

Historical development of rembetika music and its relationship to contemporary popular music in Greece

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Definition and early background

The word rembetika is from the Turkish 'rebet' meaning intractable, rebellious, unruly (Panagiotakopoulos 1997a). The music originated as slow and sad songs. This characteristic derives perhaps from Byzantine church music (Holst-Warhaft 1997).

However, historically Greek music has also been influenced by the Turks and West Asia Minor, and so rembetika incorporates musical forms of the eastern Mediterranean. When the Greeks revolted against the Turks in 1821 establishing the beginning of a new Greek nation in 1830, some 2 million Greeks still lived in Turkey. In the last decade of the 19th century sociological factors were such that the rise of the working class, movement from villages to towns and seaports, and another war with Turkey in 1897 resulted in considerable impoverishment in Greece giving rise to sections of society being alienated and resorting to crime - these became the rebetes consistently prosecuted by the police (Panagiotakopoulos 1997a).

The Smyrna era - 1890 to 1923

Rembetika music, reflecting depressed living conditions, in prisons and in homes is believed to have been heard in 1891 or earlier (Panagiotakopoulos 1997a). Early musical sources which contributed to its character include the vaudeville scene, popular and oriental songs, tavern songs, short poems and Byzantine psalms. The melodic line is based on a mode, i.e. dromi (literally 'road'). These were Arabic and Turkish modes (e.g. Rast D E F# G A B C D, Hitzaz D Eb F# G A Bb C D) from Turkish makam or classical music. As the Turks had been influenced by the Byzantine church tones these also found their way into rembetika music ((Panagiotakopoulos 1997a; Petropoulos 1991, para 77). There was no harmonic support and accompaniment was limited to playing open strings tuned in fifths.

The rebetes or mangas developed this music and this underworld type character is found in the shadow puppet theatre of Greece in 1900. The first song characterized as rembetika appears to be recorded in 1905 in Constantinople (now Istanbul) by Giankos Psamathianos called "Tik-Tak" (Panagiotakopoulos 1997b). The music was, however, obscure and without a formal name.

In the last quarter and more to the end of the 19th century there was also café aman type music emerging in large urban centres of Greek population, but more particularly in Asia Minor (Constantinople and Smyrna now Izmir in Turkey) (Morris 1981, p.81). These were musical cafes in which the Greek middle classes entertained themselves. Improvised long, wailing verses in a dialogue form on a mode (makam) were the norm with the contrived exclamation of 'Aman!' giving time to think of the next verse. The outi, a type of lyra - an ancient Greek stringed instrument - was the main instrument rhythmically accompanied by another instrument (e.g. lute) at a higher octave. Feminine voices and the tsifteteli dance in 4/4 meter (analogous to the Turkish belly dance) were also characteristic of this music. It was, however, rich in oriental (Arabian and Turkish) flavour, required skill and of high standing (Panagiotakopoulos 1997a).

Migrations by Greeks from Turkey beginning as early as the 1890s due to continuing national conflicts, reached their height after the Greek-Turkish War of 1921-22 started by Greece to recapture Constantinople. Greece suffered a severe loss, with the result that some 1.5 million or more refugees fled to and resettled in Greece. Images of burning and drowning are subsequently found in earlier rembetika songs. It was from here on that rembetika adopted the musical style of Smyrna as a direct consequence of the mass emigration from Turkey.

That style was Arabic or eastern and consisted of improvisation in lyrics and music. Songs were always started with an instrumental prelude called the taximi through which a musician could show their ability. The taximi set the mood for the songs to come which started with lyrics from familiar tunes (Petropoulos 1991).

A dramatic consequence of the Greek immigrations was that the middle class who migrated ended up in Greece with no jobs or means of income, living as a poor class in shanty-town seaport cities. The refugees became attracted to the hashish cafes (tekedes) and taverns which were the hangouts of the rembetes who had developed as a sub-class of society in urban areas. Many refugees joined them and rembetika became their music of urban social rebellion and discontent (Holst-Warhaft 1997, p.232).

Refugee business interests soon opened their own low class and cheap cafés aman in which rembetes were employed. Rembetika then broke away from the narrow limits of the prisons and tekedes, and began to appeal to wider social strata. This coming together filled the gap left after traditional rural folk music declined with urbanization.

