

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE REBETIKO AND ITS REFLECTIONS ON THE GREEK SOCIETY

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Abstract

This study focuses on the perception of rebetiko in Istanbul and to analyze this fact, we will present a short history of rebetiko, which is taken in hand in hand by two so-called schools, the schools of Smyrnia and of Pireaus. In the second part, we will talk about the rebetiko in Istanbul and analyze the musicians of this kind. In this part, we will try to understand the general perception of the rebetiko in Istanbul.

In the middle of the 19th century, the music that is called the rebetiko was born simultaneously and spontaneously in Asia Minor and in continental Greece. As a matter of fact, one should be aware of that rebetiko can not be limited with music as it is a mode of living. This mode of life is represented by the music, the clothing, the behavior, the resistance to the values of middle and/or upper social classes and to the police, while this resistance was not frequently realized with physical scuffle. This living sub-culture was more valid for the ones in Pireaus until the population exchange as, before 1924, most of the Asia Minor musicians were belonging to middle, even, upper classes. Yet, there are some differences between the two rebetiko schools, i.e. Smyrnia, Pireaus, regarding the music, performance and gender. As stated by Koglin, the immigrant musicians were able to perform both the West and the East art music as they had a formal music education. Furthermore, the musicians were from both sexes. Whereas, the Pireaus musicians were autodidacts and were usually males (Koglin 2008). The rebetiko songs were an expression of everyday life: The lyrics were focused on unemployment, being an immigrant, life in the prison, love, loss and poverty. They were direct and simple with the vivid imagery and emotion. The use of slang and popular expressions were frequent. Furthermore, the rebetiko was always an indicator in the debates of the Greek national identity (Stamatis 2011: 157-158).

Rebetiko too, can not be understood without regarding the particular urban circumstances and the political situations as the other genres such as the blues, flamenco, fado and tango while every genre still carries its own distinct area of research. It is the politics and the war which have been the causes of major changes of rebetiko. First of all, after the independence of Greece and the Balkan wars, the Megalo Idea was the principle discourse of the Greek government and in order to achieve this, Greece entered to the First World War and after the treaty of Mondros, Greece has begun to occupy Asia Minor from Smyrna to the edge of Ankara (Holst 1983). However, after the unexpected defeat, the Greek economy has seen a large regression and with the Treaty of Lausanne and the exchange of population whose sole criterion was the religion, Greece has opened its doors to an enormous number of 1.5 million people. The Greek government has tried to do install this population to the rural area but neither the infrastructure in the rural nor the will of these people have allowed this. Thus, this population has settled to the urban area. This condition

has shaken the economy and the politics of Greece, but on the other side, these immigrants have brought their own cultures, including, the music and its relative technologies and instruments. The first recording of a rebetiko song in Greece was released in 1924 and this date is not a coincidence, it is just after the great catastrophe of 1922 which led to the population exchange between Greece and Turkey. The immigrants from Asia Minor were not only consisted of peasants, "ordinary" men, on the contrary, among them there were musicians and also, the entrepreneurs of music. In Istanbul and Izmir, recordings of rebetiko songs were already present by the companies such as Odeon, Columbia and His Masters' Voice. For example, a very well known musician, Panayotis Toundas, had been the head of a recording company in Istanbul and he has continued his business in Athens also.

During the 1930's, the rebetiko has increased its popularity in the Greek society. In this period, one sees that the rebetiko has begun to exit the tekkes (hashish dens) and opened itself to diverse classes and their areas of musical performance (Petropoulos 2000). In the period of the Metaxas dictatorship, the usage of hashish was monitored more strictly by the police, as well, the composition of the songs of hashish has begun to disappear. Yet it can be said that the regime did not essentially try to prohibit the hashish but they were trying to decrease the influence of Rembetiko in the society (Holst 1983).

During the period of the Second World War, one cannot say that the rebetes were active in the resistance movement but there were small number of rebetes who attended, such as Sotiria Bellou (Holst 1983).

Marxist opinion leaders have addressed the issues of the link between the rebetiko and the Greekness, and the question of class concerning the position of rebetes in class structures. A lot of communist writers, inspired by a spirit of patriotism, have searched for a Greek culture uncorrupted and indigenous. According to the Marxist thought, a national culture must be identified with the noble traditions and heroic efforts of people, those who have withstood the various invaders and the exploitation of the ruling classes. Accordingly, the foreign or bourgeois musical influences have been perceived either as a proof of a national decline, or as a vehicle of an imperialist plan to alienate the conscience of the people (Zaimakis 2010:7). Those who opposed to the rebetiko have perceived the oriental elements of the kind, as a residue of an unwanted occupation. Parallel to the rock music, rebetiko was considered as traces of imperialist plans to corrupt the Greek youth, inculcating in them the values of individualism, the pleasure and hedonism.

