis, 1988). Through the centuries, singing of folk poetry was the sole musical entertainment of the Greek people, along with the accompanying
musical instruments and dances. Most ethnomusicologists have expressed the view that Neo-Hellenic folk music is deeply based on both traditions of Classical Greece and of the Byzantine Church (Loukatos, 1978; Chianis, 1988; Michaelides, 1967; Baud-Bovy, 1996). Despite the influence from all different populations that have inhabited Greece through the centuries and from the music of neighbouring peoples, these two sources have mainly formed the physiognomy of the contemporary Greek folk music (Michaelides, 1967). Elements such as metres, modes and melodic features can be traced back to ancient Greek music or Byzantine music.

Music plays a vital part of every event in rural Greece. At the event of a wedding, the bride and groom are accompanied through the streets of the village on the way to church with the sounds of processional folk music played by local musicians. After the wedding, at the feast, the newlyweds are congratulated with songs wishing long life, many descendents and prosperity. Villagers sing when they bid farewell to a fellow villager who is immigrating to another country. Mothers put their babies to sleep with *nanourismata* (lullabies). When someone passes away, he is mourned with *moirologia* (laments). As Chianis (1988) states, “for village people, music not only serves as a means of self-expression, but is truly an inseparable part of daily life” (p. 37).

Greek Folk Songs

Kyriakides (1990) in his book “The Greek Folk Song” has noted that it is rather difficult to give a definition of the *dimotiko tragoudi* (Greek folk song), since it comprises of various categories of songs which, while having many similarities, also have many important differences. A general definition that Loukatos (1977) gives is that Greek traditional songs are metered poems (narrative or lyrical) that have been created by unknown folk poets, individually or cooperatively, and in accordance to the existing traditions of music. Malevitsis (1985) states that “the Greek folk song projects at the same time the essence of the conscience of the Greek people” (p. 11). Their themes and their melodic lines have moved Greek generations for centuries. Goethe noticed the uniqueness of the Greek folk song and in 1815, in a letter to his son, expressed the view that although the Greek traditional song is “so folk, (it is) yet so dramatic and so epical and so lyrical, that nothing similar to it exists in the world” (Malevitsis, 1985).

The categorization of the Greek folk songs that ethnomusicologists have used consists of eight general categories based on their subject, the theme, the text and the traditional occasions of their use that perpetuate them (Loukatos, 1978; Politis, 1925; Ioannou, 1994). A short example is included in each category that follows:
Greek Folk Music

Epic songs

Akritika

These are songs that narrate heroic actions and achievements of the Akrites, the people that were guarding the Greek frontiers during the Byzantine period.

Klephika

These songs were born and created during the Ottoman empire’s occupation of Greece and they describe the life, the achievements and the troubles of the klephites, self-appointed anti-Ottoman insurgents and warlike mountain-folk who lived in the countryside.

Historical

The historical folk songs narrate unforgettable historical events such as sieges, the fall of cities, revolutions and lost battles, massacres, killings, wars.

Τη λευτεριά λαχτάρισα, δε θέλω να’ μαι σκλάβος·
θ’ ανέβω πάνω στα βουνά, πάω να γίνω κλέφτης.
I yearn for freedom, I do not want to be a slave;
I will hide in the mountains, I will become a klephitis.

(Dimitrakopoulos, 1998, p. 65)

Lyric songs

Paraloges

These are mainly narrative songs in poetic and dramatic manner that talk about universal affairs and matters of life.

Love songs

These are songs that praise love and adoration.

Εβγάτε αγόρια στο χορό, κοράσια στα τραγούδια,
pέστε και τραγουδήσετε πώς πιάνεται γη αγάπη.
Από τα μάτια πιάνεται, στα χείλια κατεβαίνει,
kι από τα χείλια στην καρδιά ριζώνει και δε βγαίνει.
Boys come out to dance, girls come and sing,
tell and sing how love can be acquired.
You can grab it from the eyes, it goes down to the lips
and from the lips it roots in the heart and does not come out.
Of the table (tou trapeziou)
These are songs for group singing that are sung when family and friends sit around the table, at special events and feasts.

Wedding songs (nyfiatika)
These are songs that escort all aspects of the traditional wedding ceremony, praising the bride and groom, wishing long life and prosperity, but also underlining the sorrow of separation from the other relatives, especially the daughter separating from her mother.

Mourning songs (moirologia)
The moirologia are songs that escort the dead from the moment of death until the burial and are sung mostly by women.

Immigration Songs (tis xeniteias)
These are songs as sorrowful and painful as the mourning songs that narrate the unbearable separation and the desire to return back home, of people immigrating to another country in search of a better life.