The classical era - 1923 to 1940

Rembetika songs dealt with the life of the 'urban underworld' and less reputable elements of society (Holst 1989) - it was a type of Greek blues. Drug references (particularly hashish) were common in the 1930's and 1940's. The baglama, a small stringed instrument, was a symbol of the underworld and the rembetes used to say "Eho to baglamadaki, kati ap' to sakaki" - "I have my baglama under my coat" (Pappas 1998). If in jail it was small enough to conceal and play when needed. However, the Middle Eastern outi and santouri (dulcimer) and the more local mandolin were still the usual instruments.

Rembetika also had dance forms that go with it. The heavy zeibekiko dances in slow 9/8 (or 9/4) meter originating from the war dance of the Zeibekides, a tribe in Asia Minor, were danced by males. It was a solitary dance with no steps and often including acrobatics and complicated balancing acts with items such as wine glasses on the head of the dancer. The dancer keeps a frown on the face and tends to stare downwards.

Rembetika songs consisted of hoarse male voices lacking sweetness and rather rough. The taximi on a baglama (and later bouzouki) was in a free rhythmic character and remained an important part of the repertoire (Morris 1984).

Three great male musicians of the times were Batis (who began using bouzouki in recordings in 1933), Artemis (composer of such songs as "The Junkie's Lament") and Stratos (who went on to perform with greater stars like Vassilis Tsitsanis and Yiannis Papaioannou).

Another prolific singer/composer was Markos Vamvakaris (often called the father of rembetika). He first recorded in 1932 and his "Narxosouna re magka mou" had the chance to be the first rembetika record with bouzouki in circulation (although Batis had used and recorded bouzouki earlier) (Panagiotakopoulos 1997b). At Pireaus in 1934, Vamvakaris met Batis, Artemis and Stratos and formed the Piraeus Quartet (Harrison p.22). Vamvakaris' most famous song is "Frakgosyriani" about a Catholic girl from Syros.

Celebrated female singers also existed in the 1920s and 1930s such as Rita Abatzi and Rosa Eszkenazi who began her career as a dancing girl in the cafés aman (Morris 1981, p.89).

During the Metaxas dictatorship of Greece from 1936 to 1941, the government ordered record companies to stop recording hashish songs and make rembetika respectable entertainment. At the same time Greeks became fascinated with Italian kantades (serenades - the Eptanissa serenades from the Ionian Sea islands were a West-European influence on rembetika); minor and major scales of the piano, guitar and accordion became the norm resulting in the demise of quarter tones used in Turkish music; and the oriental flavour of rembetika started to disappear (Panagiotakopoulos 1997a). The more popular recordings were sanitized to take out crude references and concepts so as to make them decent.

The popular era - 1941 to 1960

What was happening was that as rembetika music became popular, it underwent changes such as lyric censorship, cleaning up of notes, changing quarter-tones to semitones, so that "classic" rembetika could not be found in Greece after 1945. Gradually the music came out of the tekedes and into the nightclubs of

Athens and many singers became stars. Harmonization of melodies was developed using elementary chords, but this resulted in loss of its modal character.

The real idol of the time was Vassilis Tsitsanis who began recording in 1937. Tsitsanis transformed the rembetika songs to popular music (Smith 1991). His style was softer, mellower and more pleasing while melancholic and compassionate. A masterpiece is "Synnefiasmeni Kyriaki" - "Cloudy Sunday", written in 1943-44 as a lament about the desecration of Greece and demoralization of its country people ("Cloudy Sunday, you make My heart to bleed and cry"). This song bears similarities to the Byzantine hymn "To the Defending General" written in 626 AD by Romanos Meledos (Panagiotakopoulos 1997a).

Most importantly, Tsitsanis diverged from the outi, santouri and mandolin and used only the bouzouki and guitar. This enriched the melody with intricate cadenza (bouzouki solos). He reached a far wider audience than pre-war singers had done. Other famous singers such as the great female singers Sotiria Bellou and Marika Ninou also worked with him.

A strong period for rembetika was after the death of Metaxas resulting in German occupation from 1941 to 1944 and the Greek Civil War following until 1945 between leftists and conservatives. "Saltadoros" is a song of the time by Michalis Genitsaris about stealing fuel cans from the back of German military trucks.