The reception of the Rebetiko in Turkey

Although there were some structural, formal and aural differences which can be explicitly seen in the songs between the musicians who immigrated from Asia Minor and the ones who were in the continental Greece, the dichotomy between Smyrnia school and Pireaus school was a matter of political discussion among the Greek society. Thus, this dichotomy is mainly inorganic and depending on the degree of nationalism, the hierarchy changes. For instance, for the ultra nationalist Greeks, the original rebetiko is the Pireaus style. Whereas, for more tempered nationalists, the Smyrneian school can not be underestimated. However, its roots can be found in the Byzantine music, so, it is still Greek. According to the scholars of this field, for instance, Gail Holst, the smyrneiko (the Smyrneian school style) is not the basis of rebetiko but with the style of

the Piraeus, they influence each other and after the arrival of smyrneiko, rebetiko was opening up to the outside and became a popular urban music. But still today, the debate on the question of what style the Rembetiko is continues. For the same question Muammer Ketencöđlu has claimed that rebetiko has two feet which are equally important; these are the styles of Smyrnia and Piraeus and that one can not make a hierarchy between them.

Actually, until the end of 1929, it was very difficult to distinguish these styles regarding their maqams. It is the instrument that makes the apparent difference, therefore, except that the use of bouzouki, this is not quite easy to differentiate between these two styles up to a certain time. For example, we cannot feel the smell of the Asia Minor among the works of Markos Vamvakaris even though he uses the maqams and the rhythms used in Asia Minor. In any case, it is very difficult and even, impossible to draw the lines between the two styles. Ketencöđlu as well, opposes to the idea of establishing a hierarchy between the two styles and this attempt is not musical but political. At last, these two styles trigger each other.

The discussion above is necessary in order to understand the reception of the rebetiko in Istanbul. In order to make a brief introduction, some general information will be given. Istanbul has a population of approximately 12 million. Even though Istanbul has always been in a state of cultural diversity, things have become really complex since the integration to the world economy and to the globalized consumption after 1980 (Koglin 2008:13). This way, several international record labels and musical networks found their places in Istanbul's soundscape, so did rebetiko. However, even though the rebetiko label was seen in 90's, it couldn't have made its way if there wasn't a potentially interested listener crowd.

From the 80's on, as the private enterprises were encouraged more than ever and in the relative democratic air of Turgut Özal period, several local and nation wide recording companies emerged, among all maybe the most important is Kalan Müzik. Speaking of the augmenting interest to rebetiko is based on the following facts: First of all, the resurgence of interest among the Turks in the music of "minorities" (Kurdish, Laz, Armenian, Rum, etc.) ; and, secondly, the evolution and enhancement of the relations between Greece and Turkey, both culturally and politically.

Another historical fact which creates a "Greek music" image in Istanbulites' heads is that number of establishments which provided the entertainment, including dance, alcohol, food and live music had traditionally been executed by members of the Greek Orthodox community or the Rum people (Koglin 2008:4). These places provided Greek popular music -including rebetiko songs- to the customers. However, the number of these establishments has decreased intensively with the massive emigration of Rums of Istanbul in 1950 and 1960. Then, the remaining Rum owners were reluctant to run their bars and restaurants after the Cyprus conflict of 1974 because of the fear of a public hostility. The retour of the "Greek music" in Turkey started again in 1980 with Zülfü Livaneli, who used to be an activist musician. He started giving common concerts with Mikis Theodorakis and Maria Farantouri who, as well, had political backgrounds. Only ten years later, rebetiko itself made itself heard in Turkey with Yeni Türkü -a band whose influence and name father was the nueva cancion movement in South America- who had published two albums consisting of rebetiko songs translated into Turkish. Furthermore, Turkish government removed the ban from Kostas Ferris' movie *The Rembetiko* and broadcasted it on the national television which attained to millions of people. It would be helpful to give the commentary of Atila Dorsay ,who is the most popular movie commentator in Turkey, in order to understand the point of view of

a group in Turkey regarding rebetiko¹: “The film of Rembetiko shows that the Greek popular arts were influenced from us, the Turks, and it affirms once again the common points of two cultures concerning the culture, perception and sensitivity.”

As one would find out the main discourse concerning the Greek culture is taking the Turkish culture as the reference point but also tries to embrace the Greek culture with showing how close the two cultures are (in this case one is derived from the other). This discourse is reinforced by the nostalgic points of references, as we shall see below.

