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From the Living Tradition to Presenting the Tradition. Performing Music, Performing Gender. A Greek Case

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Abstract

This article discusses the interaction between the dominant ideology of a society about gender and its musical and dancing practices. More precisely, the article relies on material compiled in the process of pursuing my doctoral dissertation. The research focused on the area of my hometown, Karditsa, a small town in central Greece, and a number of neighbouring villages. It is worth noting, however, that the interchange of expressive and cultural codes between the rural and urban culture of Greece, between the country and the city, between the traditional and more modern or professionally skilled performances has been continuous and indisputable. The analysis concerns certain female activities related to music and dance in the context of traditional community life but also the professional presence of women in the local music scene. Thus, although the transition from the analytic category *women* to this of *gender* has theoretically been accomplished long ago, Greek folklore and ethnomusicology have silenced female voices and have been indifferent to or deliberately ignored the manner in which women confirm and reproduce or question and subvert social gender stereotypes through their song and dance. Consequently, this text begins with women, not of course as a general, abstract and undifferentiated category, to approach the performance of gender and music.

Keywords

Performance, Music, Dance, Femininity, Gender

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Introduction

When, a few years ago, I published my PhD thesis (Koziou 2011) and chose to dedicate it to my 'voiceless'[1] grandmother Stavroula, many hastened to ask me if she was really mute. The truth is that, until a certain age, I thought that my grandmother did not have a voice, since she rarely ventured to speak during the numerous gatherings of my mother's multi-membered family. I later came to realize that, like many women of her generation, social origin and class, she had been taught to endure and remain silent. Nevertheless, by lightly stirring my memories, I can almost hear her sing to me a Greek guerilla song with a quick rhythm while, as we both grew older, I had often observed her dance in the village square with the other women and accompany their slow, long- drawn dance with the appropriate vocal song.

On the other hand, the same family gatherings in the village coffee house owned by my grandfather, where various musical feasts were organized from the 1950s up to the mid 1980s during community festivals, were filled with allusions to professional female singers usually derogatorily referred to as 'tragouthiares' (female singers, chanteuses). They were women who played a leading role in the musical performance as well as in the male fantasies. Women who had, for various reasons, transgressed the ideology of society respecting their gender by becoming professional singers. Women who performed a necessary function but remained obscure, who were known professionally only by their first name (often an alias), who met with the outcry of society and were treated with indifference or disdain by the traditional music researchers.

Indeed, what Suzan Mc Clary (1991) observed in the early 1990s about the indifference or even the fear displayed by musicology towards women, towards feeling and the body, remains a reality for Greek ethnomusicologists. Although in several texts, written mostly by earlier and later folklorists, who approached the Greek folk song as a text, reference has been made to the role of women in the creation and dissemination of folk songs (Fauriel 1956, Κυριακίδης 1978, Τζιαμούρτας 1998, Αναγνωστόπουλος 2010), the question of power and authority has never been broached, the relations between genders have not been explored and music has rarely been studied in its interdependence with gender ideology. So, even though this article is being written in an era when the theoretical transition from the category *women* to the concept of *gender* (Koskoff, 2014:13-30,) has been realized, I feel the need to start by talking about women (or even better, to let them talk) and conclude with analyzing the performance of gender and the gender of musical performances (Magrini 2003).

Significantly, during the 1970s and under the influence of the feminist movement, the interest of the social sciences began to focus more on women. In this era women's anthropology interpreted female subjugation cross-culturally and across time through

[1] A term used by Edwin Ardener (1975).

universal models. Soon, however, these models were criticized as Western-centric, while the category 'women' itself was considered to silence individual differences within the female gender, which had to do with class, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation. So the transition from women to social gender is gradually taking place. The latter term was brought into more mainstream usage by sociologist Ann Oakley in 1972. The concept of gender as a social construct gave hope that things could change.

