

Greek Rebetika Songs: Markos Vamvakaris

GEORGE PILITSIS

Rebetika are a type of Greek popular song, a musical genre, whose lyrics deal mostly with the everyday life of the **rebetes** who were men of the underworld living in big cities like Athens, Piraeus and Thessaloniki. According to various researchers and music critics, the first form of the rebetika songs began to appear in Greece late in the nineteenth century. The music was based primarily on oral tradition where the art of improvisation was very important.

The composers and singers as well as the listeners of the rebetika songs were, for the most part, prisoners, ex-convicts, unemployed workers or drug addicts. These people, known as **manges**, spent most of their time smoking hashish in **argiledes** (water-pipes), getting high on opium in their prison cells or in various dives in the city or joints known also as **tekedes**. It is interesting to note that, with the exception of prostitutes, no women were allowed to be present in these places. The lyrics of these songs reflected their surroundings, poverty, drug addiction, police oppression, prison life, love and betrayal. In various studies the rebetika songs have been compared to ragtime, the urban blues, and jazz of the United States.

Bouzouki and **baglamas** were the musical instruments used to express the lyrics of these songs. Often, a lone man in the company, tipsy with **retsina** wine or high on hashish, or both, would get up and dance his **zeibekiko** solo dance to the sound of bouzouki or baglamas. As for the lyrics of the songs the subject matter was restricted or limited to the suf-

focating life and narrow social environment of the **rebetes**. The language the writer used to articulate his thoughts and feelings is plain and adorned with many elements of Greek slang, both controversial and popular at the time. Because of their anti authoritarian or non-conformist nature, many of these songs were banned. It was not unusual for police to raid the **tekedes**, smash their instruments and arrest the **rebetes**. Often, to avoid censorship and persecution by state police, many of the songs were written in an elaborate form of slang or a symbolic language, known as **koutsavakika**. Only those within the circle of the **manges** and **rebetes** understood the true meaning of these words.

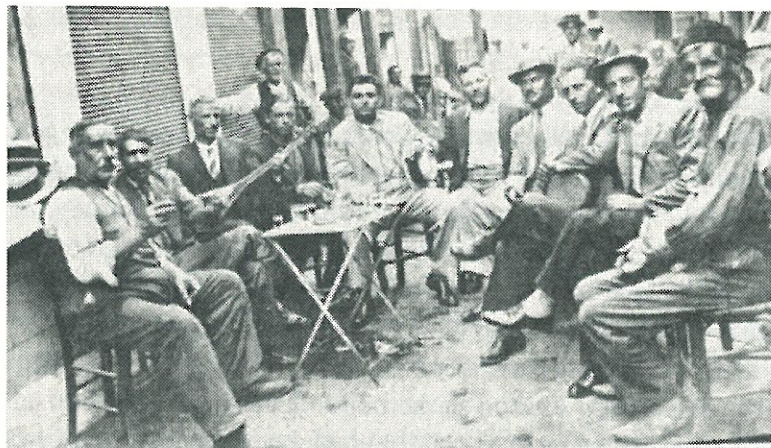
Anyone who listens to the **rebetika** songs composed in the 1920's and 1930's will not fail to notice that many of them contain elements usually associated with the **amanethes** and the instrumental prelude called **taxim** of the Middle Eastern world of entertainment and culture. These musical improvisations can be traced to and associated with the historical events of the 1920's. In 1921, at the instigation of the great European Powers like England, France, Italy and Russia, the Greek army invaded Turkey. The Ottoman Turkish Empire was in a state of collapse. To fulfill their military and political plans, the great powers convinced Greece to lead the attack with the excuse that by doing so they were protecting their fellow Greeks who lived on the coast of Asia Minor for centuries. After invading the major parts of the west coast, including the large city of Smyrna, the Greek army, confident of victory, decided to march further inland and take Ankara, the capital city of Turkey. This decision, however, was not approved by the European powers. Concerned that such an operation might start another major world war, the Europeans withdrew their support. Aware of this, Mustafa Kemal Attaturk, the Turkish General, began his counterattack. Under the conditions in which they found themselves, the Greek troops lost and began to retreat to Greece. The

Turkish general sent his army to burn down the cities and expel all the Greeks who had been living there for centuries. About 200,000 Greeks died in the massacre. Those who survived were expelled from their homes in the fertile land of Anatolia and were forced to emigrate to mountain villages in Greece or to refugee settlements in major cities like Athens, Piraeus and Thessaloniki. By 1922, close to two million refugees had arrived in the country.