Na σας επιώ, θλιμμένες μου, θλιμμένο μοιρολόγι·
μήτε από μάνα τ´ ἀκουσα μήτε από θυγατέρα,
tου Χάρου η μάνα το´ λεγε μες στο χορό τραγούδι:
«Ο γιος μου έβαλε φωτιά σε όλους τους πεθαμένους».
I will tell you, grievers, a sorrowful lament;
I did not hear it from a mother, nor from a daughter,
Death’s mother was singing it while dancing:
“My son put fire on all the dead”.

(Kougeas, 2000, p. 47)

Religious Occasions’ Songs
These are songs that are sung on major holidays such as Christmas, Epiphany, Easter and other similar occasions.

Καλήν ημέραν, άρχοντες, αν είναι ορισμός σας,
Greek Folk Music

Χριστού την θείαν γέννησιν να πω στ’ αρχοντικό σας.
Good morning, gentlemen, if this is your desire,
I came to announce to your honored house the divine birth of Christ.

(Spatalas, 1997, p. 176)

Seasonal Songs

These are songs that announce the beginning of a season or a month such as New Year’s, the first day of March (helidoniastina), the first of May or during periods of drought (perperouna); they are full of wishes.

Χελιδόνα έρχεται απ’ την Άσπρη Θάλασσα,
κάθει και λάλησε: Μάρτη, Μάρτη μου κολέ
και Φλεβάρη φοβερέ, 
κι αν χιονίσεις, κι αν ποντίσεις, πάλι άνοιξη μυρίζεις.
The swallow comes from the White Sea,
sits and sings: March, my dear March
and scary February,
even if you snow, even if you rain, your aroma heralds springtime.

(Ioannou, 1994, p. 256)

Social Songs

This is a category that includes songs that entertain people in social events such as feasts, at work and social interactions. These songs express mainly aspects of social injustice, of perseverance and the small joys of life like the tavern songs, the apokriatika (Halloween), satirical songs, and working songs.

Φίλοι, γιατί δεν τρώτε και δεν πίνετε;
Μήνα και το ψωμί μας δεν σας άρεσε;
στέλνουμε στους γειτόνους και τ’ αλλάξουμε.
Μήνα και το κρασί μας δεν σας άρεσε;
βαγένια έχουμε κι άλλα και τ’ αλλάξουμε.
Μήνα και τα φαγιά μας δε σας άρεσαν;
μαγειρίσσες είν’ κι άλλες και τσ’ αλλάξουμε.
Μήνα κι η καψονύφη δε σας άρεσε;
Η νύφη μας αυτή είναι, δεν αλλάζεται.
Friends, why don’t you eat and drink?
Is it that you did not like our bread?  
We will go to the neighbors and change it.  
Is it that you did not like our wine?  
We have barrels of other and we’ll change it.  
Is it that you did not like our food?  
We have other cooks and we will change them.  
Is it that you did not like our poor bride?  
This is our bride, we will not change her.

(Politis, 1925, p. 247)

Proverbial Songs

These songs focus on teaching, philosophizing and reflecting. In these songs one finds thoughts and prompts for the enjoyment of life, the vanity of this world, the importance of every different age period of one’s life, a deep love for values and ideals and a bitterness for the fleeting and ephemeral side of all daily simple gratifications. Some examples are the alphabet songs, epigram songs and praise of life songs.

"Καημένοι χρόνοι και καιροί, οπού είστε περασμένοι  
tάξα δεν εγυρίζανε τα μαύρα νιάτα πίσω  
tα νιάτα και η λεβεντιά και το κρυφό καμάρι.
Poor years and times, all that have passed  
the youth can not come back  
the youth and the beauty and the hidden pride.

(Ioannou, 1994, p. 315)

Children Songs

The last category includes songs that are sung to babies and children during family hours or games’ occasions. Examples of such songs are nanourismata (lullabies), tahtarismata (baby dangling songs), protovadismata (first steps’ songs) and game songs.

"Κοιμάτ' αστρί, κοιμάτ' αυγή, κοιμάται νιό φεγγάρι  
κοιμάται το πουλάκι μον σαν άξιο παλικάρι  
The star sleeps, the dawn sleeps, the new moon sleeps,  
my little bird sleeps like a worthy lad.

(Ioannou, 1994, p. 315)
Traditional Music Instruments

In ancient Greece, dances and instruments represented the spiritual and religious context of everyday life (Anogianakis, 1991). In various works by ancient Greek writers as well as on decorated clay vessels, tombs and stamps of that era, descriptions and drawing representations provide some information on dances and instruments (Psaroudakis, 1998). From the Byzantine era, many manuscripts, frescoes in monasteries, woodcuts, copperplates and icons offer us some information on musical instruments of that period (Malliaras, 1998).

