

AUTHENTICITY AND IDENTITY IN GREEK POPULAR MUSIC: THE ART-POPULAR SONG

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Abstract

The study of Neo-Hellenic culture has diachronically been controversial, even problematic; one of the main reasons for this complexity is the difficulty to specify the Modern Greek national and cultural identity. The filling out of a narrative of an undisturbed and continuous history from Antiquity to Modern Greece that was achieved by the late 19th century, led to the configuration of a Greek national identity which was considered pure from any foreign –mainly eastern- elements and strongly associated to Ancient Greece. In fact, continuity had become almost a required criterion for the legitimization of almost any genre within Neo-Hellenism. The fate of Greek popular music, specifically the massively accepted genre of art-popular song which emerged during the mid 20th century, was no different. Even though the description of art-popular song makes use of words such as hybrid, amalgam and fusion, its mass success was built upon the coveted Greekness, and therefore authenticity. Composers have been adopting foreign influences and have used them in their favor musically; at the same time, they have been using concepts such as (long) traditions and national identity to convince audiences for purity and Greekness. In this paper, I intend to focus on the use of the rhetoric of authenticity, continuity and identity by the art-popular composers Manos Hadjidakis and Mikis Theodorakis, which led to the reception of art-popular song as the most representative example of Greek national-popular music. Art-popular song urges one to consider how foreign elements can be borrowed, perhaps slightly modified, and subsequently transformed into the purest samples of musical tradition

During the late 1940s and early 1950s a re-orientation of Greek popular music occurred, reaching its climax with the creation of a new tradition; that of the art-popular song, the so-called *entechno laiko*. Manos Hadjidakis (1925-1994), an almost self-taught Greek composer, alongside the Western art educated Mikis Theodorakis (1925-present), perpetually changed Greek popular song in accord with their innovative ideas on the popular, the traditional and the national. Art-popular song gained massive popularity from the late 1950s onwards and has hitherto been considered the national popular music of Greece.

Art-popular song was initially formed as a synthesis of Western art music, Western popular styles (such as French cabaret song) and Greek musical tradition: folk/*demotic*, *rebetiko* and *laiko*.¹ There is a lengthy list of characteristics that could qualify a song as *entechno laiko* but what is crucial for a song of this genre is to share elements of Greek musical traditions and classical music (Dalianoudi 2009: 185-187). The use of lyrics by eminent poets was another significant characteristic of this new type of song.² The importance of the genre should not be underestimated since different categories of Greek musical traditions were combined and elevated in order to be relevant to a modern society. The concept of elevation is both interesting and problematic since it

1- Definitions of genres of Greek musical traditions (e.g *rebetiko* and *laiko*) follow in p. 3 of this article.

2- Certain thinkers oriented towards the political left held the belief that art-popular song had to be accessible to the masses. However, this is an approach that was prevalent mainly after the 1960 when art-popular song was institutionalised and established.

resulted to a reconsideration of what was believed to be 'national' and certainly 'authentic' music by the general public, resulting to the subsequent establishment of the art-popular as the most appropriate representative of Greek national-popular song.

Even though the description of art-popular makes use of words such as hybrid, amalgam and fusion, its mass success was built upon the coveted Greekness, and therefore authenticity. In this paper I intend to focus on the ways art-popular tradition gained mass popularity locally as well as globally by the use of mainly the rhetoric of authenticity. The stress on Greekness, instead of hybridity, is also the prevalent rhetoric for the diffusion of Greek popular music globally; *bouzouki* as the authentic Greek popular instrument, *zeibekiko* as the authentic Greek dance etc. However, some of the key elements of the art-popular song have various Eastern and Arabic influences in terms of style, harmony and instrumentation which proved problematic for the smooth development of the genre. Art-popular composers have been adopting foreign influences and have used them in their favor musically; at the same time they have been using concepts such as (long) traditions and identity to convince audiences for purity and Greekness. Even though hybridity was musically interesting to audiences, the alleged long and purely Greek musical heritage had to be reinforced through such concepts due to the complex relationship with the East. Interestingly, elements which were initially perceived as oriental, as well as some controversial instruments, such as the *bouzouki*, gained local and global recognition as the authentic voices of Greek popular music in a relatively short period of time. Art-popular song urges one to consider how foreign elements can be taken, perhaps slightly modified, and transformed into the purest samples of musical tradition. Therefore, the fluidity of cultural and national music boundaries is under question.