World War I had crippled Greece, and the economic conditions in the country were devastating. Unable to support themselves economically, the new immigrants, many of whom had been middle class citizens in their homeland, were forced to live in city slums and to face the specter of famine and unemployment. Many of them, for survival reasons, ended up forming an underworld of their own or joining the one that already existed in the major cities in Greece.

The refugees from Asia Minor, along with their families and their shattered dreams, also brought many elements of their brand of Greek culture, including their way of life, language, traditions, customs and other elements and various forms of public and private entertainment. A large number of these Greeks were amateur or professional musicians. Unable to find employment for themselves, the uprooted immigrant musicians joined their fellow musician rebetes of mainland Greece with whom they shared similar ways of living. Moreover, by joining them, they soon became familiar with their instruments and music. As members of the underworld in the big cities where they were forced to settle, they also shared their experience as songwriters and musicians. Playing together with their fellow musicians from Asia Minor, the musicians of mainland Greece also were introduced to musical instruments, songs and performances employed by the newcomers. Soon they began to improvise not only the music but also the lyrics in their songs. As a result, the typical rebetika of Greece began to show inevitable

changes. From the narrow subject matter of the verses, the songs began to appeal to wider audiences, including the immigrants. Many of the songs from the late twenties and early thirties contain elements such as **taximia** and **amanethes** usually associated with Middle Eastern music.



As years went by and as political, social and economic changes left their mark in the Greek society and way of life, the rebetika songs experienced similar changes in the world of entertainment. Many of them, for political and economic reasons, no longer articulated the agony of the composer over issues pertaining to social injustice, prison life, drugs and persecution. While the new music remained fairly close to the original arrangements with the use of the characteristic instruments of **bouzouki** and **baglamas**, the lyrics and verses dealt with more innocent and less provocative themes, such as love and betrayal.

Under these conditions, the musicians of the **rebetika** songs became popular entertainers. They were frequently invited by refugee businessmen to entertain their customers who frequented their "Cafes-aman". These were a kind of bar-restaurant that had emerged in the large urban centers of mainland Greece, including Athens and Piraeus, Larissa and Thessaloniki. They were similar to those in the cities of Asia

Minor like Smyrna and Constantinople. In Greece, they became popular among wealthy upper class citizens who frequented these musical cafes for entertainment. The popularity of these songs and music continued for many years.

However, in the late 1930's and during the Metaxas regime, the recording of many songs with Turkish or Eastern influence was strictly forbidden. The so-called Smyrnaika songs or **amanethes** and **taximia** could not be recorded any more without consequences. Radio stations that dared play these songs were closed down. Consequently, for economic reasons as well as for personal safety, many **rebetika** singers and songwriters abstained from producing songs in the original style of the **rebetika** and followed more of a mainstream form.

By 1950, having "cleansed" itself of its original underworld syndrome and its association with the **rebetes**, the **re-**



betiko, still played to the sound of **bouzouki** and **baglamas**, entered a new stage of popularity in the music of Greece. Professional singers and musicians, including women, performed these songs in theatres and huge music halls before large audiences. Often, the most popular of them were invited to America to perform before huge audiences of Greeks of

the Diaspora. A great number of recordings were also made in the USA. This commercial success, however, had its inevitable effects. The authentic style and original meaning of the songs started to decline.

From 1960 onwards, people in Greece began to enjoy the benefits of considerable economic recovery. As a result, a new middle class of people emerged strongly in the cities. The economic prosperity contributed greatly to the elimination of the **rebetes** as a social group. As a consequence, in the world of entertainment and music, the **rebetika** songs were no longer considered or referred to as the voice of the **rebetes'** soul. Thus the **rebetiko** music was no longer produced in its original form.

This stage of stagnation, however, did not last long. By the mid 1960s the **rebetiko** in its "original" form was rediscovered by a new generation of music lovers. In the early 1980s, after a period of inertia during the years of the military junta in the 1960's and 1970's, the revival of the **rebetiko** reached a high point. Appreciating the beauty and artistic value of the songs, world-renowned Greek composers like Manos Hatzidakis, Mikis Theodorakis, and later Stavros Xarhakos, adopted the musical style of **rebetiko** to their compositions. By doing so they revived its popularity and elevated its artistic value to higher levels. Consequently, the **rebetiko**, played to the elegant sound of **bouzouki** and **baglamas**, became once again the most popular music in Greece, and, beyond that, even reached an international audience.

SELECTED REBETIKA SONGS

MARKOS VAMVAKARIS

Translated by George Pilitsis

YOUR BEAUTIFUL BLUE EYES

Your beautiful blue eyes
Shine like the stars in the sky,
Many hearts they have broken,
They have the power of the Creator.

Your pale white, beautiful body
Poised like a column when you talk
In this false and vain world,
You are always full of joy and light as you walk.