The most known instruments which are still used to present days and accompany traditional songs and dances are: string instruments such as the tabouras, violin, lyra (of Crete, Pontos and Thrace) and santour; wind instruments such as the klarino, gaida, zournas, tsabouna, and percussion instruments such as the daouli, defi, and touberleki.

Every region has different instruments. In addition, more recent instruments that came with the immigrants of Asia Minor that settled in Greece include the bouzouki, baglamas, and tzouras (Anogianakis, 1991).

String Instruments

The name tabouras characterizes a group of plucked string instruments of the laouto (lute) family which originated from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and they are played with fingers or with a pick. In ancient Greece, the tabouras was called Pandoura, in the Byzantine period, Thaboura, and more recently, tabouras, bouzouki, baglamas (Liavas, 1998). It is the basic instrument of rebetiko music, the urban traditional music of the ports of Aegean Sea from the end of the 19th century till the 1950’s. Due to its flexible shape, the tabouras provides all variations of musical intervals of Byzantine and traditional music.

Santouri became prominent in the Eastern Aegean due to Greeks from Asia Minor who migrated after the destruction in 1922. Its melodic, polyphonic and expressive qualities contributed so that it became part of the compagnia (group of musicians) of the mainland and the island region of Greece, along with laouto and violin. The santouri, shaped in an isosceles table, has metallic strings and it is played with two thin mallets with cotton tips. The musician places it on his lap, or on a table, or even hangs it from his shoulders when played standing up. Besides the wide range of sound, colors, melodic ornaments and rhythmic shapes, a characteristic
Greek Folk Music

technique is the repetitive playing of a note, which gives the impression of the continuation of sound (Anogianakis, 1991).

The violin, *viol*, is a traditional instrument in Greece that goes back to the 17th century. It is one of the main melodic instruments of the mainland and island region of Greece. The *viol* is part of the *compania* along with *klarino*, *laouto*, *sadouri* and, although it is the same as the violin, it is tuned in a different way (Anogianakis, 1991).

*The lyra* comes from the East, but it has also many similarities with the ancient Greek lyre. It is a three stringed pear-shaped instrument played with a bow. It is basically for quick melodies and dances, used in weddings or traditional fiestas. The Cretan *lyra*, was derived either from the Arabs or, most probably, from Constantinople. In Crete, the lyra accompanies traditional dances and songs and its bow has little bells attached to embellish the melodies (Anogianakis, 1991).

**Wind Instruments**

Although the clarinet comes from the West, the *klarino*, as a traditional instrument, came to Greece from Turkey in the 19th century. It is part of the *compania*. Since WWII, the *klarino* became the leading melodic instrument and is recognized as a “national” instrument (Anogianakis, 1991).

*The askavlos* came from Asia during the first to second century AD, is the Greek bagpipe, and has two variations: the *tsabouna* (in the islands) and the *gaida* (in Macedonia and Thrace). It has three parts: the bag (made of goat hide), the mouthpiece and a device for the sound production. It is crafted by the musician himself and the two types differ mainly on the device that produces the sound. *Gaida* differs because of its additional (third) pipe that is used as the bass drone. The *tsabouna* is played with the bag propped underneath the musician’s left armpit. The sound of the *tsabouna* is sharp and loud, so it is ideal for open-air performances such as dancing and singing at weddings, baptisms and fiestas. In some islands it accompanies Christmas carols. (Anogianakis, 1991).

*The zournas or karamouza or pipiza*, originating from the ancient Greek flute, is a double reed instrument like the oboe and produces a high-pitched and shrill sound. The *zournas* and *daouli* (percussion instrument) are part of the traditional group in the Greek mainland and is played in open space because of its very loud sound (Liavas, 1998).
Greek Folk Music

Percussion Instruments

_The aouli_, known since the Byzantine years, is the most important rhythmic instrument of the mainland. Made by the musician himself, the _daouli_ is a cylindrical drum with two heads and comes with many variations in terms of size, skin leather processing and the way the strings are tied (Liavas, 1998). The _daouli_ accompanies other melodic instruments such as the _zournas_.

_The defi_ is a small ancient Greek drum with or without cymbals around its wooden frame, similar to the tambourine. It accompanies melodic instruments in every region of Greece (Liavas, 1998).

_The toubeleki_ accompanies different kinds of melodic instruments in the North Greece (Thrace, Macedonia), the Greek islands and Asia Minor. It is played by both hands in many different ways and techniques. It consists of a clay frame and a drumhead made of animal skin. It is usually performed with a melodic instrument like the _gaida_ (Anogianakis, 1991).