In fact, there is a mass which is in friendship with the Greek culture (mostly the culture of tavern) and who sees the Greek music (including rebetiko) as a companion to raki especially in Istanbul and Izmir. The large majority of this group is constituted by the former middle class. There are stereotypes of these taverns, this type of man, of the raki and the nostalgic approach which can be found in the books, the television series and the comics. Even the professional and serious musicians house the same approach. For instance, as Koglin states:

The guitar and kemençe (fiddle) player Cengiz Onural, whom I interviewed in his recording studio in Üsküdar, said he liked rebetiko ‘because it reminds me of the good old times of Istanbul where Turks and Rum people were living together sharing the values of the brilliant culture of the Ottoman Empire’ (March 8, 2005) ... To him, rebetiko symbolized a bygone humane, cosmopolitan mentality. It referred to an Istanbul before 1922 where, to recall the novelist Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1901–1962), ‘rich and poor, all classes, would entertain together’. (Koglin 2008:11).

At this point, we can talk about a second perception of the rebetiko. It may be stated as “a course of self-awareness”. In this perception we can see an intellectual environment, in which the people are interested in this music with an intentional desire. Self-awareness course emerged in Turkey when the different identities became a matter of politics-making. It is interesting to note that, other than the Greek language and the Western languages, books about rebetiko are translated only into Turkish.

Also we can say that there exists a third perception which can be called “conversely empathy”. With the process of the rediscovery of the various identities, a positive prejudice emerged to the music of different cultures such as those of Rum, Kurdish, Laz and Armenians. This perception can be explained as an apology to the cultures suffered in Turkey and in Ottoman Empire.

In Istanbul, if one spends Saturday evening in Istiklal Street, it is possible to hear rebetiko in several venues. Other than the regular programs, there are artists and musicians who play at least once a month or two. Every musician and group have its own perception and reception of rebetiko.

To begin with Muammer Ketencöğlü, his approach to rebetiko is very purist, rejecting the over-orchestration. He began to make performances and conferences on rebetiko since the beginning of 1990. He formed the group Kompania Ketencöğlü with Orhan Osman, Stelyo Berber and İvi Dermancı. In this band their playlist consisted mainly of Pireatiko songs because of the existing instruments (accordion, bouzouki, rhythm). For him, the tradition is very important and the music should be played by its own traditional instruments. After Kompania Ketencöğlü, he formed Muammer Ketencöğlü and Zeybek Ensemble, who has performed the traditional zeybeks

1- See the cover of the DVD of Rembetiko.

through out the Anatolia, and Symrneiko songs. This ensemble consists of the accordion, violin, oud, rhythm and three singers. Today, Ketencoğlu does not play rebetiko because, according to him, his audience has changed and that he had left this music to the younger generations.

The other group which has been observed, is Tatavla Keyfi. According to them, they are trying to make the music of Istanbul to regain its diversity and entertainment of old Istanbuli rebets. The name Tatavla derives from the former name of the district of Kurtuluş where the Rums and the Armenians lived (and still living) and it was one of the most dynamic districts of Istanbul. Their repertoire is composed by the songs of rebetiko of Smyrna and Piraeus, as well as some very popular Turkish and Greek traditional songs. Their singer Alper Tekin said that the rebetiko songs always gave him the sense of separation and being far away from the homeland. It is observed that their performance is mostly for entertainment and the entertainment depends partly on the exploitation of nostalgia (nostalgia as a longing for the unreal). This nostalgia is represented by their clothing and the reaction of the audience, what in fact is to see what they want.

Last group that had been observed and interviewed was Cafe Aman Istanbul. Cafe Aman Istanbul is formed by Stelyo Berber and Pelin Suer accompanied by the violin, oud, double-bass, rhythm, bouzouki/guitar, kanun and accordion. They also collaborate with a dance company and invite popular musicians from Greece for their concerts in big halls/stages. Cafe Aman Istanbul describes itself as “a presenter of a moving performance of unforgettable Turkish and Greek music in period costumes, highlighted by lively dances from the era, which include theatrical elements and transform every concert into an audiovisual celebration.” Professional dancers and the period costumes are not so frequently seen in traditional music concerts in Istanbul. Furthermore, most of the musicians had formal education in the State Conservatory, thus, they have advanced level of maqam, harmony and sight-singing knowledge. However, after speaking with them, it was realized that they had a little knowledge about rebetiko, Rum culture and about the actual discussions going on about the subject. Also, their performance does not fully reflect the traditional way of playing the rebetiko.

Conclusion

With globalization, the Turkish public was able to reach other cultures' music via CDs and the internet. In this case, the rebetiko is more than music from another culture but it is also a music that is attempted to appropriate by the Turkish public. However, during its entrance, it is deformed and its reception is completely different than that of Athens, Thessaloniki, Berlin or Paris etc. What is crucial to understand the reception of rebetiko in Istanbul, is that the music is perceived in both directions at the same time: The rebetiko is both 'our' and 'their' music (Koglin 2008:18).

While working on the subject, first of all, as a musician playing rebetiko, I improved my knowledge on what I play. Also I discovered that even the rebetiko musicians do not have enough intellectual knowledge on music which they perform, and almost all of them have similar nostalgic perspective to rebetiko.

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