

The Athens Centre

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Lecture Title:

Popular Musicology in Greece: The Case of Rembétiko and Laikó Musical Styles

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, and many thanks for attending my lecture which deals with a rapidly flourishing field of studies. Several terms are used to describe this field: popular musicology; musicology of popular music; new musicology and so forth. However, popular musicology in Greece has not shown its will to produce fruits as yet. Rembétiko and laikó are two extremely popular musical styles, both in Greece and abroad.

I can imagine that most of you are familiar with sounds like this: [Song: Zorbas]. This was the famous ‘Zorbas dance’ composed by one of Greece’s most famous and respected composers, Mikis Theodorakis, from a well-known movie entitled ‘Zorba the Greek’. This is what is called, more or less, laikó song in Greece.

Before I continue, I shall try to clear things up regarding terminology. In 1923, as part of the treaty of Lausanne, a great exchange of populations took place, and approximately 1.5 million Christians of Turkish citizenship moved from Turkey (mainly Asia Minor) to Greece, while approximately five-hundred thousand Muslims of Greek citizenship moved from Greece to Turkey. The criterion of the exchange was the respective religions of the populations. This sparked off the modern Greek urban-popular, the so-called *rembétiko* musical style, for the refugees from Asia Minor took with them their musical traditions. Today, *rembétiko* is often called ‘the blues of the Mediterranean’. This is due to the fact that the style has been marginal for many years, connected to people who lived in the underworld, just like the case of blues. Please, have a listen and make your own comparisons. [Songs: *I’m in the mood* by John Lee Hocker; and *O alaniaris* by Markos Vamvakaris].

To give an idea of the prevalent discourse surrounding the history of *rembétiko*, Greeks consider and call the music style that came with the refugees from

Asia Minor in 1923 *Σμυρναίικο* which derives from the word Smyrna and, hence, they consider it the very first stage and the forerunner of the *rembétiko* music style.

However, the use of the term *Smirnέiko* is problematic and misleading, for there were songs from several other origins, such as Constantinople and Adrianople, which were part of the repertoire that Greeks address as *Smirnέiko*. The following song is a typical example of what Greeks call *Smyrnέiko*. [Song: *Lili skandaliara* by Panagiotis Toundas].

According to common beliefs, *rembétiko* has its roots in Piraeus with pieces very much based on the style of *Smirnέiko* but also with many differences, such as the usage of a completely different orchestration and a different lyrical theme. I should also mention at this point the derivative *rembétis*. Apart from the musical style, the word also covers a more general and broader life stance, connected to people living in the underworld, such as criminals and drug-addicts, who had their own ideology, appearance, idiolectic and moral rules. The following song is a typical example of a Piraeus, bouzouki-based *rembétiko* song. Contrary to the aforementioned *Smyrnέiko* one, this one is based on the guitar and the bouzouki (that is, on fretted instruments). It also makes use of harmony and generally is not so tightly connected to the Eastern styles. [Song: *O ponos prezakia* by Anestis Delias].

In Need of a Term

After *rembétiko*, with Márkos Vamvakáris as its major representative (who is often called by *rembétiko* enthusiasts ‘the Patriarch of *rembétiko*’), the Greeks speak of the new *laikó* music style with its most important representative, Vasilis Tsitsánis. The work of Vasilis Tsitsánis is credited for the genre’s broader acceptance, under the term *laikó*. *Rembétiko* enthusiasts in Greece consider the turning point to be somewhere around the 1940s – 1950s, basically with Tsitsánis’s post-war work which is often labelled as his ‘classical period’.

The word ‘*laikó*’ stands for popular, of the people. The word comes from the word ‘*λαός*’ which means, the people. Peter Manuel describes Greek popular music as being modern Greek working class music. Manuel also describes the *rembétiko* style as being ‘urban Greek lumpen proletarian music of the early twentieth century’ (1990: 269). For Risto Pekka Pennanen, *laikó* songs are generally ‘post mid-1950s Greek popular songs’. However, Pennanen points out that the term ‘is used for urban Greek

popular music in general as distinct from the rural *dimotika* music',¹ that is, traditional music.

The term 'laikó' is extremely vague. I will give some examples regarding the use of the terms *rembétiko* and *laikó* by my fellow countrymen and women. These examples are products of discussions with other people (musicians or not) and readings of printed material such as articles in magazines, newspapers and so forth.

