

Preface to the fourth edition

A long time has passed since I wrote this small book as an introduction to the songs known as the rembetika, also spelt rebetika. Despite the fact that it was produced by what was then a tiny publishing house in Athens, with virtually no overseas distribution, the book seemed to find its way into the hands of many people who were interested in Greece and Greek music. During the years since 1975, the rembetika have been the subject of considerable popular and scholarly interest. Books, articles and academic papers have been written about the music, hundreds, perhaps thousands of recordings and re-recordings of the songs have been made, films have been shot, broadcasts made, ensembles formed to play the music in Europe, the United States and Australia.

It is always embarrassing to re-read one's work, especially when it was written thirty years ago. I have tried to correct the most obvious mistakes in the text, and to make some changes in my translations, but not to re-write the book. What I have written subsequently on the rembetika is included in the bibliography together with a selection of articles and books that readers may find useful. Research into the rembetika is still hampered by the lack of reliable sources. This is true of most areas of popular culture in Greece and the late Ottoman Empire, and encourages researchers to speculate or focus on the hard evidence we have: the recordings themselves, record catalogues, photographs, literary descriptions. Unfortunately, recordings are made for a market that already exists and do not represent the original context of the music, and there are only a small number of interviews and autobiographies of rembetika musicians and I regret not having interviewed more musicians when I had the opportunity.

Few subjects have aroused such controversy in Greek cultural life as the rembetika songs. In the Greek translation of this book, we included a series of articles from Greek newspapers and journals of the immediate post-war period that dealt with the rembetika.¹ Played out largely in the pages of the journal *Epitheorisi Technis* (*Arts Review*) and in the Leftist newspapers *Avghi* (*Dawn*) and *Rizospastis* (*Radicalist*), the debate about the rembetika was long and passionate. The music was viewed by many in bourgeois Greek society as ‘oriental’ and outmoded, a relic from the Ottoman period with which many modern Greeks wished to sever all ties. For Leftwing intellectuals there were serious questions about the moral content of the songs and their effect on the morale of the working-classes. The musicologist Vassilis Papadimitriou, to take one example, claimed the songs eroded popular music and ‘spiritually and psychologically polluted the people.’² Other Leftist critics claimed the rembetika as the expression of a marginalized working-class during the inter-war period (Holst, *op. cit.* pp. 231–7). Composer Mikis Theodorakis was accused of sacrilege by Leftist intellectuals for setting the poetry of major Greek poets such as Yiannis Ritsos to music using elements of rembetika music; still worse, in the eyes of such critics, was his use of the bouzouki and a rembetika singer to interpret his music. His fellow-composer, Manos Hadzidakis, had been the first intellectual to champion the rembetika in a speech he gave at the Arts Theatre of Greece in 1949. He passionately defended the beauty of the whole phenomenon of the rembetika: the lyrics, the music and the dance (see Holst, *op. cit.*, pp. 151–5). Both composers saw themselves as taking the rembetika to a new plane of sophistication.

If we could summarize the conflict about the rembetika, we would have to say that like many other phenomena in this small and proud nation, the songs were admired to the extent that they were seen as Greek, and despised when considered foreign. References to drugs and the underworld were viewed by the opponents of the rembetika as part of the Ottoman legacy, but few critics knew or cared that many

¹The selection of articles was made largely by Yiannis Kondoyiannis, to whom I am most grateful.

²See Holst, *Δρόμος για τó Ρεμπέτικο*, Athens: Denise Harvey, 1977, pp. 145–51.

of the songs were simply Turkish tunes with Greek words.¹ Despite the fact that quite a number of the songs written by Vassilis Tsitsanis dealt with the world of the hashish-smoking rembetes, he was credited, by some, for having rescued the songs from the depraved milieu of the hashish dens and brought them into the true province of the Greek soul (Christianopoulos, 1961).² As their elements were incorporated into the music of middle-class composers, some Greeks lamented the gentrification of the rembetika and their once colourful, if sordid, environs. One such aficionado was Ilias Petropoulos, whose *Rembetika Traghoudia* (*Ρεμπέτικα Τραγούδια*, 1968) was the first book to be published about the rembetika songs and contributed in no small way to the myth of the rembetiko milieu. The virtue of the songs, for Petropoulos, was precisely their shady ambience and connections to the marginalized and the criminal demi-monde. The controversy about the rembetika, focused initially on the café aman music and later on the Piraeus style, is still alive today despite the general acceptance of the songs as the basis of much Greek popular music.

Within the circles of rembetika scholars and enthusiasts, issues of chronology, terminology and methodology are also debated. There are still serious gaps in our knowledge of the origins and early evolution of the genre despite considerable research into the historical background of the rembetika. We are not even sure if the word rembetiko is of Turkish origin as my early informers confidently asserted. On the subject of when the term was first used we are equally in the dark. The earliest instance of the term rembetiko as a designation for a particular type of song may have been on the labels of records pressed in the United States and England in the 1930s.³ A recording made by Pol (Leopoldo Gad) in the USA, which almost certainly

¹ An account of the nationalism associated with the early rembetika and the Greek adaptation of Ottoman melodies and forms can be found in Risto Pennanen's article 'The Nationalization of Ottoman Popular Music in Greece', *Ethnomusicology*, 48/1, 2004, pp. 1–25.

