

THE CRETAN LYRA IN PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

The lyra has a special and perhaps unique presence in the musical landscape of Greece. On the island of Crete, lyra music and musicians enjoy a well established role as custodians of 'roots music' through the lyra-laouto ensemble (a bowed lute with accompanying plucked lute duo or trio which may be augmented from time to time with mandolin, guitar or percussion). The richness and complexity of this performance phenomenon, involving music, poetry and dance, necessitates that a broad ethnomusicological perspective be adopted in any attempt to understand it, demanding prolonged, multifaceted and interdisciplinary research. This paper will provide an overview of my own attempts to meet these demands. I discuss some of the ways in which lyra music, musicians and the lyra itself are agential in Cretan musical, social and cultural life, including historical background, organological detail, with a focus on performance practices. The power of the lyra music tradition relates to some of the most fundamental organisational characteristics (and issues) that have defined Cretan society, with the expression of deeply-seated local cultural values. This is evidenced via a range of inter-connected phenomena and relate strongly to the structuring of musical performances. Crucial here are the virtuosic performances of lyra musicians at celebrations – their techniques of improvisation will be discussed in some detail in this paper - and their high profile work within the vehicle of a local recording industry. Musicians as entrepreneurs in this context exploit a range of opportunities, inviting participation but also shaping expectations. Musicians as men engage with social life as both musical and extra-musical adepts, the empowering iconic status and affect of lyra music, as both a sonic and visual phenomenon, providing for an inter-textual and cross-media performance extravaganza that still retains a certain gravitas and polarising affect within the Cretan world at large.

What can be said of the Cretan *lyra* (*kritiki lyra*) in the context of a conference on the *kemençe* in Turkey? This paper details aspects of a response from me, as a long-time researcher into the music of Crete. The lyra is embedded in Cretan culture in the form of a distinct musical tradition. However the adherents of this tradition do not always relish its musical relations within a wider Eastern Mediterranean world. Yet it is clear that the distinctive features and morphology of the Cretan lyra shares a family resemblance with several other fiddle-like instruments in the Aegean region and beyond, particularly the Turkish *fasil kemençe* (*politiki lyra* in Greek). Those connections have

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been more recently emphasised in the work of Ross Daly, for instance, who has explored them in great depth via his experimentations with a range of bowed instruments. So the core question in this paper is: What contribution can the study of the Cretan lyra provide for an understanding of kemençe-like instruments in the Eastern Mediterranean region? Moreover, with my emphasis on music ethnography, what kind of contribution can I make to the broad-ranging discussion in this volume?

What is a musical instrument?

To begin with, it would seem to be logical and propitious to consider the basis of our discussion in some detail in asking the question: What is a musical instrument? Musicians such as the late Cüneyd Orhon, with their intimate and unsurpassed relationship with their musical instrument of choice, force us to consider the broader significance of instruments as they intersect individual and collective worlds of musical creation. A musical instrument is much more than the sum of its parts, however much it is designed for specific sonic reasons. This is surely a key factor? It is a solid component of our musical practice. A musical instrument can be measured and weighed, its acoustic properties investigated, the ecology of its wood documented, its metals sourced, the site of its sound activation identified, and its sound spectrum plotted in an endeavour to define it. However, made to be played, whether one person's noise or another person's music, when musical instruments sound out they are invariably made to make meaning (changing soundscapes, affecting emotions, moving bodies, demarcating identities, mobilising ideas, demonstrating beliefs, motioning values) which, in turn, makes them potent social and cultural phenomena. For various reasons, Cüneyd Orhon achieved significant and substantial musical and social momentum with his music and with his kemençe. It is clear that he existed in a wider world of music-making which we might acknowledge here. As sites of meaning construction, musical instruments are embodiments of culturally based belief and value systems, an artistic and scientific legacy, a part of the political economy attuned by, or the outcome of, a range of associated ideas, concepts and practical skills: they are one way in which cultural and social identity (a sense of self in relation to others, making sense of one's place in the order of things, after Michel Foucault) is constructed and maintained. For example, I note the prominence and rootedness of the '*ud* (*oud*)' in the soundscape of Arab music cultures (and to some extent Turkey) and its significance for the development of a musical cosmology, mythology, and performance practice system over several centuries (see Jenkins and Olsen 1976; Shiloah 1995; Touma 2003; Marcus 2007, Bates 2012).

