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GREEK DANCES

Greek dances, like all dances, are inextricably connected with Greek popular music the quality of which is different both from that of western European music and from that of Oriental music, though the character of Greek music is clearly Oriental. Although there are fundamental differences that distinguish songs from different regions of Greece – for instance Roumeli, the Cyclades or Crete – some features are common to all Greek music.

As there is a great variety of songs, there is a great variety of dances, too. Greek traditional dances, whose origin is to be located in a very distant past, can be divided into two main categories: the *syrtoi*, which are performed in line, and not in couple, with the foremost dancer ‘dragging’ the others, are dragging dances, or *syrtoi*, and the *pidiktoi*, or springing dances. But they can occasionally be made up of both categories, and moreover their name varies in accordance with the region in which they are performed.

The musical *modes* are not limited to the Western major and minor and the scales bring into play intervals somewhat greater and smaller than a semitone. As a result there could be nothing more unnatural to Greek popular music than its accompaniment on a piano. In this respect Greek popular music bears significant resemblance to that of Byzantium to which ancient Greek music has bequeathed many elements.

The rhythms are dissimilar too: they are not the customary rhythms western music avails itself of (2/4, 3/4, 6/8, etc.). To tell the truth they are individual and ‘irrational’ (5/8, 7/8). The 7/8

rhythm – the *syrtos* – is the most common rhythm, it is therefore widespread all over the Greek world and it is also the most ancient.

The rhythm of the *syrtos* is triple and is punctuated thus

♩. ♩ ♩ or – ∪ ∪

but the long first note does not correspond to two short notes, but to one and a half. It has been recognized that, in accordance with ancient musical theory, this was the rhythm of the Homeric hexameter and that the relation of the long syllable to the two short ones – i.e. not 2:2 but 1 ½ : 2 – was there also ‘irrational’.

The term *syrtos/syrtoi* is very ancient. In an epigraph of the first century A.D. found in Beotia, a landowner is mentioned who ‘piously performed the traditional dance of the *syrtoi*’ [τὴν τῶν συρτῶν πατριῶν ὄρχησιν θεοσεβῶς ἐπετέλεσεν].

The most ancient of these dances is the *syrtos*, and it is believed that the ancient Greeks performed it around the altars in the course of their holy ceremonies.

As a matter of fact, scenes representing people dancing in a continuous circle while joining hands, can be observed on numerous ancient jugs and vases brought to light all over the Greek world. And there are also many frescos on the walls of monasteries that represent the *syrtos* with the lead-performer who holds a handkerchief in his hand.

As is natural, the majority of the songs cannot only be sung but can be danced as well. Only a small number of songs are never danced, and among these are the klephtic songs.

The klephtic songs are sung in accordance with an atypical strophic system called the 'klephtic strophe': the singer intones the first *dekapentasyllabo*, or fifteen-syllable verse, and carries on to the first hemistich of the second verse; then he reiterates the second *dekapentasyllabo* completely and the first hemistich of the third, and so forth, each time singing a verse and a half as one unit. In other songs the singer often splits the verse into two parts or introduces small units called *gyrismata* or *tsakismata* which confer a great sense of variety and suppleness to the song.

As with the songs, there are many variations in the dances too. As we already said that the most widespread is the *syrtos*.

The *kalamatianos*, performed in 7/8, is a faster and more springing variety of *syrtos*, danced all over Greece, and the name of which derives from the town of Kalamata, in the deep south of the Peloponnese.

The *tsamikos* danced in Epirus, is serious, admirable for its Doric manly quality, and masculine, is characterized by a triple rhythm which corresponds to the ancient iambus.

The *tsakonikos* is danced in Tsakonia, in the southernmost part of the Peloponnese, and the dancers perform it in 5/4 or in 5/8 while holding each other firmly by the arm. It is deeply rooted into an ancient tradition according which this dance revives the victorious exit of Theseus from the Labyrinth at Cnossos.

The *lambriatiko* is a dance that people perform on Easter (*lambri* in Greek) in the town of Kedros, near Karditsa, in Thessaly.

The *sousta*, a *pidiktos*, is danced primarily in Crete and in the Dodecannese. All Greek springing dances are also called *sousta* in northern Greece. In the Dodecannese *sousta* is the main dance, although in each island it has a character of its own.

The dances of Macedonia and Morea possess a particular dignity, while the dances performed in the islands are characterized by a delicate womanly allure.

The principal dances of Crete are the *pendozalis*, a circular war dance that up to not so long ago, used to be performed by armed men who held themselves by the shoulders; the *sousta* and the

syrtos. Also the *syrtos* is a circular dance that dancers perform holding each other by the hand and, as is customary in all Greek dances, the one who leads the dance makes abrupt impressive steps.

In the Cyclades Islands the dances are mostly *syrtos* and *ballos*.

In the Ionian Islands, which have been for centuries under Frankish (western European, especially Venitian) influence, the way of dancing is more poised, even the quality of the music is quite dissimilar than in the rest of Greece, and some dances like the *ballos* are exceptionally performed by couples.

In Cyprus the dances are fundamentally *antikrystos*, that is the dancers perform them facing one another from a short distance. They are performed either by men alone or by women alone, and the music that accompanies women is different from that that accompanies men.

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