Whenever someone hears Márkos Vamvakáris's harsh and heavy voice in a recording, Greeks, without any second thought, speak of a *rembétiko* song.

I would call this 'voice identification'. Moreover, they roughly determine the date of the recording somewhere in between the period of 1930s and 1950s. Let's listen to an example. [Song: *Skila m' ekanes ke liono* by Markos Vamvakaris].

Now, if the same people listen to a contemporary recording of the same song, made by a modern singer, they then speak of a *laikó* song. The most bizarre part of the story has to do with the case when someone listens to the contemporary recording before they listen to the original one. When they then listen to the original one, it is quite possible that they will not even realize that they are listening to the very same song or, in a better scenario, they are shocked and wonder whether this is the same song (than the one they already know) or not. A good example is the George Dalaras's production at the Athens' Concert Hall which is a tribute to Vamvakáris. In these CDs, there are many songs that seem unrecognizable, when one compares them with the original recordings. Obviously, modern arrangements, the use of more than one *bouzouki* (that is, the instrument which is the flagship of Greek popular music), the use of a large ensemble, the use of a different singing style than Márkos's and changed tempi can transform the song from *rembétiko* to *laikó*. And then comes the role of technology. Performing and recording a 1930 song in a country's best concert hall, with virtuoso *bouzouki* players using sophisticated arrangements and advanced technological media, is like making a movie based on a Socratic dialogue. You use the original text but, in the end, you know that this is only a reconstruction.

Please listen the very same song of Vamvakáris performed in the concert hall by Dalaras. [Song: *Skila m' ekanes ke liono* by Markos Vamvakaris, sang by George Dalaras].

¹1999: 67: n. 1.

If we think that we have somehow cleared things up in terms of the characteristics of the rembétiko and how people categorize old and new songs, things seem to be even more complex for the term laikó. If we accept that indeed the transition towards laikó is somewhere around 1950s, how can we have Theodorakis, Hadjidakis, Tsitsánis, Zambéttas and so many others under the same label, that is laikó? Literally speaking, all of these are laikó songs, because they form an urban popular musical style which is intended and made for the people. In other words, songwriters with different musical backgrounds and outputs are labelled under the same term, that is, laikó. I believe that musical genres and styles cannot be labelled based only on dating. Thus, artists may fit into one or more genres simultaneously. There is a mixture of elements which fit together like a bespoke suit which can be applied to a song. From this, we can consider two things: first, we cannot change any part of the fit for there it will not be able to represent a particular style anymore, and secondly, the fit can and should be applied only to a single piece and not to an entire repertoire. In other words, if we consider the items of the preceding paragraph as being the ‘ingredients’ of a musical style (that is, parts of the fit), a different arrangement (such as the paradigm of Vamvakáris and the concert hall) would be like changing a button on the suit and thus, the suit that was worn on the original recording of Márkos (that is, labelled as rembétiko) cannot be the same for the contemporary recording, too.

Using the same scepticism, we cannot categorize all songs made by a particular songwriter in a single musical style, especially if their careers have been long-lasting, for it would have been almost impossible for someone to compose music based on one musical style, that is, using the very same ingredients, again and again.

A great sample of this confusion amongst the people regarding the terms rembétiko and laikó is to be found in the text written outside the Vamvakáris museum, next to his bust in the island of Síros. One can read on the plaque:

Here, the great master of laikó song and craftsman of rembétiko
was born and lived his early years of his life.

It should be noted that the English text found below the Greek and French versions is not a correct translation of the Greek one. However, one can notice the words ‘rembétiko’ and ‘popular’ in the English text, too.

Popular Musicology

Turning now to popular musicology; clearly, academic research on popular music has been developing rapidly; this can be verified by the numerous theses, books, articles and so forth. Let us look upon a problematic issue concerning this field of studies. If we take as a fact the domination of the English language in the published texts and that it is usually Western scholars that undertake research on non-Western musics, a critical question arises: what if these non-Western countries develop popular music studies in their countries using of course, their own language; will they have to take as facts the English nomenclature already established? Basically, all of these form a simple yet crucial question: how can we communicate with each other at an international level? Although there is something that brings together everyone involved in popular musicology, that is, the music industry and the recorded music, there is need to find more connecting elements, one of them being the nomenclature. Within the field of popular musicology, as used by Derek Scott,² or of the musicology of popular music, as used by Allan Moore,³ discographical research and musical analysis provide the main means of examination of the evidence. Scott's and Moore's 'popular musicology' also exemplifies the interdisciplinary trends in music studies. A full discography of *rembétiko* and *laikó*, for example, would have two major positive impacts: it would put things in their place, as regards wrong information provided in non-academic publications made in the past, and it would work as the frame on which musical analysis could be built. For instance, accurate recording dates are a critical piece of information, important not only to the discographical analysis, but to the musical analysis as well.