The fact is that a musical instrument is much more than the thing itself, even if the object has specific design characteristics related to certain desirable sonic and structural effects. We can see this with the various experiments with sound design in the pear-shaped kemençe, especially in its variable number of strings, varying sizes, and ensembles, as well as the debate surrounding such experiments and developments (as was in evidence at the Cüneyd Orhon conference in 2010). So musical instruments are generally not regarded as "things" at all, at least not for long, but acquire meaningful status as part of individual-collective musical worlds, wherein they develop a "social life" (Appadurai 1986) akin to that of "social beings" (after Gell 1998 and 2006), becoming empowered (DeVale 1989; Doubleday 2008), providing a solid basis for cultural memory (Fisher et al. 2006) and participation in social life (Turino 2008). In fact, just like the various designs of the

pear-shaped kemençe in Turkey, musical instruments can be the basis for contest and negotiation, for competing views of the world if you will. The objects of material culture (see Forty 1986; Miller 2005; Woodward 2007) go on to acquire a degree of power and agency in the contexts of their use, as symbols of transformation (Jung 1977), extending the influence (and intentionality) of their creators and patrons outward and onward through the passage of time and the stages of human life. This is surely the case with the work of Cüneyd Orhon? Moreover, the fact that musical instruments by design and definition are produced to create humanly organized sound provides them with an empowering multi-sensorial dimensionality that eludes many other objects of material culture.

It is clear then, when one considers the development of various kemençe-like instruments throughout the Eastern Mediterranean area, that musical instruments continue to develop, emerge out of, mutate, or resonate as a part of a continual convergence of a wide range of meaningful developments in music, culture, design, and technology (Arthur 2009). One might use the examples of the various musical instrument designs emerging from Istanbul Technical University as an example here: one of the latest developments being the microtonal guitar of Tolgahan Çoğulu. Here I use the term “technology” in the widest sense possible to subsume old and new, acoustic and electric, and analogue and digital sound-producing devices. Moreover, such a term includes a wide range of construction materials, from wood to carbon fibre, plastics to metals.

Drawing on the historical impact and value of musical instruments (and their study) but focusing on the present day, one might productively include musical instruments among such models as: “music-cultures” (Titon and Slobin 1996), “sonic cultures” (Greene and Porcello 2005), and “technoculture” (communications, culture and technology) (Penley and Ross 1991; Lysloff and Gay 2003), among numerous other locations or convergences of culture (see Bhabha 1994, Jenkins 2006, respectively), which incorporate, overlap, and interpenetrate with the life of musical instruments. Musical instruments exist as a part of an intricate web of sound-producing and sound-carrying/relaying/filtering/ processing devices that can be heard—directly or indirectly—around the world. Cüneyd Orhon played live and on record, and on radio and television, all of which had subtle and less-subtle effects upon his sound and approach. The boundaries that have traditionally separated or demarcated musical instruments from other objects and technologies, as well as academic disciplines, must surely be questioned. How do we now get to hear the work of Cüneyd Orhon? We now listen to his recordings. Such factors as they come to play in music find resonance also within the Cretan context.

Researching the lyra in Crete

I spent the best part of the 1990s engaged in research on the music of Crete, whether in the field or away from it in critical reflection, theorizing up (Dawe 2007). My focus was upon the Cretan *lyra-laouto* ensemble, loosely, a lead fiddle with accompanying lute duo (or trio with an extra laouto) that play primarily for celebration dances in both the villages and towns of Crete. A vibrant music industry still exists on the island with local production companies, recording studios and retail outlets. But there is also a more informal and spontaneous tradition of lyra music performance in small *parea-s* (‘social parties’), primarily as a context for the often impromptu gathering of friends and associates.

It became clear to me that any discussion of the Cretan lyra in performance presents a challenge to the ethnomusicologist: How to do justice to the lyra's ubiquity, iconicity and power as an emblem of Cretan social and cultural identity by talking about its sounds and constituent repertoire alone? And then: How to do justice to its musical-organological complexity by silencing it in a sociological analysis? In this paper it is my intention to acknowledge that a balanced view of the Cretan lyra in performance is not only possible but completely essential, and that a synthesis of viewpoints is desirable silencing neither approach. Here, adopting a holistic ethnomusicological analysis then, I try to demonstrate some of the ways in which the musical and the social coalesce around, upon and as the instrument that is the lyra of Crete. In remembering Cüneyd Orhon, one remembers the musician at the heart of the matter and his intimate connection as both a virtuoso and architect for his instrument and the broader reaches of its musical culture. Likewise, in my analysis of the work of lyra music I recall several famous master musicians from Crete, such as Andreas Rodinos, Thanasis Skordalos, Kostas Moundakis and Nikos Silouris.

