

GREECE in Music and Song

STEREO
ZFB 70

'Epirus won in the end. At Ioannina, the centre of sliding-tone clarino playing, yesterday under a vast oak tree, three ensembles playing archetypal miralogia (dirges) which rather interfered with each other . . . A group which had been blowing all night came up the road at sunrise, surrounded by dancing prancers and drinking spirit straight from the bottle'

This postcard, sent by Ivan Polunin, a folkmusic collector, to Madeau Stewart at BBC Sound Archives in 1962, sets the tone of the record—a collection based on a marathon recording session with a gipsy family in Ioannina the previous year, and on a 72-hour gipsy festival at Arachova, in the central Rumeli mountains, when eleven fixed ensembles and various itinerant groups gradually blew one another to a complete standstill.

Epirus, the mountainous northern zone stretching to Albania, is one of three areas in Greece which never wholly submitted to Turkish domination. It is the home of the freedom fighter and the guerilla bandit, the *klepht*. The signal tune of Radio Ioannina is the song of the women of Souli who danced to death off a high rock rather than submit to the despot, Ali Pasha (died 1822); and the whole area, from Igoumenitsa to Volos, breathes resistance and toil. Zagori, where the chill widows' lament was recorded, is a collection of 44 villages north of Ioannina without water, without electric light, and in cases without roads. Men, lonely figures, beat a living from the soil; women spin wool even while travelling on bulky frame saddles.

The Halkias family, who perform the big items, are typical of the many settled professional gipsy groups who keep alive the epic or *klepht* tradition—a logical continuation of the border resistance ballads of the Byzantine era. Their music is indispensable for village dances and weddings. The players are: Nicholas Halkias, 53; his three sons, Giorgios, Dimitrios and Evangelus; and Vassilios Zubas, a relative. Nicholas is probably the finest clarino virtuoso in Greece. He plays about seven instruments and has taught his children to play theirs: lute, double-strung guitar-lute, and *défi* (pronounced 'deaf-ee'), a kind of tambourine. Only Evangelus, who is studying, can read music. Occasionally, between recordings, they would exchange instruments, tossing them one to the other, and carry on playing. I recorded them for a night and a day and barely scratched their repertoire.

Music infects the lives of almost everyone in Greece. In Epirus it was the local MP, a cabinet minister, who suggested the Halkias family and then lent us his suite as a recording studio; it was a radio technician who took us to the lost villages of Zagori; in Rumeli the wife of the Mayor of Levadhia knew which musicians would best perform the Distomon ballad; and at Arachova it was a lorry driver—so drunk he had to be helped home—who provided a sensitive guitar accompaniment to the *bouzouki*.

A *bouzouki* looks like a giraffe-necked mandolin. Ioannis Thassarigikis, who plays it with a plectrum, is a gangling 6ft 3in tavern-keeper in Arachova with a slow sleepy smile; he keeps his instrument under the counter, with the *retsina* glasses and the salad oil, and after closing down between eleven and midnight is wont to play it for a few friends and dancers. This is natural *bouzoukia* as it was played, sung and danced in villages between the wars before it was urbanised and debased into the present cabaret pattern.

It should be stressed that the music on this record is not representative of all Greece; it is a slice from the central and northern mountains.

SIDE ONE

1 SKAROS (Epirus)

A pastoral, with imitative bird cries. A taste of Nicholas Halkias' sliding-tone improvisation to come.

2 SERVICOS (Arachova—Rumeli)

Bouzouki improvisation on a dance theme.

Controversy still rages about the authenticity of *bouzoukia*. Purists say it is Turkish and therefore impure. Enthusiasts liken it solemnly to Bach, and have welcomed it into the demotic (folk) idiom.

The name is from the Turkish *vouszook*. The instrument came to Greece with refugees from Turkey after the First World War.

3 SERVICOS (Zagori—Epirus)

Song about a famed 18th Century traveller named Rovas. All the available manpower would go with him. Wives are said to have had their houses built exceptionally high, the sooner to see their menfolk returning with Rovas' caravan-trains.

