The construction of the national identity of modern Greece and its impact on music

The national identity of European people, since the 19th century, is depended on the political circumstances and the cultural matters of a nation. In these last two centuries, politically, people think of their strength and determination as a product, shaped by their common historical continuity and destiny. Culturally, it is constituted from ethnic factors such as customs, language, myths, and religion that are symbolically used to represent a distinct community of people. That was the main notion put forward by Herder’s *Volkgeist*, which is perhaps the most influential idea for the determination of nations.

Nations defined and built their historical narrative gradually. They had to construct their own history in order to define their cultures. However, even if modern European nations seem to be by definition the products of a reconstruction of the pre-modern past, all historical constructions are not equivalent to each other, for the reason that some nations have a longer and different history. This is the case of Greece, according to the sociologist Constantinos Tsoukalas, who claims that: ‘The historical narratives had long preceded the emergence of national political projects. It is not the nations that built and reconstructed their pre-modern histories, but pre-modern histories that developed into nations’. \(^1\) The idealized shadows of monuments and ruins had an immense symbolic value of pre-modern Hellenism. This symbolic appreciation of Greece acted in combination with the “Greek myth”, a product of Western European modernity, and both served the construction of the Greek cultural identity.

The Greek myth was produced by European intellectuals, who saw Greece as the cradle of civilization, democracy, philosophy, drama and naturalistic forms of art. In the Renaissance Age the ancient Greek ideology was idealized; the arts and science were influenced by Greek ideas, many books of Ancient philosophers and scientists were translated, and many Greek scholars, who moved from Byzantium to various European countries after the Fall of Constantinople, spread the Greek cultural spirit. Similarly, the use of Greek tragedy as the model in the formation of opera inspired Monteverdi and his contemporaries in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Moreover, during the Enlightenment, philosophers glorified Ancient Greece. Even in the late 19th century, Wagner returned to Greek tragedy to produce operas, and Nietzsche turned to Ancient Greek tragedy as the model for regenerating modern art. Therefore, it was Europeans that revived the Ancient Greek ideology and discovered their own idealized cultural ancestors in Ancient Greece. It was that imported revival of ancient Greece that proved to be of great importance to the emerging Greek state in 1830, just after Independence. In consequence, this caused an indigenous interpretation of the past, which strengthened even more Greek national conviction.

The construction of Greek national identity is significantly associated with the Greek language itself. Despite the fact that the Greek speaking population was one among the various groups, which composed the multiethnic Ottoman Empire, and that, after three centuries of Ottoman Rule, most ethnic Greeks were poor and illiterate villagers, ethnic Greeks were privileged with regard to the spread of their language. According to the Byzantine traditions, all official ecclesiastical functions were carried out in the Greek language; so, a written version of it was allowed to be

reproduced. That, along with the European notion of Hellenism that existed in parallel with the contact of the educated Greek speaking strata with Western intelligentsia, gave the Greek language primacy. Tsoukalas, claims that: ‘The sense of pride for speaking the Greek language was mainly imported; a fact which explains, not only that Greek nationalism preceded its Balkan counterparts half a century, but also that social ascendancy and enlightened rationality were synonymous with linguistic Hellenizing. The Greek language thus seemed to be evolving into something like the Latin of the East’.  

Although the majority of the ethnic Greeks were poor and lived in the arid, mountainous and undeveloped southern areas of the Balkan Peninsula, they were taught their language through the prayers, the psalms and during the catechism. Their folk music, which first appeared with the name of “secular Byzantine music” in the 10th century, became the vehicle through which Greek language survived for centuries. Folk music was integral to daily life. Folk song unconsciously shaped and strengthened their national self-determination for many centuries; while later the use of folk song turned to be used consciously for national enhancement, organizing the struggle for Independence.

However, the most influential aspect of the construction of Greek national identity was its twofold character: Eastern and Western. Just after Independence, most living customs were closely linked with the Orthodox faith and were inevitably anti-Western. The Christian Orthodox Church had been opposing the Roman Catholic West since the 11th century. Oriental Orthodoxy had drawn its cultural inspiration from the glory of the Imperial Byzantium. On the other hand the myth of eternal Greece was imported from the West. The notion of self-determination of nations, which entered the East from the West, as part of the ideological framework shaped in the Age of the Enlightenment, was to a certain degree founded on the glorification of ideas which were traceable in Classical Antiquity.

