

A Concert of Contemporary Greek Songs

December 5, 2004, 7:30pm

Kresge Little Theater, MIT, 48 Mass. Ave, Cambridge, MA



Performed by: Panos Liaropoulos, piano ~ Theodoulos Vakanas, violin, bouzouki
Panagiota Haloulakos, vocals ~ Ledios Damis, bass ~ George Lernis, percussion

Co-sponsored by:



Hellenic Students' Association of MIT



Brief notes on Greek music and the songs

Greek Music: From Ancient Greece to the 21st century

The word “music” is of ancient Greek origin, and refers to that which is “of the Muses”. The Muses are the Greek goddesses who preside over the arts and sciences and inspire those who excel at these pursuits. Daughters of Zeus, king of the gods, and Mnemosyne ("memory"), they were born at Pieria at the foot of Mount Olympus – in the heart of Macedonia, which always was a central part of the Greek world. The nine muses were: Calliope, Clio, Erato, Euterpe, Melpomene, Polyhymnia, Terpsichore, Thalia, and Urania. The Muses had several epithets which usually referred to places where they had settled, and each specialized in a different discipline, such as theatre, epic poetry, history etc. They were often called at the beginning of every relevant activity; one of the most celebrated examples can be found at the first lines of Homer’s Odyssey:

“Tell me, O Muse, of the man of many devices, who wandered full many ways after he had sacked the sacred citadel of Troy. Many were the men whose cities he saw and whose mind he learned, aye, and many the woes he suffered in his heart upon the sea, seeking to win his own life and the return of his comrades...”

Euterpe (the "Giver of Pleasure") is the muse of music and is represented with a flute. It has been said she is the inventor of the double flute. By the river Strymon, next to the modern day city of Thessaloniki in Macedonia, she bore Rhesus, who was later slain at Troy.

One of the most important aspects of music in the ancient greek world was its tight relation to many other fields that superficially appear dissociated nowadays; from the Divine, to the other arts, to mathematics and psychology among others. Countless examples exist: the role of Gods such as Apollo and Dionysus and of related ceremonies, the Pythagorean world-view and universal concepts such as “Harmony”, all the way to investigations of the effect of different scales on character and morality.

The ancient Greek scales (“tropi”, often referred to as “modes”) still exist either in disguised or in name-shuffled forms in medieval church music, western art music as well as, interestingly enough, in jazz: some of which are the “Ionian” (often identified with the major scale), the “Aeolian”, the “Dorian” etc., taking their names from regions and tribes of the ancient Greek world. An interesting diversity of rhythms also exists, tightly bound to the poetic rhythms. Interesting similarities with numerous other civilizations can be found, due to underlying historical causes; not only in terms of theoretical worldview (for example, concepts similar to “harmony” in ancient Iran and India) but also in terms of technical devices (the tetrachords, tunings and more).

Throughout the centuries, many developments and interactions took place – through the Hellenistic times of Alexander, the Roman Empire, Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire, all the way to the modern Greek state and the countless refugees returning from Ionia and Pontus, in modern day Turkey. A small sample of the results you are going to listen tonight...

Some words about the songs and the composers

Two of the main popular Greek composers of the 20th century are Theodorakis and Hadjidakis. Both of them had a classical background but also deep knowledge of folk and contemporary music; and they created both “entechni” (art) music and “laiki” (popular) music, always of the highest quality. Their works are quite distinct in character, and in some respects complementary – Theodorakis being more political and in a sense epic, Hadjidakis sentimental and lyrical. Some of their masterpiece records include: “Aksion Esti” (“That which is worthy”, musical version by Theodorakis of the nobel-winning poetry collection by Elytis), and “Megalos Erotikos” (“Grand tribute to Eros” by Hadjidakis, a collection of poems related to aspects of love all the way from Sappho and Solomon to Cavafy and beyond). Both of these records tend towards the “entechni” side.