The matter of authenticity is strongly related to the concept of Greekness and thus it needs to be viewed within the wider context of Greek nationalism and some of its basic assumptions during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. During the mid nineteenth century, only a few years after Greece had gained its independence and during the flourish of romantic nationalism in Europe, modern Greek identity began to be viewed from a different perspective (Beaton 2009: 1-20). The most important and symbolic turn was the attitude of the Greek intellectuals towards Byzantium. According to the prevalent views of the period, Byzantium and its culture was a natural evolution of ancient Greece (Herzfeld 1986: 75-122). The filling out of a narrative of an undisturbed and continuous history from Antiquity to modern Greece that was achieved, resulted to the configuration of a Greek national identity which was considered pure from any foreign –mainly eastern- elements and strongly associated with Ancient Greece. In fact, by the early 20th century such tracing of alleged survivals from Antiquity or the Middle Ages had become almost a required criterion of legitimacy of any genre within Neo-Hellenism.

The fate of art-popular song was no different since continuity was a key aspect to the smooth development of the genre as national music. One of the main elements of art-popular song, and perhaps the most problematic as far as the concepts of Greekness and continuity are concerned, was the marginal genre of *rebetiko*. *Rebetika* were the underground songs that flourished at the beginning of the 20th century and derived from the Asia Minor, sharing many elements with Ottoman traditions. *Rebetiko* songs “were originally performed, listened and/or danced by *rebetes*, men of waywardness and non-conformity” (Pennanen 1997: 65). *Rebetiko* has its roots in the early 1920s, with the influx of refugees following the exchange of populations after the Greco-Turkish War in 1922 and the revival of café *aman* music in Greece. The café *aman* tradition was subsequently

fused with the underground urban Greek music, resulting to the Piraeus style *rebetiko*, a genre with its own distinctive features (Petropoulos 2000: 18-20). One of the main characteristics was the use of the modal system of *makams* and the instrumentation, namely the constant use of the *bouzouki* and its miniature version, the *baglamas*. This syncretic style was originally related to the subversive, lumpen proletariat society and its themes were related to acts of delinquency and misbehaviour. However, during the mid 1930s a popularisation of the genre occurred with the advent of Vasilis Tsitsanis, who removed the heavily eastern elements. Tsitsanis initiated the use of chordal harmony, the modal system of major-minor as well as the use of lyrics that applied to larger segments of society, transforming *rebetiko* to a more popular (*laiko*) genre (Tragaki 2007: 61).

The indications of westernisation of *rebetiko* as well as its gradual establishment led Manos Hadjidakis to musically intervene in the mid 1940s in order to transform *rebetiko* to a genre of higher intellectuality that would subsequently determine a high-popular aesthetic in Greek song. From that moment on, and through the various uses of *rebetiko* by Hadjidakis and Theodorakis, *rebetiko* was elevated and “hailed as the authentic Greek popular music” (Papanikolaou 2007: 67). Even though the ideological and aesthetic criteria of Hadjidakis’ and Theodorakis’ turn towards *rebetiko* are totally diverse, the authenticity rhetoric that was employed in order to achieve the integration of *rebetiko* into art-popular music presents significant similarities, at least at the initial stages of their career.

The pivotal work in the transformation of *rebetiko* to art-popular is usually considered to be Hadjidakis’ incidental music for the 1949 play *Blood Wedding* by F. G. Lorca³, even though there are more distinctive examples of this hybrid genre. According to the analysis of Dalianoudi, the theme of the *Introduction* of the *Blood Wedding* is identical to the main theme from the *rebetiko* song *Archontissa* by Vasilis Tsitsanis but in a much more westernised manner and with the exclusive use of Western art instrumentation (Dalianoudi 2009, 68-71). Another characteristic example of the embedment of *rebetiko* to art music is the song *He was the Pride of the Dawn*, composed for the same play. The rhythmic structure of the piece is based on the 2/4 *rebetiko* rhythm of *hasapiko* (Dalianoudi 2009: 70), which is one of the two widely used rhythms of the genre (the second one is the 9/8 rhythm of *zeimbekiko*).