The lyra is still anchored in a soundscape largely defined by the landmass of its island base, despite its travels in the hands of musicians working the Cretan diaspora throughout the world or representing Greece in the Eurovision Song Contest. Moreover, it is the Cretan lyra, distinct from the Karpathian lyra or the lyra of mainland Thrace. The Cretan lyra sounds very different to these instruments. It is first and foremost a Cretan instrument, and secondly an instrument of Greece. In any acknowledgement of the geography of kemençe-like instruments – we might call them the pear-shaped fiddles of the Greater Aegean area- a family resemblance might well be identified and cultural-historical affinities established. And it is clear that many Cretan musicians look towards Turkey when aligning their music with some other musical place, whether they like it or not. The relationship of the Cretan lyra to places elsewhere is not an easy one to broach, let alone discuss or define in detail, despite some local musicians clear engagement with the wider soundscape of the region, past and present. Ross Daly is probably as well known to Turkish audiences as he is to Cretans, and is clearly keen to point out, for example, musical relations between Greece and Turkey.

The claim here is that at the heart of the Cretan music tradition are the virtuosic performances of lyra *musicians as men* at live celebrations, their techniques of improvisation being musically and socially agential in these contexts, but also resonating well beyond them. However, brief mention must also be made of the extensive commercial musical infrastructure on the island, its industrial hub being the record companies, music clubs and musical retail outlets of Crete's capital city, Iraklion. That is, however much the symbolic power of lyra music resides in outlying villages, such as the central mountain village of Anoyia, such a centralisation of 'tradition' is contested as local music comes within the reach of global media. Yet one still finds benchmarks of 'authenticity' and markers of local identity in the mountain village way of life, in pastoralism, shepherding and farming, with the island's agricultural economy via its many employees still a faithful patron of lyra music performance live and on record. Musicians as entrepreneurs in this well established musical-symbolic infrastructure exploit a wide range of performance opportunities. *Musicians as men* engage gregariously on the stage of social life.

Lyra music takes on an audible and highly visual presence in island life. There are various ways in which it does this. Enable to exist productively in two dimensions, the islands recording industry carries the sounds and sights of lyra music around the island. Clearly, as lyra

music circulates around the island it celebrates it. I note first the links lyra music maintains with the pastoral way of life, rooting it in the life of mountain villagers, as evidenced, for instance, on the covers of some recent compact disc releases: (Figure 1)



Figure 1. Music in mountain life: Apo Sitea sta Hania ('From Sitea to Hania') album cover (Aerakis Records)

From the Classroom to the Celebration context

Dimitris Pasparakis, known as the 'teacher of Cretan music', is at the centre of traditional lyra music teaching and performance in Crete ('the tradition') and it is through a focused study of his work that I have attempted to draw the worlds of learning, teaching and performance together in relation to *lyra* music. Master musicians like Dimitris exert a strong influence on the direction and help sustain the profile of lyra music in Crete. (Figure 2)



Figure 2. Dimitris Pasparakis at home (2000): Photo by Kevin Dawe

Dimitris was keen to point out the need for a solid and constructive learning and teaching experience for his pupils. 'The tradition' is now increasingly rarely learnt by sitting at a master's or relative's feet for years on end, as time and space are compressed and reconfigured not only affecting Dimitris's outlook but also the way in which he approached his teaching. He had been forced to formulate a teaching system based on his own learning experiences as a boy and at celebrations whilst attending to the aims and objectives of the conservatory system. In short, Dimitris had been

forced to not only start a business but to explain himself. The quality of that explanation would be judged by his peers and contemporaries, those in the music business along with enthusiasts and pedagogues, among a general audience. Kostas Moundakis had put the *lyra* on a footing with the pianoforte, *bouzouki* and (most importantly) the violin by adding it to the conservatory curriculum in 1969. Then *lyra* music was seen to be in need of as much explanation as the music of Bach or Mozart or Theodorakis or Markopoulos. *Ad hoc* or individualized teaching systems that were once the mainstay of 'the tradition' were gradually reworked to encourage and foreground technical precociousness and virtuosity inherent in 'the tradition' but re-worked as a part of the school system. Whereas crowd management and musical masculinity are but two elements somewhat muted but still present - I had to try and learn more about them by observing performances -, even if they occasionally they surfaced in the classroom. These latter elements were not marked in assessments but they were definitely attributes that helped to define the successful *lyra* musician in Cretan society.