Henceforth, the Modern Greek state had to face the debate over whether its culture was essentially Western European or Eastern. The oriental, popular and “Dionysian” components of the nation came against its official, rational, European and “Apollonian” element, creating a complicated dilemma. They would either have to consider themselves as direct successors of Imperial Orthodox Byzantines, in which case they might be obliged to give up a part of the universal symbolic aura they owed to their ancestors, or they would have to reject the Byzantine legacy as a “dark” interlude. Yet, the latter option would alienate them from the archetypes of their daily cultural life, which was deeply rooted in religious beliefs. It is worth noticing that this debate was primarily expressed and imported by western scholars, who viewed the Classical Antiquity also as part of their own identity, while Byzantium for them was east, heteronymous, and even “barbaric”.

The answer to this dilemma was given by Constantinos Paparigopoulos, at his writings of the official Greek history in 1860s and 1870s. He argued that the continuity between pagan classicism and Byzantine Christianity could only be appreciated through a totally new concept, created from the amalgamation of the above features; bringing forth a new term, the “Helleno-Christianity”.  

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importantly, it placed Byzantium as the intercession between Antiquity and Modern Greece, even though the Byzantine Empire was multiethnic.

The type of folk music, that with its individuality emphasized the Hellenic character of Byzantium, was Klefiko song. That music was originally introduced by the agricultural Greeks living in the mountains of the mainland at the beginnings of the 18th century, and continued developing all through the 19th century. The significance of Klefika songs lies in the fact that, despite their origin during the years of Ottoman Occupation, their musical identity was purely Greek, because the areas they originated had almost no contact with the Eastern culture. Thereby, these songs were the musical mediation between Classical Times and Modern Times; while at the same time they were establishing even more the meaning of the new term of “Helleno-Christianity”. Their themes were related to the national conviction and their tunes enhanced the national feeling during the pre-revolution as well as the post-revolution period. Therefore, the use of that type of folk music proved to be of decisive value in the construction of the Greek national identity.

Despite the strong impact of folk song, especially the Klefiko song, to the revolution and to the national confidence, during the Ottoman years, an organized band playing western music, like marches, appeared in 1825, which is actually before the Independence year. According to the scholar, Ilias Voliotis, there was parallel existence of the folk song and the music by military bands even earlier, from 1821.4 The role of these bands was similar to that of the folk music itself, to enhance the struggle for Independence.

The years after Independence brought forth two opposite poles inside the society of Greece. The one pole included the agricultural people which were the majority of Greeks, while the other one the governing people, the so called upper class. The intermediate social levels were still absent in those years. The folk music was expressive only of the agricultural people of the newly founded Greek state, while the upper class preferred exclusively western types of music. Thus, we realize that the polarization of the Greek society affected decisively the musical identity of the Greek state in the first decades of its existence. In Athens of the 1870s, this polarization became even stronger when the Café Aman and the Café Santan appeared. The latter one had program with dancers of Western Europe, while the first one had musicians playing Greek, Arabic, Turkish, Armenian, and Bulgarian music. The strong competition that developed between these places reflected the opposition that existed between the two social poles mentioned above.

The cultural isolation during the Ottoman occupation, the slow musical communication with Western Europe in later years, the mere refusal of the upper class to approach the music of the agricultural people, meaning the folk music, and the slow social process in contrast to the industrial revolution, caused a delayed internationalization of Greek music. Exception was the music of Eptanisa Islands, which were never under the Ottomans. There from the beginning of the 19th century, developed a kind of music that constituted the first attempt of the foundation of an indigenous music, which combined East with West.

On the other hand, in Athens, such kind of attempt appeared much later, at the end of the 19th century, and that was the Athinaiko song. However, according to Voliotis, the Athinaiko song did not succeed its aim, to create a modern formula of music, which would be able to combine the two identities; something that verifies the

4 Voliotis-Kapetanakis Ilias, Enas Aionas laiko tragoudi, Nea Sinora- Livani, Athens, 1989, p. 64
ineffectiveness of the Greek society itself to follow the new implications. In a way, that type of song constitutes the earliest type of Greek urban song. Nevertheless, the urban song and the popular song of Modern Greece derive from the folk music of different people that settled in Piraeus in the 19th and the 20th century. Thereby, the shell of urban and popular song is folk music; and the line between folk music and them, particularly that of popular music, was vague in the first years of their evolution. Therefore in the first decades of the 20th century we can distinguish a great variety of musical types: the folk music, the urban music and the popular music. However, the art music remained the music of the upper class, and so the musical polarization mentioned above continued to exist.