² Ντ. Χριστιανόπουλος. «Ιστορική και αισθητική διαμόρφωση του ρεμπετικού τραγουδιού», *Διαγώνιος*, τχ. 1 (Ιαν. 1961), Θεσσαλονίκη, σ. 5–22.

³ S. Gauntlett, *Carmina rebetika Graeciae recentioris*, Athens: Denise Harvey, 1985, pp. 31–2.

belongs to the late 1920s, is the earliest instance I know of, but a poster for the Neos Cosmos café for the year 1930 indicates that the Greek public were familiar with the term at that date. It advertises a programme of songs to be performed by Nouros and Stellakis which will include ‘...all the latest European and rembetika songs’ as well as ‘*amanédhes*¹ full of pathos’.

The type of song later termed rembetiko may derive from or have its origins in an oral tradition where improvisation played an important part, but many of the early songs that are referred to or labelled rembetiko in Greek belonged to a late Ottoman tradition of café music. Older musicians I talked to confirm that they learnt their songs from amateur or semi-professional musicians who frequented the hashish dens and cafés of Piraeus. Some of the songs they called anonymous, others they ascribed to a particular musician, but they were not always in agreement about the authorship of such songs and they all remembered improvising not only music but also lyrics as they sat and played together. The improvised introductions to the songs, or ‘*taximia*’, belong to a long tradition of Middle Eastern improvisation. It was in the *taximi* that a good musician showed his knowledge of the modal system and his dexterity, just as a singer displayed his or her musicianship in the vocal improvisations known as *amanédhes* (singular, *amané*) or *gazeler*.

When I wrote this book, it was difficult to hear the old café aman or Smyrna style rembetika. There were no long-playing records of the music available, and 78 r.p.m. records were hard to find in Athens. Since then there has been a proliferation of re-mastered early recordings. They have made us aware of the beauty and refinement of the music performed in the cafés aman and we can understand now what made the music so popular. If I had heard Rita Abatzi, for example, singing an amané, I might have written a different book. Ottoman café music, in Greece, western Turkey and the United States, was a rich, eclectic mixture, and its Greek performers, many of whom also recorded songs in Turkish, were splendid musicians. When the rembetika were first revived in the 1970s, the style of music then referred to as

¹ Italics will only be used the first time Greek words are introduced.

'Smyrna style' had long ceased to be popular. It was the bouzouki-based music of Piraeus, championed by Hadzidakis, Theodorakis, Petropoulos, and others, that seemed to be at the centre of the tradition.

That the rembetika songs were prized from their exclusive environment and commercially exploited was to be expected of music performed in a rapidly-expanding city, especially after the first commercial recording companies were established in Greece. As Bruno Nettl said, 'What is it that sets urban musical cultures off from those of villages, small towns and nomadic life?... Perhaps most of all, it is the coming together of different musical styles and genres from many sources.'¹ In Greece it may only have been the poorest class of urban workers who were open to contact with the refugees from Smyrna and could freely borrow musical elements from whatever they heard around them. The earliest recordings of the rembetika bear witness to a healthy eclecticism you would expect of urban folk music. The commercial success of the rembetika meant that good musicians were encouraged to write songs in rembetika style. It also meant that as the lyrics lost their immediate contact with a lively sub-culture, composers began looking for new lyric-writers. The songs that the composers of the 1960s wrote using elements of the rembetika with the lyrics of Greece's leading poets may have been vastly different from the rembetika of the Piraeus underworld, but they were unthinkable without them.

What seemed to me like a faddish revival of the early rembetika in the 1970s has become a permanent recognition of the genre. Not only are there new clubs springing up in Athens where young people go to play and listen to the rembetika, but there are similar clubs in Sweden, Germany, the United States and Australia. The repertoire of these young musicians has changed too. At first they were determinedly purist and musicians rather solemnly imitated the nuances of vocal and instrumental style they had heard on records. Now the programmes often include a mixture of early rembetika and café aman style songs. Some clubs play traditional folk music as well. In fact the

¹B. Nettl (ed.), *Eight Urban Musical Cultures: Tradition and Change*. Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1978, p. 60.

mixture of music is not unlike what might have been heard in one of the early Athenian cafés aman.

The comparison I and other commentators have made between the rembetika and the blues of the USA seems to me to be validated by the lasting popularity of the rembetika and the freedom with which their forms have been adapted. The songs have strayed a long way from their musical and social origins. They have suffered a comparable period to the blues of rejection on moral and social grounds. They have been similarly modified to suit the tastes of a broader audience and later revived in a 'pure' style. Now that they are being performed in a variety of free and strict forms we begin to appreciate the best songs of early, middle, late or revival-style rembetika for what they are — good songs by any standards.

A number of the leading characters mentioned in this book have died since it was written, and I dedicate this new edition to their memory. Among them are the incomparable singer Sotiria Bellou, the most prolific of all rembetika composers Vassilis Tsitsanis, and the singer/songwriter Grigoris Bithikotsis, whom Theodorakis used to perform his popular songs during the 1960s. Sadly missed from the ranks of rembetika scholars is Ole Smith, whose recognition of the importance of the discography of the rembetika in the United States, amongst his other insights, made a lasting contribution to the field. Finally, my main informant, teacher and friend Thanassis Athanassiou has passed away. I hope he finds a little *mavraki* wherever he may be.

Gail Holst
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