The *Blood Wedding* was not significant merely for the music innovations of Hadjidakis though. The performance was followed by a seminal lecture⁴ by Hadjidakis on *rebetiko* (Hadjidakis n.d) regarding its authenticity, which subsequently evoked numerous discussions about its social value (Vlisidis 2004: 76-83). Hadjidakis’ first concern in the lecture was to praise the artistic value of *rebetiko*, its musical as well as thematic complexity, and at some level defend his preference towards the use of *rebetiko* tunes in his own theatrical compositions of the period. Most significantly, Hadjidakis focused on the so-called Greekness of *rebetiko*, its natural continuity with Byzantine

3- Manos Hadjidakis’ work *For A Little White Seashell* could be considered the first effort of the composer to bring together art music and Greek musical tradition. However, this work is based mainly on Greek folk tradition rather than *rebetiko* or other urban genres.

4- The lecture was given on the 31st of January 1949, at the Art Theatre. The date, the year and the place where the lecture took place were matters of ambiguity until the recent past. The critic Vasilis Papademetriou in 1949 mentioned that the lecture was given at theatre Alike whereas an article in the journal *Ελληνική Δημιουργία* mentioned that the lecture was given at the ‘Art Theatre’. Until very recently, there were only some parts of the lecture published. However, in 2003 the whole lecture was found in Foivos Anogeianakes’ archive where the correct place and date of the lecture were indicated.

chant and ancient Greek culture. At several points, he did so by using the rhetoric of musical and cultural continuity, making a hypothesis of an authentically Greek *rebetiko*. Even though –unlike Theodorakis- the triptych Ancient Greece, Byzantium and Modern Greece as a continuous entity is an ideology that Hadjidakis never fully adopted in his subsequent work, its presence in the particular text is dominating; this is certainly revealing as far as Hadjidakis' motives are concerned as well as the expectations of the audience in relation to Greekness and identity.

Some eastern elements were apparent within the different forms of *rebetiko* song, specifically within the Smyrnaean style of *rebetiko*. In the lecture though, Hadjidakis did not hesitate to relate *rebetiko* to Byzantine chant and Ancient Greek traditions, specifically in respect to the spirit and ethos of those songs. He did not give any technical examples of this alleged continuity and he supported his hypothesis with sentimental assertions:

Rebetiko songs, in an admirable unity, have the strength to achieve a combination of logos, music and movement. The composition as well as the performance of them instinctively create the conditions for a triple conjunction, which sometimes is close to perfection and morphologically reminds us of ancient Greek tragedy (Hadjidakis n.d).

The evaluation of *rebetiko* in relation to ancient Greek tragedy was not restricted to the direct comparison between the spirit of *rebetiko* and the spirit of tragedy. Hadjidakis moved on to specific stereotyped features of ancient Greek culture and he gave *rebetiko* historical validity by mentioning that: “What music can claim today that it exists beyond that of Byzantium, beyond demotic songs, and at worst beyond the broken columns of the Parthenon and the Erechtheum, there where all these found themselves in their day and age? *Rebetiko* songs are genuinely Greek, uniquely Greek” (Hadjidakis n.d).

In the same lecture, Hadjidakis referred to the two dominant dances/rhythms of *rebetiko* song, the *zeimbekiko* and the *hasapiko*. The former has its roots in Eastern Anatolia and the latter to Macedonia and the multi-cultural Constantinople. However, Hadjidakis mentioned that “the *zeimbekiko* dance obviously descends from the dances of the Cycladic islands and Pontus” (Hadjidakis n.d). As far as the dance of *hasapiko* is concerned, Hadjidakis argued that it bears certain European features, which is partly true, but he ignored all its demotic aspects.

Being one of the first composers who elevated the marginal genre of *rebetiko*, Hadjidakis might have used certain continuity rhetoric in order to achieve this transition. However, the use of *rebetiko* elements was not as direct as his intentions might seem. The use of *bouzouki* was not even introduced yet, and the instrumentation of his early compositions was rather conventional and, most significantly, western orientated. The advent of Mikis Theodorakis had a more direct effect and in some way integrated what Hadjidakis had started, “but with the aim of redefining its links with the people” (Papanikolaou 2007: 79). The first composition that was considered a pure art-popular work and gained considerable popularity was the 1960 *Epitaphios* by Theodorakis. *Epitaphios* is a song cycle, based on a poem written by Yannis Ritsos, a communist Greek poet. Theodorakis had not yet achieved international acclaim but *Epitaphios* was a defining moment for him as well as for art-popular song. For the composition of this work Theodorakis “relied heavily on the “reviled” stringed instrument, the *bouzouki*, and Ritsos’ words were sung by a throaty male singer, Bthikotsis” (Papandreou 2007: 90). He also made extensive use of the rhythms/dances *hasapiko* and *zeimbekiko* which he used in four songs out of a total of eight. Theodorakis’ use

of *rebetiko* elements was not as subtle as Hadjidakis', since he adopted the classic performance style of *rebetiko* and preferred a *laiko* singer instead of a western-art educated one. However, the association of *bouzouki* with Middle Eastern and Ottoman traditions as well as its extensive use in underground *rebetiko* songs caused a huge controversy over the appropriation of its use (Vlisidis 2004: 96-99).