Greek composers of art music faced a similar dilemma to the historical one explained above. Should they follow the Western harmony with its various compositional techniques, or should they remain close to monophony and folk music culture, which pre-existed and had already served the patriotic and national feelings for centuries? Which means should they create music for a limited audience or for the many people? Yet, because European music, at the turn of the 20th century was often connected to “folklorism”, as Béla Bartók defined it, the majority of the Greek composers, worked on the synthesis of both musical cultures: that of East and that of West. Therefore, most Greek art composers accepted the new term of “Helleno-Christianity”, proposed by Paparigopoulos, and applied it to music. At the same time they continued the work of earlier composers from the Eptanisa Islands, contributing to the cultural and, thereby, social convergence.

Another attempt for the synthesis of the two musical identities was the creation of a new type of stage art music that had obtained great popularity from the last decade of the 19th century and continued in the 20th century: the Elliniki Operetta. Its political and social thematic material strengthened the national conviction of Greeks during the years of the Balkan Wars, particularly in the big urban centers, whereas folk song remained the main way of patriotic expression for peasants. But, the Elliniki Operetta was a western type of music that, even though it was influenced by eastern musical features, as “folklorism” implied, it remained closer to West than to East. As a result, it did not succeed its goal and, thereby it was unable to play any social role; that is why its fame faded very quickly (in 1928).

In the 20th century, two political dramatic eras, the one from 1912 to 1922, and the years from 1940-1949, have been fundamental to the cultural, social and political development of the Greek nation. The tragic moment of the Devastation of Smyrna by the Turks in 1922 with the forcible resettlement of Greeks of Asia Minor in 1924 brought many refugees in the Greek mainland, but admittedly it strengthened the will for National unity and indeed affected music. The refugees from Asia Minor brought with them their own musical tradition, the so called Smyrneiko, which was influenced by the music of the East. The Smyrneiko song was talking about the national defeat of Greeks in 1922; it was expressive of the Greek national feeling, in particular of the nostalgia and the pain of the refugees. On the other hand the folk song had more recognition away from the urban centers, among the villagers and the places it originated.

In parallel to Smyrneiko song, there was another kind of song with the same origins, that was highly developed during the interwar years; that was the Rebetiko song. The case of Rebetiko is very special. In the beginning it symbolized the life and the society of the very low poor class. The refugees from Asia Minor and the poor

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urban people had common issues and problems during 1920s. *Rebetiko* song carried the Greek folk element while at the same time it was strongly influenced by Eastern musical elements. Thus, *Rebetika* songs were both considered as belonging to the Greek society and culture while at the same time they were named as Eastern songs. And for that reason there was a strong debate concerning their identity, deriving once more from the issue mentioned above, of the twofold identity, that of East and that of West.

During the interwar years, there was a similar kind of music that earned much popularity as *Rebetiko* song had got; that was the so-called urban pop music- *astikolaiko tragoudi*. Its development went in parallel to the development of the big urban societies, like Piraeus, and Athens; its stages reflected the stages that these societies passed through. It was an amalgamation of elements of folk music with influences of the *Rebetiko* song, and of the musical tradition of the several minorities that had settled in the Piraeus. Its significance was that it managed to create cultural interlinks between the poor people and the upper class, and thereby bridging the two social poles. Because it talked about the worries that urban people were facing inside the modern societies, it was the principal type of music which continued existing after II World War. After a short pause of progress in 1940s, there was a quest for urban-popular music to change root in order to develop a modern identity. It was then that after a century of search for a modern musical identity the eastern and the western element typically fused in one, by harmonizing the pop tunes; a technique that was, in a way, imported by abroad and the music of the Greek communities in other countries. From this stage on, urban-pop music was commercialized, and thereby it gained popularity in all social levels.

Dahlhaus has stated that “the national side of music is to be found less in the music itself than in its political and socio-psychological function”; a notion that indeed reflects the case of Greece. Any research on the Greek musical culture has to focus on the fundamental questions of the composition of the national culture, placing the Greek music in the context of two conflicting historical models of the nation; two models, which despite they have derivate from the same nation and its continuous history, brought about internal cultural rivalry. Ideologically that was answered by the new term of “Helleno-Christianity”; a term that, its musical sense practically preexisted to its theory. However, the debate between the eastern side and the western side of Greek music remained an issue from the 19th up to the mid 20th century. This twofold musical identity represented the two opposite social poles of the newly independent Greek state. It was only in 1950s when the society managed to develop some kind of intermediate social levels that the two-sided musical identity seemed to have fused into a single one, the so-called *laiko tragoudi*.

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