

**Social perceptions of tradition, musical policy and the revival
of a 'forgotten' musical instrument: a case study of the
tambouras**

Introduction

The tambouras is a stringed instrument affiliated to the long necked Lute family. It is a general appellation referring to any of a group of closely related instruments sharing the following general characteristics: a pear-shaped wooden sound box, a long slender fingerboard as a direct extension of the sound box, movable frets, and wooden tuning pegs.

More specific terms, such as bouzouki, karadouzeni, baglamas, bulgari, kiteli, yogari, etc., were also traditionally employed according to the respective size, number of strings, and tuning of the particular instrument. In popular usage the terms often became interchangeable, reflecting mainly regional preferences and usage. Apart from Greece, similar terms are also encountered in other Balkan countries as well as in Turkey, reflecting a common Ottoman terminology.

Tambouras type instruments were commonly used in Greece up to the early 20th century, surviving in some places (particularly in Crete in the form of bulgari) up to the mid 1900's. They gradually fell into disuse, partially displaced by louder instruments such as lute (laouto) and violin (violi) and partially overshadowed by the development of the bouzouki which has come to be regarded as the Greek instrument par excellence. Originally a typical tambouras, the bouzouki began to develop in its own right towards the late 19th century acquiring a mandolin like carvel-built sound box, an elevated fingerboard extending on top of the sound box, fixed metal frets, and metal machine tuning heads.

Despite the eventual displacement of the tambouras, a combination of factors has led to a gradual revival of this instrument since the 1990's, a revival that has revolved around two main pivots:

a) A conscious return to traditional music through linkage with its Byzantine roots, whether discernible or 'inferred'. Within this context the Byzantine system of musical notation, rather than the traditional makam modal system inherited from Ottoman times, is employed for the transcription and teaching of traditional music and the common musical heritage of the Ottoman period tends to be attributed to Byzantine times.

b) An increasing familiarity in Greece with traditional world music and 'ethnic' music since the late 1980's. Their popularity also resulted in an appreciation of the common musical heritage of the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East which at the same time also led to a re-evaluation of traditional Greek music.

Historical background

Following the establishment of the Modern Greek State in 1830, there was an ardent desire, mainly within the ruling elite and upper classes, to 'cleanse' the country from its Ottoman past and adopt European manners and outlook. The whole fabric of social and civic organisation was to be based on European models (from city planning and building to dress, education, the arts etc.), and the country's development and modernisation were gauged by the relative success and progress of such adoptions. Within that context, any cultural traits that belonged or seemed to belong to the country's Ottoman legacy were looked down upon as backward, undesirable and inferior and educational policies were focused on the acquisition of European cultural and technical achievements.

Although in theory, traditional Greek culture and customs had been claimed as repositories of the true spirit of the nation preserving intact survivals of ancient Greek culture, they were not however deemed suitable as an integral part of a modern society. They were rather seen, through an

ideology of folkloric nationalism, as historic relics that hold no relevance to contemporary life. In fact the state up to the period under survey (1990's) actively promoted and emulated, both in its educational and cultural policies, western cultural models discouraging the seemingly inferior and parochial indigenous ones.

Within village societies however, antagonistic and resentful of the new urban values that rendered their own way of life obsolete, traditional music and culture still reigned supreme.

The great blow to traditional culture came between the 1950's and 1970's when increasing urbanization resulted in a steady migration from rural areas and villages to the large urban centres and especially to the capital, Athens.

For those moving into the large cities, rural culture was a source of embarrassment, a sign of backwardness implying lack of sophistication. Both the social perception as well as the state policies during this period dictated an almost exclusive appreciation of western norms as vehicles of a superior and desirable culture befitting a civilized modern society, and as such were at least nominally adopted by a large segment of Greek society.

At the same time, the extensive immigration (both internal and external) depopulated rural communities disrupting their social and cultural fabric further weakening the vitality and continuity of local traditions.

