

## Greek music: A cultural crossroads between East and West

The history of Greece has always been defined by its geo-political position. Many aspects of the Greek culture demonstrate its unique character as a cultural crossroads between East and West.

### Rebetiko

An example is *rebetiko*, a form of urban popular Greek music. The origins of this music stretch into the 19th century, but it was especially important and vibrant from the 20s to early 50s. Although nowadays treated as a single genre, rebetiko is, musically speaking, a synthesis of elements of European music, the folk music of mainland Greece and the Greek islands, the Byzantine church music and the late Ottoman café *aman* music.



*The "Smyrna Trio", with Roza Eskenazi*

The word "*rebetiko*" is derived from a Turkish root "*rebet*", meaning rebellious or disobedient. It probably originated in the music of the coastal Greek cities during the Ottoman era. In the early 20th century, the main centre of the rebetiko music was the multi-national port of Smyrna (modern Izmir) in Asia Minor.

The musicians of Smyrna were influenced not only from the eastern sounds inside the Ottoman empire, but also from the European-style music of the many European communities of the city. After the conclusion of the *Greco-Turkish War* of 1919-1922 and the *Asia Minor Catastrophe* an exchange of populations was agreed to between Greece and Turkey. Some 1.5 million Ottoman Christians were sent to Greece and 500,000 Muslims living in Greece were sent to Turkey. There were many professional musicians among the 1.5 million refugees, who had formal musical training and wrote and performed in *café aman style* in Smyrna, especially, or Constantinople or elsewhere. Over the next decade, two distinct musical traditions intermingled in the poorer neighborhoods of Piraeus and Athens (and elsewhere in Greece), where both the refugees and rebetes lived: the "native" *peiraiotika rebetika* of Greece and the *café aman-style Smyrneika* of the refugees.



*Rebetes in Peiraias, 1930*

The sounds of Rebetiko in its early phase were significantly different from the one in the period 1930-1955, when another traditional instrument, the *bouzouki*, became part of the emerging genre. Despite the marked difference in sound, the early period profoundly influenced that which followed. One thing is for sure: Rebetiko music permitted both the musicians and their public to express the negative emotions created by a world changing around them, and became a way to let the sorrows fly away.

Gail Holst notices in her book *The Road to Rebetika*: "What was special about the rebetika song was the combination between traditional musical forms of the Eastern Mediterranean and the words of the songs, which dealt with the life of the urban underworld and the less reputable elements of the society."

Like several other urban subcultural musical forms such as the blues, flamenco, fado and tango, rebetiko grew out of particular urban circumstances and often its lyrics reflect the reality of a marginalized subculture's lifestyle. Thus one finds themes such as crime, drink, drugs, poverty and violence, but also a multitude of other common themes such as death, exile, love and diverse other everyday matters, both happy and sad.

*"Cloudy Sunday", by S. Bellou, music-lyrics: V. Tsitsanis*

Since the music was closely associated with the Greek "underworld," for respectable Greek society it was considered as a threat to the morals of the nation. Songs were banned due to their anti-authoritarian subject matter and rebetiko musicians found themselves in an adversarial position, much like 1920s jazz men or the early gangsta rappers in the US.

Police raided the *tekes*, smashed instruments and arrested *rebetes* at will.

Many rebetiko songs were created in the world of jail and "tekes" (slang for hash dens). In those places *rebetessang*, one after the other, each singer adding a verse which often bore no relation to the previous verse. Such a song often went on for hours. One accompanied the singer with a *bouzouki* or a *baglamas* (a smaller version of the bouzouki, easy to make in prison and easy to hide from the police) and perhaps another would get up and dance.

Great composers of this genre were Markos Vamvakaris and Vasilis Tsitsanis, who developed the "westernization" of the rebetiko and made it more known to large sections of the population.



*Markos Vamvakaris*



*Vasilis Tsitsanis playing baglamas*



*Manolis Chiotis, solo bouzouki*

Manolis Chiotis developed much more the "europeanisation/westernization" of the rebetiko, importing Latin and South American rhythms, and added a fourth pair of strings to the bouzouki, which allowed it to be played as a guitar.

Hadjidakis and Theodorakis adopted traditional rebetiko rhythms and instrumentation to create some very sophisticated modern compositions. The catchy melodies they wrote made the bouzouki internationally synonymous with the music of Greece. But by Hadjidakis's own admission, their music was not true rebetiko: "Rebetiko only existed when it was illegal, played in inaccessible hiding places, somewhere on the fringe."

Today, rebetiko songs are still popular in Greece. The genre is a subject of growing international research, and its popularity outside Greece is now well-established.

## Sources

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