

Greek Music in America and Me

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Most people take music for granted today because it is everywhere. It permeates almost every aspect and moment of our lives through the many technological advances that allow anyone to tap, click, or ask their smartphone or virtual assistant to play their favorite music. The appreciation of live music takes a bit more effort. You have to click and buy tickets, you have to show up at the concert hall, theatre, or bar where your favorite artist, group, or orchestra is playing, it becomes a special event. Live music for occasions is also a treat for guests at weddings and christenings. Some choose to hire a DJ to play recorded favorites instead of hiring a band in an attempt to cut costs, while others choose to hire both a DJ and a band for weddings, especially. There are, as we all know, certain songs that must be played at a wedding reception. It's tradition and it harkens back to a time when music highlighted the important milestones in life and was always performed live.

Christopher C. King's *Lament from Epirus: An Odyssey into Europe's Oldest Surviving Folk Music* delves into the history of Greek music back to the pre-Homeric period.¹ This thoughtful and well-researched book is a must-read volume for those interested in music, even if one's home village is about as far from Epirus as can be. King's travels in search of 78s, those big, black records from "the olden days" that were played on record players, led to his discovery of Greek folk music in the earliest recordings. He was captivated by the sound and traced the roots back to Epirus where much to his delight, the tradition going back thousands of years continues on. In this compelling work of non-fiction, a cast of colorful characters emerges and their extraordinary stories, intertwine with the history of the region and its music.

King explores music as a powerful form of communication, a tool for healing and even survival, as a shared experience for the community, performed by musicians who were and are revered for their talents. The book is a treasure trove of information and offers insights into the ways recording folk music often brought about its demise. King is a harsh critic of contemporary popular music which he calls "a dulling, inescapable, even sinister noise." (page 20)

He continues, "I understand many people have strong attachments to contemporary music, but I cannot deny what I hear. In modern music, I hear self-

centeredness, a constant referencing of individual artistic expression. It is all about the 'me.' But in the old music that I love, I hear selflessness, continuity, and communal expression. It is all about the 'we.'"

King is a Grammy-winning producer, musicologist, and prominent 78 RPM record-collector, who has written for the *Paris Review*. His biography in *The Oxford American Profiles* has appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*. He lives in Virginia and Zagori in Epirus and he so loves Epirus that he plans to move there permanently.

Nicholas Gage, President of the Panepirotic Federation of America and renowned author of *Eleni*, praised King's book and is quoted on the dust jacket stating, "A blithely informative, immensely entertaining, beautifully written discourse on a music tradition, born in an isolated mountain region long before Homer composed his epics, whose echoes can still be heard today all over the world."

The fact that a *xenos*, a foreigner, is so enchanted with this type of traditional music should not surprise anyone when we read about the type of music he values as a listener. The collective "we" as opposed to "me" is what separates traditional music from contemporary and reminds us of the powerful effect of music on the soul.

Traditional music especially connects us in a profound way to each other and to our roots for those of us living outside of the homeland. Speaking for myself as a first generation Greek-American with roots in Kos, the second I hear the first few notes of the violin, I will hop up from my seat and say, "*Sousta*," grabbing my closest relatives, the dancers of the family, to get them out on the dance floor or in some cases in the village square when we happen to be in Greece for the *panegyri* celebration.

I grew up with rhythms of *nisiotika* playing in the background and I was singing as soon as I could. Singer Mariza Koch and songwriter Yiannis Glezos were friends of the family, my early music teachers along with Sesame Street. Even as a four-year-old I knew I couldn't reach the notes Mariza could, but I was going to try. I stood on a dining room chair to do it. One of my earliest memories is being onstage and singing. The music connected us to the islands and to the sea, to family members lost at sea and to *xenitia*. Although I was born in Astoria, the concept of *xenitia* was one I understood from a very young age even if I couldn't explain it in English until much later, the songs explained it perfectly highlighted by a heartrending sigh. Living between cultures, the diaspora experience can be tough and music is always there to ease the path. My Yiayia Eleni used to say it was a terrible thing to have to learn two homelands, but it also offers a unique perspective and opportunities that would never exist otherwise.