Last, the enthusiastic, albeit shallowly jingoistic and populist manipulatory promotion of traditional music and dances by the military Junta that controlled Greece between 1967 and 1974, further tarnished their image in the eyes of the average urban citizen, especially the younger ones. Social perception of traditional folk music was at its lowest and official music education mainly concentrated on the study of western classical music.

Still at the popular level, and especially in all traditional communal celebrations and festivities, traditional music and instruments continued to survive within a narrow but important social context, even though theoretically no cultural importance was attached to them. The tambouras however was no longer part of these settings.

Revival of the tambouras

The decreasing use of the tambouras in the early 20th century had resulted in its eventual dissociation and disappearance from living traditional culture. To all effects and purposes, the transmission of specific playing techniques and modes of manufacture had ceased to be a living tradition by the early 1950's, and the instrument had been more or less "forgotten".

Nevertheless, a combination of factors and interrelated phenomena has led to the rediscovery and revival, albeit limited, of the tambouras since the 1990's. This process begun in the mid 1980's and entailed in fact a reintroduction of the tambouras (in its twin form of saz) via Turkey.

a) Church music and the tambouras

In contrast to the admired classical music of Western Europe, the Modern Greek State found itself the heir of two distinct but related strands of "oriental" musical heritage. The first strand was the post Byzantine Ecclesiastical music employed by the Orthodox Church throughout the Ottoman period. The music of the Greek Orthodox Church, exclusively involved with liturgical chanting, did not employ any instruments, but had a rich theoretical background with its own system of notation. The other strand was the rich and varied traditional folk music, mainly based on the makam modal system of the Ottoman world, and closely affiliated to the music of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East. Within the State educational system, the very limited and basic music education that was offered did not include these strands as worthy subjects of study, concentrating instead on the European tradition. Up to the early 1990's music education at primary and secondary schools was minimal and the bulk of musical training was conducted by private and municipal conservatories that did not include traditional instruments and music within their offered subjects.

Instrumental in the preservation of both Church and folk music in their genuine forms was Simon Karas (1905-1999). He believed that both of these strands constituted an integral part of Greek identity preserving intact vestiges of Byzantine culture that should not be lost. The seemingly oriental Greek culture of Ottoman times was in fact of Byzantine origins and should not be seen as a foreign imposition that had to be shed¹. He thus considered the westernization of Greek music and culture as totally undesirable and strove to preserve them in their original form. In 1929 he founded the *Society for the Dissemination of National Music* and a School of National Music that was officially recognised by the Ministry of Education in 1957. Travelling throughout Greece, he collected thousands of traditional tunes, which he transcribed using the Byzantine system of musical notation. The novel use of Byzantine notation in the recording and teaching of traditional music, was a conscious choice made for ideological (it was a purely Greek system of notation) and practical purposes (it was well suited for recording the microtonal musical scales of traditional music). Between 1938 and 1971 Karas was head of the National Music department of Greek Radio. In 1972 he began releasing a series of recordings of traditional music from various parts of Greece, initiating a slow change towards a scientific, musicological approach in this field.

As the movable frets of the tambouras allow the setting of the scales to include microtones, Karas considered it ideal for teaching purposes. He also strove for the revival of other musical instruments that were no longer widely used in Greece like kanun (kanonaki), oud (outi), ney and politiki lyra.

Istanbul, and its Greek community, provided a valuable source of materials for this endeavour. Technical know how and instruments had to be introduced from Turkey, which due to its larger and more cost economic production capacity to this day remains the largest provider of all the revived traditional 'Greek' musical instruments.

¹ The desire to associate Modern Greek identity with its Byzantine past is reflected in the yearly commemoration of the Fall of Constantinople (29 May 1453) held by the Society for the Dissemination of National Music, originally proposed by Simon Karas.

World Music trend

The late 1980's saw the launch of the "World Music" concept combining western style music with traditional music from around the world. The trend for such hybrid "world" or "ethnic" music that developed also led to a wider acquaintance with and appreciation of the world's varied musical heritage in a more original and less westernized form.