I want to now move on to an analysis of musical themes as given to me by Dimitris in class using a solfege system. In figure 3, I have transcribed them into staff notation. I will provide an example of the way in which the basic themes below are worked up into complex and elaborate improvisations in performance. I probe some of the parameters of musical performance practice through a short analysis of the improvisational strategies detectable in a performance of the *protos syrtos* ('first syrtos') which consists of a suite of themes. (Figure 3)

Renditions of the suite of themes vary between $\text{♩}=70$ and $\text{♩}=130$

Theme 1

Theme 2

Theme 3

Theme 4

Figure 3. The Protos syrtos themes in Western staff notation

Dimitris insisted that I play the themes with ornamentation and suggested places where I could use it, which he also marked in his notation of themes. I played through the themes with Dimitris to try and match his phrasing and ornamentation. This is where the cassette recording of the lesson became vital, not just as a reminder of melodic material but also the critical ornamentation, from vibrato to trills, that brings the music to life and provides it with a further characteristic of 'the tradition.' Ornamentation itself would be used as a device to achieve difference between themes otherwise played almost exactly the same. How is this suite of themes deployed during a live celebration event? One such context is the Grom's procession. (Figure 4)



Figure 4. The Groom's Procession (Anoyia village, July 1991) Photo by Kevin Dawe

The transcription of the whole performance enabled certain patterns, structural landmarks and organizational techniques to emerge. Indeed, Dimitris recognized most of them as a part of the means by which he shaped and moulded musical materials and they reveal, to some extent, *how* (at least in terms of pitch and duration) he is able to achieve a particular phrase, episode, direction or effect. Ornaments, stress marks, dynamic markings, and extra-musical sounds are included in the full transcription (see Dawe 2007). Analysis of the full performance reveals improvisational strategies, as follows:

- A specific occurrence and order of themes within the improvisation
- Repetition, variation, and contraction
- Variation within a given theme
- Variation within a mixed theme
- Longer repetitive extension and reference to more than one source theme
- Repetitive extension, transformation and recapitulation
- Global linking structures

At the celebration, Dimitris and his band worked their magic, or so it seemed, in an effort to create an ideal social world, not just for budding musicians but for a whole community. And this social world was largely organized on *their* terms. Within well-established *musically* created boundaries the celebration transcended, but never quite left behind, the everyday world of work (a world in which the only obvious 'workers' not left behind were the musicians). The audience largely danced to Dimitris's tune and it was largely up to him to set the pace, direction and order of the occasion. He was the *animateur* of the event and the *kefi* ('high spirits') it produced. I want to re-emphasize its pivotal role here and the role of musicians as responsible for creating *the musical context* that allows for a social transformation to take place which sets the fundamental rhythms and tones of the occasion. Exclamations of *kalo ghlendi* ('good celebration'), *kale para* ('good company'), *kalo fageto* ('good food') or *kalo krasi* ('good wine') all point to the phenomenon of *kefi* ('high spirits') and to the success and pleasurable impact of an event not just registered in musical

terms. I never heard success described in purely musical terms either by musicians, guests or patrons but clearly all the other elements, in the hands of patrons and guests, had to at least to aspire to be as good as the music.

But despite the fact that I have over ninety hours of recorded music from attendance at weddings, baptisms, name days, etc., including Cretan music clubs, not all of it can be said to convey a *successful* performance. Food in short supply or lack of tips, for example, certainly sabotaged a notion of overall success for the musicians. I came away from Crete convinced that the ability of musicians to articulate the themes of sociability is as much an important skill for them to acquire as it is for them to learn sublime musical virtuosity.

Concluding remarks

Given what has been said about the complexity of the Cretan music tradition as an artistic, social and cultural force, it might seem hazardous to attempt some conclusions. But evidence strongly suggests the following:

- New interpretations exist alongside classic benchmark recordings;
- The lyra is a fundamental part of Cretan music tradition and it remains emblematic of Cretan values and beliefs even if these values and beliefs are themselves challenged and changing. Moreover in a consideration of notions 'tradition' one must incorporate various viewpoints;
- The sound and morphology of the lyra remain potent emblems of Cretan ideals, aspirations and aesthetics (and remain solidly linked to notions of a patriarchal authority: music played by men);
- Although there has been some experimentation with new instrumental ensembles and Middle Eastern modalities, the performance practices of the Cretan lyra remain consistently faithful to earlier models provided by the 'protomasters' (virtuosi, such as Skordalos and Mountakis; Vasilis Skoulas, Nikiforos Aerakis and Zakaris Melessanakis are now among the elders of the tradition, whilst newer names include Alexandros Papadakis,
- Although Crete may be said to face towards the Aegean, and North to the Greek mainland and Turkey, the lyra tradition is firmly rooted in a southern Aegean island culture that sees itself as distinct but not unconnected to a larger soundscape.

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