

# Πώς άσωμεν επί γης αλλοτρίας; Greek song and identity "down-under"

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## RÉSUMÉ

"Quomodo cantabimus in terra aliena?" La question "Comment chanteront les Grecs dans un pays étranger" est un sujet litigieux ayant un lien étroit avec la définition de l'identité hellénique. Cet article explore quelques exemples indicatifs de la fonction de la chanson grecque dans la contestation de l'identité culturelle en Australie en faisant référence à trois événements musicaux des années 1990: le premier, un concert en 1993 qui a présenté un échantillon de talent musical dans la communauté grecque de Melbourne; le deuxième, le reportage d'une journaliste Athénienne sur la visite en 1995 de Nikos Xydakis et son ensemble en Australie, qui révèle une condescendance colonialiste de la part de quelques Grecs métropolitains envers la diaspora; et enfin, la récrimination contre l'engouement pour la musique grecque orientale qui suivit une visite manquée d'un ensemble grec de musique classique à Melbourne en 1996. Tandis que la "rebetomanie" des années 1980 se soit apaisée en Grèce à tel point qu'on la voit aujourd'hui comme une curiosité historique, la dynamique de l'affirmation de soi ethnique et du bricolage multiculturel assure sa prééminence soutenue aux antipodes. Ceux qui veulent remédier aux goûts musicaux de la diaspora grecque feraient bien de chercher à comprendre à fond les paradoxes mis en évidence dans cet article, en prenant connaissance de quelques recherches australiennes bien documentées, avant de dispenser des solutions à des problèmes présumés.

## ABSTRACT

The question "How shall Greeks sing in a strange land?" is a contentious issue with a strong bearing upon the definition of Hellenic identity. This article explores some signal instances of Greek songs functioning as a site for the contestation of cultural identity in Australia by reference to the musical events in the decade 1990: the first, a concert held in 1993 which presented the audience of the Greek community of Melbourne with a sample of musical talent; the second, an Athenian journalist's report on the visit of Nikos Xydakis and his ensemble in Australia, which reveals a level of condescension of colonialist dimensions in the attitude of some metropolitan Greeks towards the Greek diaspora; and finally, the complaint against the infatuation for the Greek oriental music which followed a visit markedly non successful of a Greek ensemble of classical music in Melbourne in 1996. Although the "rebetomania" of the 1980s has abated in metropolitan Greece to the extent that it is nowadays viewed as an historical curiosity, the dynamics of ethnic self-assertion and multicultural bricolage seem set to ensure its continuing prominence in the Antipodes. Would-be engineers of the musical tastes of the Greek diaspora would do well to seek to understand the political, social and economic context of paradoxes such as those outlined above by acquainting themselves with some well documented Australian research before dispensing high-handed solutions to presumed problem.

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For Greeks, the title question "How shall we sing in a strange land?" is far from the rhetorical question (denoting refusal) which it seems to have been for the abducted Children of Zion "By the Rivers of Babylon" (Psalm 136). Throughout their history, Greeks have been anything but demure about exporting their country's songs or performing them to advantage, albeit out of context. In 413 BC, Athenian prisoners famously sang their way out of the quarries of Sicily to freedom (cf. Seferis' epigram "Euripides the Athenian"), while twentieth century Greek migrants across the globe are said to maintain their identity through music and language (Vasilikos 1983: 32). Indeed Greek music appears to have a longer shelf life in the diaspora than the Greek language itself, to judge by the Poseidonians of Cavafy (and Aristoxenus via Athenaeus *Deipnosophistae* xiv 632); the Poseidonians' Greek musical festival survived their now notorious linguistic assimilation by the Latins. Looking to the future, some commentators morbidly predict that the last vestige of Hellenic culture left to the "neo-Poseidonians" of the modern Greek diaspora (and even of globalised Hellas herself) will be Zorba-music performed at expatriate "glendi" festivals (or in folkloric floor-shows for tourists in Greece herself), after they discard the Greek language or bastardise it into extinction (Gauntlett 1999).

For the present though, the question "How shall Greeks sing in a strange land?" is a contentious issue with a strong bearing upon the definition of Hellenic identity. This article explores some signal instances of Greek songs functioning as a site for the contestation of cultural identity in Australia, where, in all likelihood, song was the earliest Greek art-form to be practised. Song is, after all, an eminently portable and exportable cultural commodity, not requiring equipment for its most basic performance; it is also the indispensable accompaniment to some rather basic traditional observances and rites of passage. Thus the early Greek transportees to Australia and their fortune-hunting successors might reasonably be assumed to have laboured, celebrated, lulled their offspring to sleep, and lamented their dead, or their own exile, at least privately, with Greek folksongs on their lips.

