

GREEK FOLK MUSIC

A BRIEF SURVEY

M. Ph. Dragoumis

Greek folk music is directly and closely tied to acts, customs, chores and ceremonies linked to human existence and social and family life in villages or country societies. Most of these activities, and probably some of the music accompanying them, originated in times of remote antiquity. Such is certainly the case with the carnival festivities of the island of Skyros during which a group of men disguised as goats, with goatbells attached to their belts and another group dressed in women's clothes, form a procession and move down the streets dancing here and there a wild dance to an extremely slow and irregular strain. The Skyrians cannot explain clearly the origin of the goat dance, but we know that it is connected with the pre-historic magic rites which took place every year at the end of winter to ward off evil influences and to bring about a fertile crop.

Besides the everyday-life songs, the Greeks have a rich treasury of ballads celebrating the achievements of the Byzantine hero Digenis Akritas, and the Klephts, well-known warriors of modern Greek history.

Digenis Akritas was called Digenis from his double descent Greek and Islamic, and Akritas from the fact that he fought on the Christian side on the eastern frontiers, the '*akpes*', of the Byzantine Empire against the Turks and Saracens established in Syria and the East. He seems to have lived in the ninth century. In recent years an immense amount of work, notably by Professor H. Gregoire, has been done on the Akritan ballads and their relation to a more or less literary epic of the exploits of Digenis.

The Klephts were the patriotic outlaws or bandits who kept up a continual opposition to the Turkish government in the Greek mainland, during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Klephtic ballads were first collected in 1814 by von Haxthausen and in 1824, in a much larger collection, by Claude Fauriel.

A third group of ballads, the *paraloguea*, comprises short narratives of a swift epic character, in the form of summaries of folk traditions and folk tales.

A special feature in Greek folk poetry is the *distichs* or rhyming couplets of which a large number have been collected. These are sometimes improvised in Crete, Cyprus and the Dodecanese in special competitions held in the form of a satirical dialogue on a given subject.

Another characteristic type of folk song, but of urban origin, are the *rebetika*, commonly but mistakenly known as *bouzoukia*, from the *bouzoukia*, a giraffe necked mandolin which accompanies these songs. The exchange of minorities between Greece and Turkey in 1923 — brought over to Greece from Turkey 1 1/2 million refugees who were forced to live in very miserable surroundings mostly in Athens and Salonika. Feeling themselves on the fringes of society, the inhabitants of these slums banded together, largely through the use of drugs, and started developing a characteristically heavy type of song, dealing with such subjects as love and hashish, which had originated sometime around 1850 in prisons and places of ill repute in such sea ports as Piraeus, Smyrna and Constantinople.

The German occupation of Greece (1941-44) spread the feeling of being outcasts in their own country to all Greeks, and this encouraged a larger acceptance of this perhaps counterpart of American urban blues. Finally a lecture on the *rebetika* by Hatzidakis, a noted composer, after the war, led to their acceptance by the middle class. They then led on to a period of commercialisation and decline which has been broken only recently by a rerecording of some of the authentic specimens.

The predominant metrical form of Greek folk song is the fifteen syllable iambic metre, with a caesura after the eighth syllable and two main accents, one on the fourteenth, and another on the sixth or eighth syllables. It is the metre in which much Byzantine popular, satirical and even religious verse has been written. Other common metres are the eight, ten and twelve syllable iambic and trochaic metres, and the fifteen syllable trochaic metre.

The singing of most Greek folk songs involves extension of the given line by the repetition of syllables, words or phrases, or by the interpolation of extra syllables or phrases. Several attempts have been made to explain this curious phenomenon, but none can be considered entirely satisfactory.

Another curious aspect of the relation of the words and the music in Greek folk music is that in some old songs, the cadential phrase of each strophe is built not on the final syllables of the line which is being sung, but on the opening syllables of the line which is going to follow.

In Greek folk music, as in the folk music of other countries too, it is only very rarely that two singers will be found to sing the same song in precisely the same form, for folk singers constantly introduce unexpected changes in their renderings of traditional melodies. As Cecil Sharp has pointed out "these renderings are not corruptions, in varying degrees of one original. They are the changes, which, in the mass, engender growth and development."

Some Greek folk tunes are more popular than others and tend to become associated with a wide variety of texts. On the other hand, we often find identical texts sung to entirely different melodies.

An attentive listener of Greek folk music will soon find out that nuptial songs, lullabies, dirges, carols, work songs and satirical songs are sung to the same or very similar melodies all over Greece. Yet there are often distinct variations in the musical style of the different areas.