Research on *rembétiko* and *laikó* will not only contribute to the understanding of Greek popular music but will also offer findings concerning other musical cultures, such Turkish, Afro-Cuban, Blues, Latin, Italian, Hindi and so forth. It can function, therefore, as a bridge for all these cultures that have been mixed together in the Greek peninsula on various occasions. The negligence towards some critical musical issues of *rembétiko* and *laikó* occurred because most of the available academic material covers the aforementioned styles from ethnographical, historical and anthropological perspectives but not (apart from a few exceptions) from a musicological perspective (that is, musical analysis).

² See Scott 2009.

³ See Moore 2007.

Evidence clearly suggests that *rembétiko* and *laikó* deserve academic treatment. These are two syncretic musical styles which perhaps, and as evidence suggests, are the very first national urban musical ‘products’ of Greece which, according to Peter Manuel, ‘has one of the most distinctively national popular musics of any European country’ (1990: 126). The acculturation that happened is of major importance for Greek popular musicology, or, *laikólogy*, if you prefer. For example, one can find Turkish *makams* (that is, the Turkish modes and scales), Greek *paradhosiaká* (that is, rural-traditional elements), Afro-Cuban rhythms (that is, elements from Latin America), Western harmony and so forth.

The Educational System in Greece

Turning now to a very critical matter; the educational system in Greece. The *laikó* style is not taught in conservatoires in Greece today, although the style is extremely widespread, while in other countries popular styles are part of the educational systems, being also extremely popular with students. Apart from the political issues, that is, the fact that the government does not decide to introduce programmes of popular music studies, lack of research is the reason for the negligence of popular music. This situation is beginning to change, but still needs to take many further steps in order to reach a standard equivalent to elsewhere (USA, England and Finland, for example). An example, and at the same time the best proof, of this negligence of popular music studies in Greece is that the memorandum of the State Conservatoire in Greece (on which all the other conservatoires’ memoranda and teaching systems, state or private, are based) does not include the teaching of *laikó* music style alongside the other Greek popular styles, such as Greek rock, Greek artistic, rural traditional and so forth.

Bearing in mind the previous points, I will refer to some data collected from the National Documentation Centre regarding doctoral theses held at Greek Universities. Four entries have been found with keyword ‘*rembétiko*’. Two of them are from Psychology schools, one from a school of Media and one from a school of Sociology. There is not one from a school of Music. 84 entries with the keyword ‘music’ have been found. More than 50 per cent of them were held on Byzantine music (that is, the Orthodox Ecclesiastic Chanting). This proportion alone gives rise to many questions, such as why this musical style merits such an academic treatment?

Four entries deal with traditional music. None of them, however, was held at a music school. The fact that the word 'laikó' does not return even a single result, reveals how neglected this music is and much about the musical value system of Greek academia.

One crucial act that the Greek government should take is to officially recognize popular music (theory, instruments and so forth), something that is not in effect today. I will describe a situation which reflects the gravity of the whole matter. Academic education is part of the purview of the Ministry of Education, while music education in conservatoires (private and state) is part of the Ministry of Culture. In 1988, the Greek government introduced Public Music Schools, secondary and high schools. Although the law passed in 1988, the music schools became popular almost ten years after. Today, music schools offer an alternative to pupils who do not desire to follow the programme of studies of the general secondary and high school and prefer to have in their daily schedule as many 'musical' hours as possible. The programme of studies of public music schools includes the teaching of Greek popular music, Greek traditional music, Byzantine music and Western classical music. Both Byzantine music and classical music are part of the official programme of study of both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture (that is, both the universities and the conservatoires). In other words, both ministries provide official recognized degrees for these two specializations. However, it is only the Ministry of Education that recognizes the studies of the remaining two fields, that is, popular music and traditional music. In other words, if someone undertakes a bachelor's degree in bouzouki at the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki, they will obtain an official recognized degree. On the other hand, if someone studies the bouzouki at a conservatoire, they will not be able to do so because the Ministry of Culture has not yet recognized popular and traditional music and its instruments.