Traditional Dances

As Michaelides (1956) states, ”dance was an art which the Greeks cultivated with love and passion from very remote times” (p. 37). In Homeric times both song and dance were an inseparable part of every religious ceremony, national or private feast, and in classical times the art of dancing was developed to the highest degree. They were based on the beliefs of the ancient Greeks such as freedom, pride and sportsmanship. Depending on the nature of each dance and according to Plato (Laws), the Greek dances were divided in three main categories: religious, war and peace dances, through the dynamic threefold of movement, music and lyrics (Tsekoura, 2004; Serbezis & Panagopoulou, 2009).

In Byzantine times, despite the Greek Orthodox Church’s disapproval, dances continued to be an inseparable part of social, emotional and historical events (Touliatos-Miles, 2004).

In our traditional dances and their expression, movement and musical rhythm, we find the meaning by studying the ancient writers, music scales, and measures, vase-paintings, Byzantine murals and Byzantine music” (Stratou, 1979).

The folk dances are divided into two main groups: mainland and island dances (Chianis, 1988). The name of every dance usually derives either from the name of the region, the lyrics of
the songs which accompany the dance, the placement of the dancers, the movement of hands, or an object used, i.e. a scarf.

Many combinations of movements are found in Greek dances. These movements use mainly the legs, including single or double bouncing, standing firmly on the whole foot or on half, crawling, sliding, single or double hovering in the air, deep seating and turning (Zografou, 2003). The morphology of the ground of every region plays a substantial role on the configuration of the dance’s character. The island dances contain more bouncing with complicated movements and resemble the waving movements of the Aegean Sea. On the contrary, the mountain dances are heavier and harder like they are coming out of a battle against the struggles of mountain life. Dances are danced either by a group, or a pair, or by an individual. The most known contour of the Greek folk dances is the cyclic, although often, we come across other shapes and dancing lines, like “facing each other” or in a line.

There are many Greek dances, but the most popular folk dances are the various forms of “Syrtos” (usually in 2/4, rarely in 7/8), “Kalamatianos” (in 7/8 or 7/16) and “Tsamikos” (in 3/4) (Chianis, 1988).

Baud-Bovy (1968) states that the dance name Syrtos was used originally in ancient Greece (p. 11). Syrtos at the islands follows a 2/4 meter and is either danced in pairs or in groups. Syrtos of the mainland follows a 7/8 meter and it is danced in groups. It is usually followed by a Balos, an erotic dance from the Aegean Sea islands, which has many dancing variations (Bournelli et al, 2007).

Kalamatianos is a syrtos traditional dance in a 7/8 or a 7/16 meter and has very few variations in terms of style and rhythm (Baud-Bovy, 1968; Michaelidis, 1956). This dance consists of 12 steps which are danced by a group of dancers and are repeated through the whole duration of the song, more calmly by the women and more bouncy by the men. Its name originates either from the lyrics of the song referring to a scarf from Kalamata city or from the musicians that needed to differentiate it from the other syrtos dances (Diggelidis et al, 2009).

Tsamikos, also known as klephtikos, was danced by the klephtes, the Greek rebels living and hiding in the mountains, during the Ottoman occupation. It is a dance in 3/4 meter from Thesprotia, a northern region of Greece, was considered to be the bravest dance of all and was only danced by men. Today, women and men dance tsamikos. It consists of 10 steps, but also 12 or 8 steps, and has many variations and figures (Diggelidis et al, 2009).
**Sousta** is a Cretan quick and bouncing dance form that is danced in cyclical form in the Rethymnon area and in couples in Herakleion and Lasithi. Even though it is considered an ancient war-dance, it has evolved into a dance of affection, love and erotic expression (Tyrovola, 1998).

**Pedozali** is a very well known Cretan dance that represents braveness, heroism and hope and is danced by men and women. It usually starts off with *kondylies*, slow dance movements, and is followed by quick and energetic dance movements. The slow part (*siganos*) has 6 to 8 steps and the quick part has 5 steps in 8 beats. It took its name from the five zala (five steps) (Diggelidis et al, 2009).

**Zonaradikos** is a traditional dance from Thrace, in the north of Greece, and is performed by men and women in a circle. The name *zonaradikos* is derived from the way the dancers are holding each other from their belts (*zoni* in greek). It is in a 2/4 metered rhythm with 6 dance steps and is a lively dance (Diggelidis et al, 2009).

**Karagouna** is a women’s characteristic dance of Thessalia (a northern region of Greece) but can be danced by both men and women. The song of Karagouna is a reference and an admiration to the majestic women’s dress. It is a slow dance consisting of three dancing motifs, each having different number of steps which are danced in an isochronal regular rhythm (Bournelli et al, 2007).
References