The music from the Pontos regions, which is now cultivated mainly in Greek Macedonia, where the Pontic Greek settled after the exchange of minorities between Greece and Turkey in 1922-23, is characterized by a three stringed mini-fiddle called the Pontic lyra or *kemendje*. It is held upright on the knee and plays in parallel fourths compound metres such as 9/8 (.....) or 5/8 (.....) in a very rapid tempo.

The musics of Epirus, on the NW mainland has a slow tempo and a rhapsodic character. It is based on the anhemitonic pentatonic scale and often has wide leaps in the melodic progressions, irregular metres, such as 8/4 (.....), and a profusion of glissandi. The most popular instrument of the area is the clarinet which plays in the lower register in combination with the fiddle and the lute, and sometimes the dulcimer (*santouri*). The clarinet was introduced in Greek folk music in the early nineteenth century, and is gradually replacing the *pipiza*, a double reed instrument similar to the oboe.

In the remote region of Pogoni, in N. Epirus, small choral groups sing polyphonic songs in three or four parts, in which the intervals of the fourth and the second play an important part. This type of song, which is also found in Albania, is often concluded by an instrumental dance, with abrupt pauses at cadential points.

The music of the remainder of the Greek mainland and the Peloponnese has a more or less unified style in which the prominent features are the 7/8 (.....), 6/4 (.....) and 2/4 metres, and the use of the seven tone scale in various diatonic, chromatic or mixed forms but never in the minor mode. The principle instruments are the same as in Epirus, but the clarinet has a tendency to play in the higher register.

In the islands the music tends to be light and delicate in character, with dance rhythms based on short ostinato phrases, while in W. Crete it has an heroic flavour, since the area was for many centuries the focal point of fierce struggles between Greeks, Saracens and Turks. The instruments of the islands are the fiddle, the *lyra*, which is gradually being replaced by the fiddle, the bagpipe, the lute and the dulcimer. The *lyra* is a mini-fiddle like the Pontio *kemendje*. The clarinet has been adopted only in a few islands in the N. Aegean, such as Skyros and Skopelos.

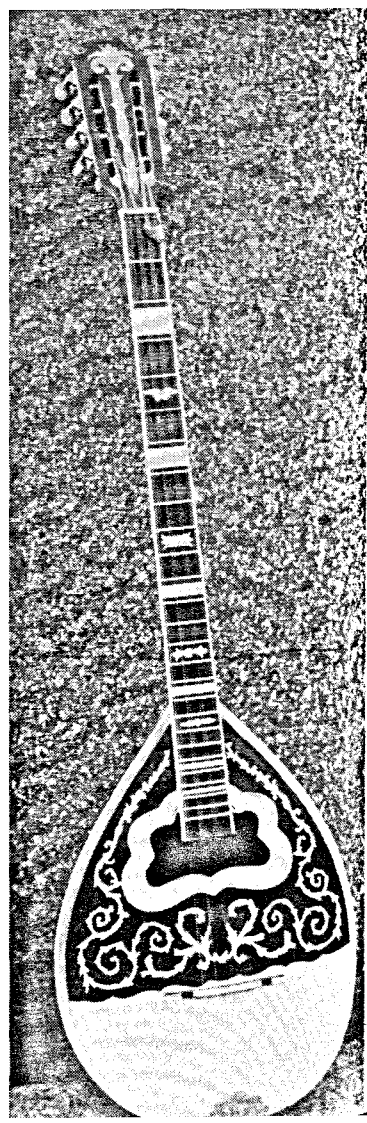
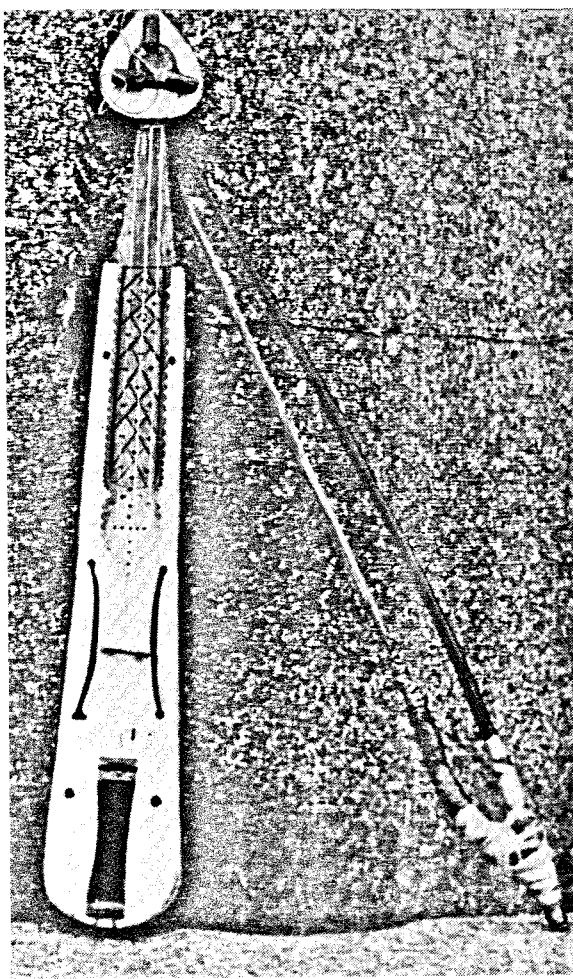
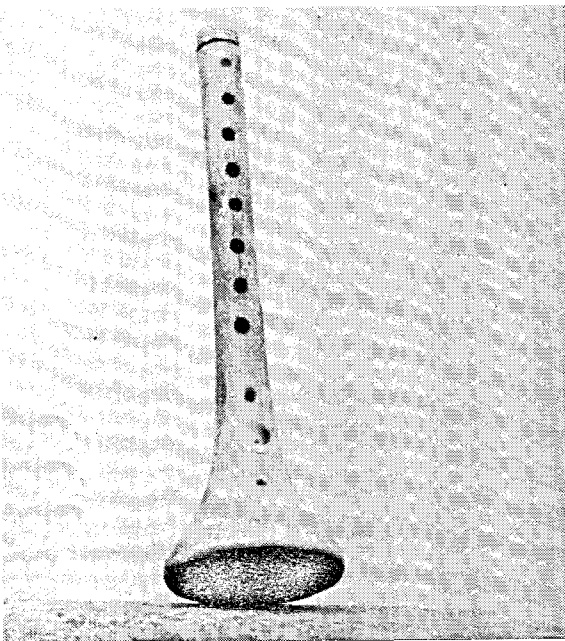
From the standpoint of melodic elaboration there are two basic styles in Greek folk music, the melismatic style with an abundance of ornaments and complete metric freedom, and the simple style with a well defined metric structure. The simple style is usually connected with dance. The melismatic style in the mainlands is usually associated with the singing of