Omorfi Poli (beautiful city, Theodorakis)

“Beautiful city, musical voices
Endless roads, stolen gazes
The sun is golden, the hands sown
Mountains and unfinished buildings, seas stretched

You will become mine
Before the night comes
Before the pale lights
Throw their nets
You will become mine

The night has come, the windows are shut
The night has fallen, the roads have vanished”

Min ton rotas ton Urano (don't ask the sky, music by Hadjidakis)

“Word after Word
And we got carried away
Sorrow has taken us
And night has come

Blow out your tears
With my handkerchief
So that I can drink the sun
From your lips

Don't ask the sky
The cloud and the moon
Your dark gaze
Has taken something from the night

Whatever came to us
And whatever gave us sorrow
Like a knife
It has secretly hit us”

Many other composers of “entechni” and “laiki” music exist, and it is worth noting that the above categorisation is quite superficial. These include Ksarchakos, Loizos, Plessas, Kaldaras and numerous others. Yet another important genre is the so-called “Rembetiko” music, which originated when the Greek immigrants from Ionia returned, and has often been compared to “blues” in certain respects. It is an oriental-sounding music, originally associated with the lifestyle of the urban underclass populations, that soon reached a much wider audience after being raised to a simplistic yet poetic level through musicians such as Tsitsanis, Papaioannou and Vamvakaris. Representative records include the “Minore tis Avgis”, or the soundtrack of the film “Rembetiko”.

To Minore tis Avgis
(the minor song of the dawn, rembetiko)

“Wake up, my baby and listen
To this minor song of the dawn
It is written for you
From the tears of a soul

Open your window,
Give me a sweet look
And then I may blow out like a candle
In front of your house, in a corner”

Sinefiasmeni Kiriaki
(cloudy Sunday, rembetiko)

“Cloudy Sunday
You are like my heart
Which is always cloudy
Oh Christ and Virgin Mary

You are a day like the one
When I have lost my happiness
Cloudy Sunday
You make my heart bleed

When I see you rainy
I cannot rest for a moment
You make my life black
And deeply I sigh”

Numerous notable more recent song makers exist; these are represented in this concert by Papazoglou, Vardis and Katsimixas. Yet, another much earlier and collective source of gems stems from the anonymous composers, and has produced countless “Dimotika” (folk), or “Paradosiaka” (traditional) songs, with very distinct styles and schools depending on their regions of origin. You could easily get a taste of this variety by comparing for example Cretan music, to the music of Pontus, to the music of Macedonia. A folk song from Ionia is included in this concert, together with some traditional songs. Also, three songs dedicated to the people of Cyprus included in this concert.

To tragudi tu Chelidoniou
(the song of the swallow, Aleksiou, dedicated to Cyprus)

“Come near me
So that I can give you a kiss
Come and don’t cry
My white swallow

May God protect us
From an eye that looks with evil
May God cover us
When the soul frightens happiness
Tell me, what fights against you?

Smile again
My crystal angel
For spring to come
And the song to shine

May bees and butterflies
Ornament the wings you are wearing
And may the clouds open
To show you God, for you to talk to
So that I can stand beside you

With songs and gems
I will do your favours
Don’t be in pain
I will send you dolphins
So that you can run from Paphos to Kerinia
All the beauties of the island you will be wearing
My swallow, and you will be singing of life”

H diki mu I patrida
(my homeland, Tokas, dedicated to Cyprus)

“They say that man should love his homeland
That’s what my father says often

My own homeland has been split in two
Which of the two parts should I love?”

S'agapo giati ise orea
(I love you because you are beautiful, traditional)

“I love you,
I love you because you are beautiful,
I love you because you are yourself

And I love,
And I love the whole world,
Because you are part of it

The window
The window is shut
The window is closed

Open one
Open one of the window panes
For me to glimpse your image”

Finally, byzantine church music and hymns form another notable part of the Greek musical tradition, which would be better covered either in an Orthodox Church or Monastery of the area or in a specialized concert. Last but not least, note that the above notes have not aimed towards being neither exhaustive nor representative; that the translations are very rough and done by us; and this leaflet is just a very very brief introduction, of things better experienced than read.



[Prepared by Nikolaos Mavridis of the MIT Hellenic Students Association, Dec. 2004]