Whoever falls in love with you
Like a carnation, he wilts away,
He withers like a rose, he doesn't last a day
He's wounded deep in his heart
And feels the cruel pain.

FRANCOSIRIAN GIRL

I feel a fire
 Burning deep in my heart
 It's as if you've cast a spell on me
 Sweet Francosirian gal

I'll come to meet you again
 Down at the shore
 I'd like you to smother me
 With hugs, kisses and all.

I'll take you around to places like
 Finikas, Parakope,
 To Galissas and Delagrancia
 Till there is nothing left of me.

I'll take you also to Pateli, to Neohori
 To charming Alethene,
 And to Biskopio for a little romance
 My sweet, Francosiriane gal.

Note: According to E. Petropoulos, Finikas, Parakope, Galissas, Delagrancia, Pateli, Neohori, Alethene, and Biskopio are areas on the island of Syros. Delagrancia was a resort area for the well-to-do residents of Syros. Alethene is on a hill next to Ermoupoli, the capital city of the island. It should also be noted that the island of Syros was the birth place of Markos Vamvakaris. The island was known for its sizable Catholic population. The French-Catholics from Syros were known as Francosirianoï. (Francosiriane: a woman from Syros)

AH! WICKED WOMAN

Ah! wicked woman, how much you hurt me!
 With your charms you made me your slave.
 You're the reason I roam like crazy
 And have lost all control of my heart.

Since the first time I met you, my lady,
 You've set all in me on fire.
 Ah, jealous woman, you like seeing me angry.
 Why do you let the slightest things drive you crazy?

Ah! wicked woman, let go of your envy;
 Come, let me taste those sweet lips of yours.
 Ah! if you only knew how you make me waste.
 Jealous woman, why do you want to hurt me so?

IN PLAKA...

On my way to Plaka
 For a glass of sweet wine
 A young doll ensnared me
 and caught me in her trap.

Who she is and where she lives
 I have yet to find out.
 When she walks and looks at me
 I suffer pains, wretched me.

I have decided I must go
 And meet with her tonight
 To let her know the pain in
 My heart fills me with woe

I'll tell her how the fire in her eyes,
The curls in her hair
And the sweetness of her lips
Have caught me in her snare.

YOUR EYELASHES SPARKLE

Your eyelashes sparkle
Like flowers in a field.
You bat your eyelashes
And take my mind and reasoning away.

Your eyes, little sister,
Break my heart
You can look till you're blind
A man like me, you'll never find.

THE DIVORCE

I gave you a divorce
What more do you want from me?
Now you'll go around telling people
All you've done for me --
Now you go around telling people

I went and got married
In the church of St. Dionysios
And I made a housewife out of you
Now, no one dares talk to you --

And I made a housewife out of you
And now, no one dares talk to you.

You'd sneak out
Footloose and fancy free

Every night you'd take your darling George
And go out filling your gourd.
Every night you'd take your darling George
And go out to have some fun.

I should have killed you
To set your mind straight
Here, get a divorce
And go on your way
Get your divorce
And go on your way.

ALL THE REMBETES OF THE WORLD

All the rebettes of the world
Show their love for me
As soon as they see me
They go to bat for me.

Those who don't know who I am
Will get to know me now
I take my walks and go on my merry way
And don't give a damn
If they crack jokes about me.

I, too, was born poor;
I've been around and met the world.
I, too, have suffered and felt
The pangs of love in my heart.

Even the tough guys
Who do time behind bars,
Feel deep in their heart
The pains of true love.

AT MICHAEL'S OPIUM DEN

I'm dying for a smoke since morning
 To Michael's den I go
 To get me high
 On a fine black.

I'll come to get stoned
 To drown all my sorrows
 To douse the fire in my heart
 And wash away the poison.

The kind of life I've led so far
 I will continue leading.
 In this cruel and sham of a world
 I'll live and die like a dervish.

I'd rather die than give up hash
 And when I find a hookah for a smoke
 I'll down the dregs and puff them away.

HOOKAH PIPE

I feed on smoking hash
 On my hookah pipe for hours,
 And then for hours I feel weak.
 After some rounds
 I feel depressed and
 I talk to no one.

My mind wanders here and there
 And I can no longer think straight
 It feels like any moment now
 I'll face my cruel death.

Never, for a moment will I
 Forget what I went through
 In this world I was born to
 Never can I find peace anew.

Life's gifts to me
 Are bitterness and sorrow
 Only with some hash
 Bad things go away only until tomorrow.

Life, how I wasted you away!
 Give me a break and tell me
 What have I done to you
 To make me go through
 With eyes in tears of sorrow?