Specific instances of public performance of Greek song in Australia are not attested until a century later, and even then some of the earliest sources are in conspicuous need of verification — e.g. the colourful oral narratives of George Katsaros, the centenarian Greek-American guitarist, who claimed to have entertained expatriate Greeks from Sydney to Tasmania with rebetika songs on two tours of Australia in the 1920s, donating the proceeds of his performances to Greek church- and school-building projects (Gauntlett 1997).

It was not until after the mass-migration of the 1950s that Greek song and dance became established as badges of Greek identity in Australia - but again the oral history of the proliferation of Greek night-clubs and the importation or local production of Greek gramophone records needs to be verified against archival sources (Gauntlett 1993a; Chatzinikolaou & Gauntlett 1993: 204-5). The internationalisation of the stereotyped Greek as the all-singing, all-dancing *bon sauvage* via "Never on Sunday" and "Zorba the Greek" might be assumed to have facilitated their acceptance by mainstream society as harmless, picturesque deviations from Anglo-Australian norms. The fact that Greek song and dance were largely contained within ethnic clubs, afternoon schools, or floor-shows in international cabarets quarantined them further, the main concern of the Anglo-Celtic mainstream being to ensure compliance with the puritanical liquor-licensing laws of the day (Gauntlett 1993a: 351).

The multicultural politics of the 1970s and 1980s turned Greek song and dance into commodities that Greeks should share with other sectors of Australian society, together with their cuisine. No doubt the international exploits of Nana Mouskouri and Demis Roussos further raised the general status of Greek song outside the ethnic community. At the same time, rebetika songs with their anti-authoritarian aura and references to recreational pharmaceuticals, attained cult status among increasing numbers of Australians disposed to explore ethnic exotica, aided by such monuments to Australian Orientalism as Gail Holst's guide-book *Road to Rembetika* (1975) and the Australian-produced documentary film "Rembetika, The Blues of Greece" (1982), narrated by Anthony "Zorba" Quinn.

By the 1990s the range of Greek music produced or consumed in Australia had broadened very considerably, as the relevant entries attest in the Oxford Companions to Australian Folklore (Chatzinikolaou & Gauntlett 1993) and Australian Music (Tsounis 1997). Rather than repeating what I and others have published there and elsewhere, I shall briefly review the background to the issues which concern this article by reference to three musical events in the decade.

First, the gala event "The AGWS in Concert, 1993", held to mark the twenty-first anniversary of the Australian Greek Welfare Society. The diverse musical program included traditional popular music, which ranged from Greek folksongs arranged for a mature-aged Cypriot community choir, to rebetika performed in consciously authentic style by a youthful Australian-born "compania", and eponymous compositions, ranging from selections of Vembo, Theodorakis and Hadjidakis rendered by a local actress and other semi-professional vocalists, to some Greek and English compositions in New Wave style and with socio-political messages by a celebrated local athlete-cum-music-student, and the versatile professional guitarist who directed the whole artistic programme. While it made no claim to being comprehensive in coverage, this event presented the audience with an evocative sample of musical talent in the local Greek community and prompted reflection on how representative a cross-section of local music making it was. Absent on other assignments were the older professional exponents of demotika, laika and rebetika, some of whom may have been unable to donate an evening's services to charity. However, since 1994 they have paraded in seriously impressive numbers at the stage-demonstration of "Dances of the Greeks" produced annually by a seconded dance-teacher from Greece during the Melbourne Demetria Festival. Also absent were some very distinguished Greek-Australian exponents of classical music and jazz, and the cantors of "the Lord's song", whose antipodean tradition dates back at least to 1868, when a Greek Orthodox priest was first attested, albeit fleetingly, in Australia (Gilchrist 1992: 206). Probably missing because of the aesthetic preferences of the concert organisers

and the expected audience, were the local representatives of the Greek pop and rock scene, a broad spectrum of whom advertise their services constantly and prominently in the entertainment pages of the Greek-Australian press. Egregiously absent from the concert were representatives of the sizeable contingent of visiting artists from Greece who were consistently present in Melbourne and for whom the Greek clubs of Australia have been a profitable, if not unproblematic, destination since the early 1960s (Gauntlett 1993b: 344).