Wherever Greeks traveled, they brought their music with them. It was portable. After all, immigrants carried it in their hearts, and if you were a musician, you carried your instrument with you. The collection of essays in *Greek Music in America*, edited by Tina Bucuvalas, highlights the history and the people who brought Greek music to the United

States and those who maintain the rich tradition to the present day.² Among the impressive list of authors who contributed to the book is Stavros K. Frangos, a much praised historian of Greek America.³

Greeks arrived in the New World along with the first Spanish explorers and British colonists. Like most people they brought their music with them. The book is a long-overdue study and is required reading for anyone who cares about Greek music in America, whether scholar, fan, or performer. *Greek Music in America* offers a sample of all the genres, sounds, and contributions of the Greek music diaspora in essay by Bucuvalas, Anna Caraveli, Aydin Chaloupka, Sotirios (Sam) Chianis, Frank Desby, Frangos, Stathis Gauntlett, Joseph G. Graziosi, Gail Holst-Warhaft, Michael G. Kaloyanides, Panayotis League, Roderick Conway Morris, Nick Pappas, Meletios Pouliopoulos, Anthony Shay, David Soffa, Dick Spottswood, Jim Stoyhoff, and Anna Lomax Wood.

The profiles that make up Part Four of the book include accounts of the lives of musicians such as Giorgos "Nisyrios" Makrigiannis who is the major influence on modern Dodecanese violin style, and singers such as Madame Koula Antonopoulou, Marika Papagika, and Amalia Baka who owned nightclubs and made a host of records. Their stories offer a glimpse into early 20th century Greek America and its music, the multiethnic audiences for the music, and the living legacy which continues through artists performing traditional music today.

Listening to 100-year-old recordings, one cannot help but be moved by the emotional power of the music and the familiar songs which continue to be recorded by Greek artists. The only difference seems to be the pace, the songs are performed faster now than in the past. This was underscored in an interview given by Yiorgos Kaloudis,⁴ a cellist, Cretan lyra performer, improviser, composer, cello professor at the Athenaeum Conservatory (Athens), and producer at the DNA Classical Label. Kaloudis pointed out that the way music is played, which was always connected in the past with human rhythms, the beat and pulse of the human heart, is too fast, trying to keep up with the speed and rhythms of machines. Playing classical pieces faster and faster has become a mark of skill or talent, but in fact, the music was historically played at a slower pace, its transcendent effect, calming and re-connecting people with the natural rhythms of life.

For many of us, recharging with music is a way of life. Not a day goes by without music and dancing for some. Recording technology has advanced to such a point that anyone can record music and share it almost instantly, but plugging in with earphones and listening on one's own is a relatively new phenomenon. Exploring various styles of music is as simple as a visit to YouTube these days. A quick search will yield practically any singer from the earliest days of recorded music. It cannot quite compare to live music but still offers a connection with other music fans as well as a connection to the past. Until a time machine is invented, recordings allow music enthusiasts a way to explore Greek music from the early days of recorded music. The multiethnic influences are clear in those

recordings from the early 20th century, reminding us of the cosmopolitan cities where Greek communities flourished and thrived along with their neighbors of various ethnic backgrounds. The music conjures historic places that no longer exist for many in the diaspora and bridges the distance between cultures like no other medium. Performing traditional music and dance connects the younger generations with their roots in a visceral way. The music becomes a part of their experience of social gatherings and family get-togethers, it is not something remote or only for special occasions, it's playing in the background everywhere, all the time. In Greek school, our knowledge of traditional dances expanded to include various regions of Greece, dances we would probably never learn in the villages where our families were from in the islands or the mountains. We learned the dances and performed them in folk dance competitions and shows. In high school, my Greek Club was told to cut one of the dances because it was boring. Perhaps the *syrto* is boring to watch, but not to dance. In the villages of Greece, the point is for everyone to dance, not just a select few in the right costume. To not dance at someone's wedding is practically a curse. These events are about bringing people together. The dance is an expression of joy, so if you sit out any dance, you better have a good excuse. However harsh life may seem, it is still beautiful and worth celebrating in song every chance we get.

¹ Christopher C. King, *Lament from Epirus: An Odyssey into Europe's Oldest Surviving Folk Music* (NY: Norton, 2018).

² Tina Bucuvalas (editor), *Greek Music in America* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2018).

³ Frangos writes a biweekly column for *The National Herald*. His major topics involve Greek Americans and Greeks of the diaspora. His collected work is available at the Greek American Portal of the Modern Greek Studies Association as well as in collections of *The National Herald*.

⁴ Interviewed by Sakellis in *The National Herald* (January 5, 2019, page 3). We also discussed his own work, especially his CD, *J.S. Bach: Cello Suites on the Cretan Lyra*.

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