4 KLEPHT BIRD SONG (Rumeli)

*'A bird sang by the dry stream of Levadhia
And was looking towards Distomon
It sings that at Distomon
They are killing people'*

A moving example of the organic folk process—traditional heroic form grafted onto recent events. In the last war German reprisals against local guerillas wiped out almost the entire village of Distomon: 400 died in 60 minutes.

In Greek folklore the symbolic messenger is invariably a bird.

5 TSAMICOS (Arachova—Rumeli)

The *tsamicos* is one of the most popular of Greek dances. Here the *bouzouki* has the feel of a *balalaika*.

6 MIRALOGIA (Epirus)

*'Come out from the earth
'I can't—I have no feet'
'Make your nails into hoes
And with your other hand push aside the tombstone'*

Miralogia ('words of destiny') are metrical dirges. They are isolated phenomena today. The form may go back to the dawn of Epirote history, after the Trojan War.

Incredibly, laments like this one for clarino and voice—usually pentatonic—are occasional table songs at marriages.

7 TSAMICOS (Arachova—Rumeli)

The players were quarried with difficulty from a *café table-top* during the Feast of St George and removed to a less bacchanalian recording ground—the municipal rubbish tip. The squalling note of the *karamusa* (flared reed pipe made of walnut—see cover) is common all over Greece and the Balkans. This shepherd exponent wore a spray of mouthpieces round his neck like a witch-doctor's charm. The drum is a *tapan*.

8 MIRALOGIA (Epirus)

Laments for clarino solo are usually in praise of heroes. In Greece this is not a virtuoso performance; this is popular music.

SIDE TWO

9 SIRTOS (Arachova—Rumeli)

Bouzouki variant of a lyrical dance, performed close to the ground, usually by women.

10 MARRIAGE SONG (Zagori—Epirus)

Almost devotional in character. The melancholy style of local singing is said to have resulted from the constant male depopulation.

11 THE WILLOW TREE (Epirus)

A pastoral love song with piquant double meaning. Nicholas Halkias improvisations on a grotesque ground bass create an even fruitier texture.

12 STIS THEROPOLIS TON KAMBO (Epirus)

One of the great polyphonic songs of the *klepht* manner. Turkish influence is unmistakable, but Greek musical genius transcends it. The 'owling' in the background is Vassilios' fiddle. The song commemorates a noted freedom fighter against the Turks.

13 MIRALOGIA (Zagori—Epirus)

Three widows in black, crouching at dusk by kerosene lamp-light, intoned this dirge in praise of a young man. Laments like this are heard only in Epirus, Mani and parts of Crete. Village superstition decrees that if keening occurs and there is no death, ill-luck will befall the inhabitants. The recording was made secretly with the help of the mayor (who was not superstitious); on his advice we left the village immediately afterwards.

The theme is unchanged for centuries; the imagery varies with inspiration:

*'Where are you going, my silver one . . .
Where are you going, my fresh sprig of basil
To lose your bloom?
You are not meant to descend into the black earth . . .
You will repent, my boy, a thousand times an hour
For the decision you have made to die.
There where you have gone
They call it the land of no return
Where two together do not sit
And three do not talk
And no marriages are made
And no festivities held
And there are no fields where you can play with your horse'*

14 LULLABY (Island of Skiathos)

In Greek song Nature is personified. Here the mother appeals direct to Morpheus, God of Sleep, to guide her child.

15 HAGNOTICO

A Cretan dance, popular also on the mainland.

16 PAGLIO ZAGORISIO (Epirus)

A grotesque dance, performed in threes by women.

17 AIUTOS—'The Eagle' (Arachova—Rumeli)

A *tsamicos*. The dancers, with arms outflung, have the freedom of the great eagles which plane in the air currents here, under Mt. Parnassus. The eagle is the old symbol for Byzantium.



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