Acquiring worldwide popularity, this trend introduced the Greek public and especially the younger generations to traditional rhythms that in many cases bore many similarities to the native tradition that they despised.

Within that wider context, the immense international popularity of Goran Bregovic's soundtrack of the film *Time of the Gypsies*², as an example among many, forced the Greek public to look into its own related musical culture through a renewed perspective as something one was no longer ashamed to listen to.

Of seminal contribution to this deeper appreciation of the common musical heritage of the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean was also musician Ross Daly who, residing from the mid 1970's in Greece and proficient in, among other, Greek, Turkish, and middle eastern traditional instruments, was in many ways instrumental in introducing traditional Turkish music and the saz to Greece. With his group and musical workshop Labyrinth, he has since 1982 been exploring and synthesizing the common elements and interconnections of various musical traditions including Greece, Turkey, the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan, India, etc. A number of young people inspired by Daly began to learn Turkish traditional instruments including saz. Many others started to travel to Turkey to study and bring back instruments and the revival of the tambouras thus begun to materialize.

Within this general background of renewed interest in Greek traditional music, the musical ensemble *Dynameis tou Aigaiou*, composed of former students of Simon Karas, with their homonymous album released in 1985,

² The soundtrack was rendered into Greek in 1991 as 'Paradehtika' by Lina Nikolakopoulou and Alkistis Protosalti.

pioneered a new trend of employing ‘forgotten’ traditional instruments like oud, tambouras/saz, ney, and kanun in the recording and performance of traditional songs. They also used such instruments in modern compositions based on traditional tunes. This proved very popular and created a wide trend of adapting and incorporating elements of traditional music to the contemporary musical scene that continues to this day³.

However, the origin of these instruments, belonging to a common Ottoman heritage, presents a paradoxical ideological challenge. In order to ‘by-pass’ their overt Oriental/Turkish associations, their use tends to be anachronistically projected directly back to Byzantine times. Employing the term ‘Byzantine’ in this context is a convenient way to refer to traditional culture without any taint of foreign connotations. At the same time the term imbues greater prestige than a more mundane appellation such as ‘folk’ or ‘traditional’.

State shift in educational policy

In 1981 Greece joined the European Union. To a certain extent the issue of Greek identity gradually shifted from becoming European to preserving one’s distinct identity within the wider European context. This change of focus also began to be slowly reflected in educational and cultural policies.

The most significant shift in the State’s educational policies concerning music was the establishment of music high schools in 1988, initially on an experimental basis. Again students of Simon Karas, and especially Marios Mavroeidis (1950-1997), were instrumental in this revolutionary development. By 1993 there were 9 music high schools with 450 students. By 2002 the figure had risen to 34 music schools with about 4.500 students. Currently there are 35 music high schools throughout Greece, 4 of them in Athens with

³ This tendency towards an artistic, “sophisticated” approach to traditional music (sometimes referred to as “Neo-traditionalist”) has come under criticism from those advocating a more “purist” approach based on the traditional performance styles.

2 more scheduled within 2006. They comprise somewhat less than 1% of the total secondary public school population of Greece.

Music high schools cover the whole 6 years of secondary education. They offer the standard curriculum of the general secondary education schools plus an average of 15 extra hours of music education a week. Western, Byzantine and traditional music are taught on an equal basis.

Since the tambouras, with its movable frets, is well suited for teaching both Byzantine as well as traditional musical scales, it is one of the main instruments taught in these schools, in most as an obligatory instrument.

This significant shift of State policy to a music education acknowledging and incorporating traditional music on an equal basis to the European tradition reflected the wider social re-evaluation of traditional music as a subject worthy of serious study. Official recognition further strengthened the new prestige of traditional music and laid the ground for the proliferation of organised efforts to preserve it.

Following the example of the music high schools and wishing to capitulate on the new popularity of traditional music most of the various private or semi-private conservatories throughout Greece⁴ also introduced it into their offered subjects. Indicative of the new status of traditional music is the fact that the Odeio Athinon, the first Greek Conservatory established in 1871 and a focal point of music education in Greece only introduced traditional musical instruments and theory in its curriculum in the educational year 2004-2005.