After World War II record companies started to realise the potential for rembetika songs and the original composers and lyricists who emphasized sad and slow songs started to disappear. There emerged the arxontorembetes - musician who became wealthy (mostly bouzouki players with impressive techniques) as they got recording contracts.

In 1950 Manos Hadjidakis published his piano suite "Exi Laikes Zografies" - "Six Popular Paintings" based on rembetika and traditional songs (Panagiotakopoulos 1997b). This reflected a change in style from "classic" rembetika which by 1955 ceased to be relevant and the development of intellectual character in the music. Places where rembetika had been played became expensive clubs as rembetika rid itself of underworld connotations and emerged as national popular music in Greece.

It was also in the 1950s that the bouzouki gained a 4th additional string (by musicians such as Manos Chiotis) and was retuned to the intervals of the four high strings of the guitar - C, F, A, D. The bouzouki was previously tuned D, A, D which is the tuning of the smaller baglama (but which is an octave higher). This resulted in faster playing so that rembetika bore little resemblance with its blues sound of the 1930s. The typical instrumental grouping had become 2 bouzoukia (main instruments) and for accompaniment a baglamas, a kithara (guitar) and the defi (hand drum) with the additions of violin and/or accordion.

Evolution into the contemporary era - 1961 to 1974

In this transition, Giorgos Dalaras, one of the most popular rembetika artists was instrumental in blurring the line between rembetika and laika - the popular music of Greece. His father Loukas Daralas was also a famous rembetika musician of the 1950s and 1960s. Dalaras' album "Rembetika Tis Katohis" - "Rembetika of the Occupation" reached back to earlier pieces while other material took the music out of clubs and into big concert venues.

Nevertheless, because political discontent still existed and Greece had not achieved political stability, there was still political content in the fused rembetika and laika style. Between 1967 to 1974 Greece came under the rule of a military junta. During this period Theodorakis was one musician whose political messages of resistance to the dictatorship resulted in not only his exile, but a revival of rembetika, which became a means to express solidarity against the junta (Holst-Warhaft 1997, p.233). It attracted the intellectuals and not just the working class or poor. Dalaras also sang songs of social conscience.

However, with the restoration of democracy in Greece in the mid 1970s, the younger generation did not identify with the meaning of the originators of rembetika, and the identification with the politics of resistance was again weakened (Holst-Warhaft 1997 p.234).

Another composer, Dionysios Savopoulos, who also performed during the junta period with songs such as "Vromika Psomi" - "Dirty Bread" and "Elsa Se Fovame" - "Elsa You Scare Me" (ELSA being the name of the secret police) disguised in the lyrics sentiments of political resistance, but used a combination of rock music and rembetika to do it. His song "Zembikiko" incorporates rock instrumentation while maintaining the emotional passion of the zeibekiko dance. After restoration of democracy, he quickly sensed that the age of the political song was dead (Holst-Warhaft 1997, p.234). Savopoulos became a mixture of rock, rembetika and laika (urban folk) music. Other artists such as Nikos Papazoglou also perform a hybrid of rembetika and rock in which the baglama, bouzouki and other traditional instruments are used in a standard rock group. Rembetika and rock became a very powerful combination.

Contemporary music of Greece - 1975 onwards

In the 1970's and 1980's foreign music became more popular amongst young Greeks, which included electric guitars, rock drums and synthesizers. The bouzouki had also become electrified. Composers began introducing jazz and rock elements into their music to cater for audience demands and in this mix the political element in songs declined. The entertainment value also increased.

As rembetika became the popular music (laika) of Greece, it underwent changes both lyrically and musically. Both the global and the local now exist in this music with elements of folk, western pop music and rembetika music styles. In Melbourne with a large Greek population, The haBiBis perform rembetika music moulded to a modern style with the use of harmonies, which was never done in traditional songs.

Conclusion

Rembetika started as the music of the poorest people in Greece, many of whom were refugees or from the depressed social classes, but became the popular music of Greece particularly from the 2 decades starting from the 1960s. From there it became contemporary with rock music characteristics. "Classic" rembetika which was music of regret lost its immediacy in a world of personal freedom and raised standards of living. As Hadjidakis (1961, 1978) said rembetika existed during the time it was illegally produced in secret and kept breathing when expressing effectively the ordeals and experiences of anguished and betrayed people.

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