Therefore, Theodorakis was the second composer who had to publicly defend *rebetiko* as his musical choice. Additionally, he had to defend the choice of *bouzouki* by focusing on the Greekness of his music. In his 1960 artistic credo Theodorakis mentioned that: "As far as I am concerned, I have gone back to the very roots of our tradition for the formation of my aesthetics. It is true what is said about me that in my music there exist Byzantine, demotic, as well as pop musical elements" (Theodorakis 1983: 17-18). Most significantly, Theodorakis supported the theory of the purity of *rebetiko* due to an alleged continuity with Byzantine chant. In the same text, Theodorakis gave a technical harmony example of the famous *rebetiko* song *Synnefiasmeni Kyriaki* by Tsitsanis in relation to a classic Byzantine *kontakion*, *Ti Ypermacho*, where he expressed the opinion of continuity between the genres due to harmonic and melodic similarities (Theodorakis 1983: 18-23). In an interview conducted in October 1960, Theodorakis defended the content of *rebetiko* songs stating that they "praise *eros* in a romantic and tender manner" (Theodorakis 1961: 188) and thus dissociated them from the marginal character that it was believed they possessed. The defence of *rebetiko* rhythms came in another 1960 text in the liberal journal *Epitheorisi Technis* where Theodorakis mentioned: "Who can be incurious of this singular union of even and uneven metre of 9/8 which we also witness in the Greek folk/demotic tradition?" (Theodorakis 1961: 193).

The public praise of *rebetiko* by Hadjidakis and Theodorakis in accord with their innovative compositions led towards a holistic legitimisation of the art-popular, and consequently *rebetiko* as one of its basic structural elements. According to Papanikolaou, "after *Epitaphios*, *rebetiko* as a genre, *bouzouki* as an instrument and *zeimbekiko* as a dance gained such legitimacy that swept away all past resistance" (Papanikolaou 2007: 89). The purification and hellenicisation of *rebetiko* and the massive acceptance of art-popular song had an impact on the international fame of both Hadjidakis and Theodorakis. Hadjidakis' film music for *Never on Sunday* and Theodorakis' film music for *Zorba the Greek* became the most characteristic samples of Greek popular musical tradition and are the most recognised Greek melodies globally. Interestingly, the *bouzouki* has hitherto been identified as the folksy tourist musical instrument of Greece, instead of an instrument of urban popular music.

The epitome of the catholic recognition of *rebetiko* and art-popular tradition, as well as its placement along with all the great achievements of the Classical past, was witnessed during the opening ceremony of the Athens Olympic Games of 2004. According to Plantzos, in the 2004 ceremony, considerable emphasis to continuity was given and there was 'a celebration of the all-time-Classic Greek ideal', with a confirmation of Hellenic identity in its whole (Plantzos 2008: 8-10). Therefore, the inclusion of *bouzouki* and art-popular was seen as part of the greater Hellenic history. At the very beginning of the opening ceremony a group of drum players started playing the *rebetiko* rhythm of *zeimbekiko* and shortly after a group of *bouzouki* players started performing a *rebetiko*-based melody by the art-popular composer Stavros Ksarchakos (1939-present). Immediately after, the *hasapiko* piece *Erimia* by Hadjidakis was played, signifying the positioning of art-popular song –and *rebetiko*–side to side with the glorious Classical past.

To sum up, the art-popular composers selected those elements which they believed were the fundamentals of the 'national' tradition and created a new hybrid that was subsequently seen by the audience as the most representative example of authentic Greek music. Therefore, the question is not how regional popular music should be in order to maintain its local identity; it is rather how local the reception of a genre has to be in order to gain acceptance. In the case of Greek music, invocation to Ancient Greece and Byzantium proved sufficient for this transition locally and globally. It is, therefore, safe to agree with Ilka Oramo's assertion: 'What is accepted as national is national, wherever its roots may be' (Oramo 1997: 53).

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