At the same time a variety of municipal and private centres have been established since the early 1990's researching and teaching traditional music as well as the manufacture of traditional instruments like the tambouras.⁵ Similarly musicological departments were established at University level (Athens, Thessaloniki, Kerkira) as well as departments of traditional musical instruments at technical universities (Arta, Kastoria).

⁴ There are about 600 conservatories supervised by the Ministry of Culture with an average number of students at 75,000.

⁵ Some of these efforts have also availed of EU educational programmes funding, like the ENIHA project for the training of traditional instrument makers.

The rediscovery of the tambouras is mainly an urban phenomenon mostly centred around public and private institutions (music high schools, conservatories, centres promoting traditional / Byzantine music, etc.), and musicians interested in the wider common musical heritage of the former ottoman world. For many of the students of traditional music the tambouras is a practical and economic choice. In this context the instrument is considered as of Byzantine origin (going back to Ancient Greek pandoura and Byzantine thamboura) even though most of the actual instruments, not to mention their playing techniques come from Turkey. Even so, there is a significant overlap between the tambouras and the saz, the main real difference being ideological perspective and respective repertoire. Thus when traditional Greek music is performed the instrument is usually referred to as tambouras whereas when Turkish music is performed it is referred to as saz (sazi). The main typological difference between the two instruments is the position of the sound hole. In a tambouras the sound hole is usually located in the upper front part of the body towards the fingerboard, whereas in a saz the sound hole is generally located at the rear side of the body. Since most of the instruments come from Turkey anyway, this distinction is not always apparent.

Still, for the wider Greek public, the tambouras remains an unfamiliar even 'exotic' instrument not readily recognisable as an indigenous one. The current revival of the tambouras, if indeed we may call it so, is limited within the confines of certain particular groups of interested individuals, students of traditional/Byzantine music and pupils of the music high schools, and has not achieved wider dimensions. Within the context of rural traditional festivities (paniyiria), wedding celebrations etc., the tambouras is not employed, a fact attributed both to its long period of disuse, as well as in its unsuitability for open or large space festivities.

If, however, music education continuous within the current framework, it will be interesting to see whether with an increasing number of high school and conservatory students training in the tambouras, the tambouras will once again become an organic part of Greek tradition relevant to the wider society or will remain restricted within the limited confines of specific groups of aficionados.

Selected Bibliography

Anogeianakis, Foivos (1992) *Greek Popular Musical Instruments*, Athens: Melissa Publications.

Dionyssiou, Zoe (2000) "The effect of schooling on the teaching of Greek traditional music", *Music Education Research*, 2 (2): 141-63.

Dionyssiou, Zoe (2003) "The contribution of education in the preservation of Greek traditional music", in Mei, X. Gang, Z. · Colomé, D. (Eds.) (2003) *Report of the Asia-Europe Training Programme: Preservation of Traditional Music*. pp. 181-197. Chinese Academy of Arts, Asia-Europe Foundation, Centre of Ethnic and Folk Literature and Arts Development, Ministry of Culture, Beijing.

Dragoumis, Markos (2003) "To Proepanastatiko Demotiko Tragoudi: Katagrafes, Organa", in: Grapsas, N. (Ed.) (2003) *Tehnes __: Episkopisi Ellinikis Mousikis kai Horou*, Volume 3, Patra: EAP Publications, pp. 174-6.

Feldman, Walter (1996) *Music of the Ottoman Court: Makam, Composition and the Early Ottoman Instrumental Repertoire*, Berlin: Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung.

Karakasis, Stavros (1970) *Ellinika Mousika Organa*, Athens: Difros Publications.

Picken, Laurence (1975) *Folk Musical Instruments of Turkey*, London: Oxford University Press.

Raftis, Alkis (1985) *The World of Greek Dance*, Athens: Polytypo Publications.