Illustrations, P. 43: Musicians from Pontos playing *Depli* and *Trambouna* (bag pipe). P. 44 Musicians playing the Pontic Lyre. Note difference in Cretan Lyre on opposite page. P. 45: Above: Cretan Musicians playing the Cretan Lyre and the Lute. Below: Musician playing the *Santouri*. P. 46: Above: *Pipiza*. Left: *Bouzouki*, Right: Pontic Lyre.









klephtic ballads or the performance of virtuoso solos on the flute, the *pipiza* or the clarinet. In the islands there is no singing of klephtic ballads, but there is a highly developed art of melismatic song which finds its finest expression in the *mantinades* or serenades and the *amanedes* (complaints of a semi-urban origin).

Any introduction to Greek folk music is bound to land on a discussion of the folk dance, which is insolubly connected with the folk song and poetry. Of course, the discussion here will be very brief and incomplete owing to limitations of space and the vastness of the subject.

There are three basic types of Greek folk dances, the solo, the couple and the group dances. The latter are the most popular. In the group dances, a number of dancers, often men and women alternately, holding hands, or linked by holding between them the corners of handkerchiefs, form one or more open circles or lines and start moving in a counterclockwise direction.

The dancer at the right end of the circle or line is the leader. He is usually a man and enjoys the privilege of varying the prescribed steps and even breaking away from the other dancers and going through intricate gyrations involving graceful leaps and beats of the heels with the right hand. The leading position is usually assumed by each one of the dancers in succession.

The music of the dance is provided either by musicians sitting or standing nearby, or by the dancers themselves, in which case the verses of the songs are sung one by one first by the leader and then by the other dancers.

The names of the various dances are determined by a wide variety of factors such as tempo, degree of liveliness, place of origin, name of accompanying tune, historical or legendary event or action described by the dance, etc.

The dances of the ancient Greeks, depicted on classical vase paintings and friezes, or described by classical authors present many analogies to modern Greek folk dances. It is also noteworthy that the modern Greek dance called Syrtos was known under the same name in Boetia as early as the first century A.D.

The following quotation taken from Chianis' *Folk Songs of Mantineia*, furnishes an appropriate conclusion to this brief introduction. "Looking over the folk music of Greece . . . one cannot fail to recognise the supreme position that music occupies in the villages. In its simple and uninhibited method of expressing love, patriotism, natural phenomena, happiness, or profound sorrow, folk music is an inseparable element of present life. As one peasant so aptly expressed, 'Our songs, like the sun, are our life.'

M. P. Dragoumis, Director of the Institute of Musicology in Athens, is a leading expert in early Greek Music, both ancient and Byzantine. Through his good offices the tape archives of the Akademi has acquired several hours of Greek Folk Music and early Byzantine Liturgy.