Indeed, in the 1990s the services of selected metropolitan artists are donated annually by the General Secretariat for Greeks Abroad to the federated circuit of "Antipodes" festivals held in March-April in five major centres of Greek population in Australia. A journalist's report in the Athenian press on the 1995 visit of Nikos Xydakis and his ensemble, exponents of "high-brow popular song", provides the second illuminating snapshot of "how Greeks sing in a strange land" at present, this time focussing on the consumption side as perceived through Helladic eyes (Vlavianou 1995). This newspaper article reveals a level of condescension of colonialist dimensions in the attitude of some metropolitan Greeks towards the Greek diaspora. It describes the mass audiences attending the Xydakis concerts over 15 days in that latter-day "Babylon" which is multicultural Australia, as woefully uneducated in matters of Greek music, knowing only some catchy hit-tunes of diverse vintage and the traditional dances they brought with them in the 1950s. Their tendency to aggregate and put on display the profoundly incompatible items of their sparse knowledge seems to have caused some consternation to both journalist and itinerant musicians. Greek-Australian audiences are reported to go to concerts determined to dance, and in this particular instance, to dance the kalamatiano to everything, in defiance of the music. The correspondent proceeds to explain to Athenian sophisticates that Melbourne boasts no less than 60 bouzouki-dives (skyladika, literally "dog-pits") which host the big names of down-market Helladic music more frequently than most regional establishments of the kind.

True to genre, the article has a happy ending. For in spite of having to share the bill in Melbourne with an exponent of rumba-style belly-

dance-songs accompanied by an amplified band which would have done little credit to the more decadent bouzouki-joints of Athens, and despite the aromas of singed meat wafting up from the surrounding souvlaki stalls, Xydakis did not stoop to the lowest common denominator or in any way compromise the quality of his Athenian repertory, complete with acoustic instrumentation and profound lyrics. This reportedly earned him high praise by local standards in Tasmania, Melbourne and Sydney ("You were very good, even though you didn't bring a bouzouki"). Quality, it seems, will prevail: QED, and let the funding bodies in Greece mark it well.

A third snapshot of contemporary musical tastes (and disputes) among Melbourne's Greeks can be seen in the local fall-out from a markedly less successful attempt in the very next year to engage antipodean Greeks with metropolitan representatives of western classical music. The abysmally poor attendance at the performances of the Mantzaros Ensemble in April 1996 was seen as confirming the low cultural standards of the Greek-Australian community, rather than reflecting the standing of these emissaries in the eyes of the broader Australian community, which had previously, and has since, flocked to classical concerts by the likes of Kavakos and Sgouros. The letters to the editor of local Greek newspapers, precipitated by the fiasco (eg. *Neos Kosmos* 2.5.1996), predictably launched into the litany of complaints periodically rehearsed there since at least the mid-1980s, blaming the popular infatuation with oriental Greek music, alleging that vulgar songs full of "sekerim, piperim, Ibrahim" amount to a blasphemous denial of the classical heritage and a betrayal of the 1821 revolution, and bemoaning the plight of the generation which will be asked to lead antipodean Hellenism into the 21st century having been reared on oriental barbarism (*Neos Kosmos* 2.8.1986 et passim). Similar fears for metropolitan Greek youth were expressed in the Athenian press after a decade of cultural populism under Papandreou (see Androulakis 1991).

To judge by recent press reports on Melbourne (*Nea Parikia* 2/9, Oct. 1996 and 2/10, Dec. 1996- Jan. 1997), and the fieldwork of the ethnomusicologist Demeter Tsounis in Adelaide (1997b), the musical

tastes of young Greek-Australians are actually quite broad, but it is rebetika above all that are perceived to be authentically Greek in the spectrum of Greek popular music. Paradoxical or unpalatable though it may be, this markedly oriental type of song, with its often politically incorrect content, functions in Australia as an affirmation of authentic Greek identity (Tsounis 1995: 161-4). Moreover, the essential Greekness of rebetika is also periodically confirmed, albeit unwittingly, by Greek community organisations and the philhellenic establishment at the highest level. Thus in 1997 alone, numerous Greek community functions focussed on the genre, culminating in the cultural celebrations for the centenary of the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne and Victoria, which prominently featured two concerts of smyrneika by the local "Rebetiki Compania", while the Victorian Government's "International Arts 21" program decided to contribute the services of the same ensemble to the celebrations of Salonica as the Cultural Capital of Europe. The irony that rebetika revivalists are to Salonica as coals to Newcastle or owls to Athens, seems to have been lost on all concerned.