PRISONS ECHO

The prison walls echo
 In Anapli¹ and Yedi-koule²
 The bells in the prisons of
 Parapegmata³ and on Singrou⁴
 Bellow out loud.

If you are a mother and feel for me
 Some day come see me.

Come quick before they sentence me,
 Ah! yes, and also shed some tears
 Move them so they may release me.

¹ Anapli is a Venetian fort in the bay of Nafplio in the Peloponnesos. The fort is also known as Bourtzi.

² Yedi-koule (seven towers) is the Turkish name for the Byzantine walls in Thessaloniki also known as Eptapyrgio (Seven-towers). Both places have been used as prisons.

³ Parapegmata was a famous military prison on Queen Sofia Avenue, in Athens.

⁴ Singrou refers to a prison on Singrou Street in Athens.

A TOUGH GUY, A BULLY TOO

– If you're really a tough guy and a bully
And want me to be yours
Pull out your gun and dagger
You, tough guy, and show me the real you.

– I am a tough guy and a bully
And know that you'll be mine.
You know I fought with death for you
Already, seven times.

– You sexy manga, I love you
And I don't regret that a bit
You broke my heart
And now I pine all day and night for you.

– Now I have succeeded in making you
Fall madly in love with me
Tough guy and bully that I am
And a stubborn dervish too.

THEY PUT ME BEHIND BARS

They put me behind bars
For the sake of your eyes,
'Cause the guy you liked
I cut him up to pieces.

My heart is on fire for you
Cruel and shameless woman,

The moment I get out
I would cut ten more like him.

And all this 'cause I want you, babe
All to myself
And anyone who dares stand in my way
Will sure express regret.

On the prison walls
And on my body, too
I curved your heart, sweet doll
To look and think of you.

GLOSSARY OF REBETIKA TERMS

Rebetika: Songs produced and performed by and for **rebetes**. The songs often deal with drugs, love, wretched conditions of living, revenge and murder. These types of songs have been compared to American jazz.

Rebetis (pl. **rebetes**): An outcast, a man who lives by his own rules, a scamp, or social rebel.

Mangas: A tough guy, street-smart, bully, cunning and crafty.

Baglamas : A type of a very small string instrument that resembles bouzouki. It is the typical instrument that rebetika performers use to sing their songs.

Zeibekiko: A type of Greek dance performed by a single man to the sound of bouzouki and baglamas. Its origin can be traced to the Greeks of Asia Minor.

Koutsavakika: A type of Greek slang language used by men known for their cunning, crafty, unruly and rebellious character.

Amanes (pl. **amanethes**): Turkish long, drawn out love songs.

Taxim (pl. **taximia**): A long drawn out instrumental prelude of Turkish love songs.

BIOGRAPHY



MARKOS VAMVAKARIS, also known as the father or the grandfather of the rebetika songs, composed the few songs chosen for translation and inclusion in the present study. He was born in 1905 in the island of Syros in the Aegean Sea. At the early age of fifteen, and for economic reasons, he moved to Piraeus in mainland Greece where he learned to play the bouzouki. He began writing rebetika songs as early as 1932. Others, equally famous and influential rebetika song writers and singers, are Vassilis Tsitsanis, Yannis Papayioannou, Bayanderas, Kostas Roukounas, Loukas Dalaras, and most recently, his son, George Dalaras, one of the most gifted singers and entertainers in Greece today. As for the women performers whose voice became identical to the rebetika songs, there are Rosa Eskenazi, Sotiria Bellou, and Marika Ninou.

Selected Rebetika Songs

PHIL PASTRAS

In December of 2002, George Pilitsis called me on the telephone to ask if I'd be interested in collaborating on his most recent project in translation. He was working on the lyrics of *rebetika* songs and thought that my background in blues, jazz, and American popular music in general made me the ideal candidate to find ways of casting the translations in the rough equivalent to the slangy, street-wise Greek of such composers as Markos Vamvakaris. I have always been a big fan of *rebetika*, so I told George I'd be delighted to give it a try, though it might be a while before I could turn my attention fully to the project, as I was currently working with famous jazz musician and composer Horace Silver on his autobiography. George explained that the translations so far were as literal and accurate as he could make them and gave me a free hand to translate those, in turn, into versions that were as colloquial, idiomatic and slangy in English as the originals were in Greek. He promptly mailed his manuscript to me, but, alas, all I could do at the time was to give the translations a quick glance and call George to tell him I was intrigued by the possibilities. Unfortunately, by the time my work on the Horace Silver project was winding down, George's health had already begun to fail and, before I knew it, he was gone.

When I was invited to contribute to the *festschrift* for George, I immediately welcomed the opportunity to get to work on the translations. I must say, George and I had worked before on the translation of Yannis Ritsos' dramatic