Laikology at its Birth

The flourishing of popular music studies and, generally, the wider acceptance of the value of popular culture within the educational system of Greece looks to be in a more than critical situation, especially in this period of depression, crisis and injustice for the people of the country. Laikology and rebetology should take their place in academia, for two main reasons: 1) popular music studies have developed to a high level abroad, leaving Greece far behind, and 2) by undertaking research on Greek

popular music, one can begin to understand the chain that connects far more musical cultures across the world: for instance, Afro-Cuban, the Blues, Turkish, Greek rural traditional, Hindi, Gypsy, Jewish and so forth. I should highlight that elements from all these cultures can be found within Greek laikó music. Therefore, it is not only important for Greek education, but also for the development of popular music studies globally.

However, one could wonder: ‘yes, but why not under rebetology (which, as a term, already exists within academia)? What is the need for laikology?’ It became clear through my research that there is a need for separating Greek urban popular music into categories. The problem, though, lies in this word’s meaning in Greek, which, as we said, is ‘of the people’. Therefore, what urban popular musical style is not ‘of the people’, that is, is not laikó? To put it another way, today, the Smirnέiko style, the Piraeus bouzouki-based, the post-war song, the Greek artistic style, the new wave and so forth, are all laikó styles, that is, popular styles, because they are mainly meant for the people (for the laós). Therefore, the title that can perhaps describe best the field of Greek popular music studies is ‘laikology’ which, apparently, includes rebetology.

The Labour Market

If one examines the whole issue from another point of view, it will be ascertained that, today in Greece, the labour market for musicians is extremely limited. The once, more or less, good jobs at venues with live music (that is, membership of a band on music stands) has now been transformed into a nightmare, due to Greece’s economic crisis: people do not have money to spend on entertainment and thus, venues do not have clients; therefore, they do not need musicians. In merely five years, the days per week that an average professional musician works have been reduced from five to two days, along with their earnings. On the other hand (and obviously this is true of every profession), taxes, goods and generally the cost of living have gone up.

It is the same economic situation that made people stop sending their children to conservatoires. At this point, I should say that conservatoires are the primary educational establishments in order for someone to learn music in Greece. Therefore, conservatoires have reduced the number of employed music teachers, due to the reduction in the number of students. Consequently, another job option for musicians

has also turned out to be non profitable. A third job option is the position of music teacher in public schools. There are two problems, though: first of all, music (as a class) is not mandatory in all schools and in those that it is mandatory, the regulations of the Ministry of Education order one class hour per week. Therefore, the job positions in public schools are limited, considering the number of available musicians. Secondly, the aftermath of the economic crisis and the loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have caused a dramatic reduction in wages of almost every social stratum, including teachers in public schools.

According to the above, the job of a professional musician is now in the heart of the crisis and in one of its worst periods. The field of popular music studies is so big (especially in countries like Greece) that it can open new horizons in the labour market of musicians. The official recognition by the state of popular music can top up conservatoires' number of students, for there are many children that desire to study popular instruments but be able to obtain a degree recognized by the state. Moreover, the creation of research programmes on popular music can create new jobs – popular music researchers. If one takes additionally into consideration several contiguous fields, whose bonds are closely knit with popular music, such as the construction of popular instruments and sound engineering, one will understand that popular music studies is nothing else but a viable field; a field that can open the road to more and new opportunities in the labour market of musicians.

Conclusion

There are dozens of possible future research projects that can be carried out. All of the above, and especially the relationships and connections amongst countries and cultures, are some of the most foundational characteristics and aims of popular music studies. To put it another way, and perhaps a little simply and child like, the same moment that there is political turmoil between Greece and Turkey, a Greek musician can sit at the same table with a Turkish musician, and without each knowing the language of the other, can 'communicate', using the language of music, having nothing to separate, at all. Music and culture, nevertheless, show that there can be no borders in civilization and progress, and that humanity can continue to evolve without politics, but not without art, especially in one of its purest and oldest forms: popular

art. After all, as a graffiti street-saying that I read puts it: 'borders are scratches on the body of Earth'. Thank you very much.