Since the early days of their appeal to the trendy avant-garde of Australian ethnic exoticism in the 1970s, rebetika have become quite acclimatised to Australian popular (multi)culture. The occasional inclusion of an aboriginal didgeridoo in performances of rebetika by the "Meraki" ensemble of Adelaide or of an Irish bouzouki by "Apodimi Compania" of Melbourne illustrates the younger exponents' readiness to do more than just reproduce old imported records. An oblique indication of the extent and the diversity of means by which consciousness of the genre and term have entered general household usage in Australia can be seen in the fact that a racehorse called "Rembetica" was running at various courses in Victoria and NSW in 1998 — and with some success, in spite of its somewhat implausible pedigree (sired by "Crystal Dancer" out of "No-alcoholic"). A more substantial indication of this acclimatisation was a cultural gift returned with interest to Greek-Australians in the form of a musical called "The Rebetes", written by Rhonda Johnson and performed at the Melbourne Malthouse Theatre during the Antipodes Festival of 1995. Set in Yarraville, an ethnically diverse outer suburb,

the work infused a large dose of anglo-antipodean feminism into the multicultural cocktail.

Another channel for the diffusion of rebetika into broader Australian popular culture has been the movement known as World Music, often criticised as an exploitative appropriation of Third-World music by the western-dominated music industry. As manifested in Australia, World Music has appropriated rebetika as one of its fundamental genres and "WOMADelaide" festivals have featured local revivalist bands revelling in names such as "The Rockin' Rembets" (Tsounis 1995: 164-9).

Whereas in metropolitan Greece the "rebetomania" of the 1980s has abated to the extent that it is nowadays viewed as an historical curiosity, the dynamics of ethnic self-assertion and multicultural bricolage in the Antipodes seem set to ensure its continuing prominence for some time to come, a fact not lost on local professional musicians, whose hallmarks are versatility and opportunism. This is perhaps nowhere more graphically illustrated than in the career of Anestis Kavouras, son of the legendary rebetika vocalist of the 1930s Yiorgos Kavouras, and grandson of the redoubtable fiddler and instrument-maker Stamatis Kavouras of Makri, Kastellorizo and Drapetsona. Anestis Kavouras arrived in Australia in 1955, acquired a guitar and made his mark in the mainstream popular music of the day as an Elvis-impersonator under the stage name "Tazzy Crab". Observing in the 1980s a sudden heightening of interest in his father's repertoire of inter-war rebetika, he re-released the original recordings on a series of LPs in Greece, and then in response to sustained demand for the genre in the Antipodes, serendipitously made a belated "debut" as the scion of the famous family of rebetes in Melbourne in 1998, with repertoire to match.

Would-be engineers of the musical tastes of the Greek diaspora would do well to seek to understand the political, social and economic context of paradoxes such as those outlined above by acquainting themselves with some well documented Australian research (notably Demeter Tsounis 1986 & 1997b, and Despina Michael 1998), before



dispensing high-handed solutions to presumed problems. The exportation of culture involves recontextualisation and local re-interpretation, so that what on one side of the world might be perceived to be overcommercialised kitsch or outmoded folklore, might well be constructed as a pristine constituent of national identity on the other side of the world.

Foucault's dictum that "No discursive practice is ever free from a will to power" prompts one to view conflicting answers to the question "How shall we sing in a strange land" in the context of a competition for the authority to define and represent Greek culture to Greeks and non-Greeks within Greece and without, to define educated musical culture, and not least, to command the associated resources (in Australia, the multicultural festive dollar).

Not too long ago the contestation of such authority in Greece itself, between proponents of broadly Orientalist and Occidentalist discourses, was highlighted in the paradoxical resurgence in popular culture of the essentially oriental rebetika genre of song at the very moment of Greece's accession to the European Community (Gauntlett 1991: 35-7). The contest may now have moved on to other sites, but the cultural politics of the Greek diaspora cannot be expected to keep step with those of the metropolis, particularly as the shots are being called not just by politicians on both sides of the equator opportunistically pursuing local cultural agendas and the mandarins of (multi)cultural arts, but also by local impresarios of the live and recorded music industries, and even by ordinary Greeks negotiating their own identity at home or abroad. Greater congruence may well ensue in consequence of rampant globalisation, but at no small cost.

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