In any case, the term women does not refer to an abstract, homogeneous and monolithic category but to real, physically present women who try to communicate and express themselves, to comprehend the reality of their existence or to simply make a living through music. They are women who agreed, sometimes willingly and sometimes reluctantly to share with me their lives and their experiences, musical or otherwise. At the same time, while talking about their contribution to the creation, dissemination and performance of the folk songs of my country, the discussion cannot be carried out as if this genre concerns a given, established, static and not specified in time product registered as either text or sound. Song, music and gender can be studied together as continuously interchangeable constructs in time and space, as cultural performances that shape one another (Butler 1990; Sugarman 1989).

The field survey covered a period of approximately 15 years, starting in the early 1990s and includes the extensive study of pertinent folklore literature, the recording of ethnographic material at a variety of festivals and a large number of interviews conducted both with professional musicians as well as ordinary people who were willing to share their memories of the musical, dancing and cultural practices which date back to the beginning of the 20th century.

Living the Tradition

By focusing on the notion of performance, two main phases of folk song and, by extension, of the female contribution and female presence can be discerned (Kavouras 2000; Koziou 2015). Succinctly, it could be said that on the one hand lies the group vocal song, the product of a transgeneological practice, of a long collective creation which expresses a generic community ethos present in many areas in Greece in the late 1940s and early 1950s. This collective song of the company plays a crucial part in the celebrations of the various stages of life (birth, marriage, death) and of time (religious festivals and fairs) but also, in the everyday informal occasions of farming life, like working in the fields all through the day and night. Without instrumental accompaniment, it functioned as a means of entertainment, communication and self-expression among the members of the community which enabled them to transcend their individuality and experience their unity.

In this phase, where the folk song is a communal celebration, the component part of a ritual, opposed to the song as a professional performance, women have a defining role in its creation, reproduction and dissemination. However, although many Greek folklore researchers as mentioned above, have acknowledged this contribution, they limited themselves to describing in detail or recording only the texts and ignored all issues that had to do with the mutual relationship between music and gender. This fact, of course, does not mean that the musical phenomena cannot be reassessed under this new perspective. And since, while discussing the Greek folk song of this period, the unity of speech, music and movement cannot be broken, there are observations to be made on how a society represents and internalizes its ideology on gender through the manner in which its members sing and dance.

I will use as an example a female practice of song and dance which was widespread in my area until the early 1950s and often revived in the following decades called the *sergiani.* During the large religious festivals and fairs the women of the village used to set up in front of the church or in the village square a dance accompanied by group vocal songs. The audience for this performance consisted of men, children and those women of the village who were in mourning and did not participate. The entrance of a young girl in the circle of the dance signified her availability as a future bride and offered an opportunity for the appraisal of her qualities. The dancing style of the *sergiani* was peculiar, slow and in walking-style, a symbol of female modesty. As Jane Sugarman (2003) remarks in her example of the Albanian women of Lake Prespa, by moving their bodies as a whole they made certain that the spectators would not turn their attention to specific parts of the body, while, by their lowered and even vacant looks, they exhibited their self-control and moral propriety. Or, in the words of my interlocutor, Garoufalia

> We were serious in the *sergiani*. One didn't dare look at anyone. If one looked and her eyes fell on a boy, she would look away instantly. Because we were observed (and pitilessly criticized accordingly). The whole village was gathered there. If you were seen looking or nodding, you couldn't show yourself in the village the next day. Some girls who were in love would look but then the young men didn't want them anymore. They would say that she gave bold looks. And if a girl did something naughty they would call her lewd and promiscuous. If a girl would move her body more freely during the dance or raise her arms, they would say that she is not fit to be a wife and run a house. (Karambekou Garoufalia, interview at her home, Karditsa, May 2007).

This practice of observing and of being observed implies a relationship of power (Foucault 1978) exercised over women even in the midst of joyful circumstances as in the festive occasion described above, that rendered their enjoyment ambiguous. According to John Berger, quoted by Jane Cowan (1998:196) in her research on dance in northern Greece, "A woman must always watch her deportment. She is constantly followed by her own image. She must monitor everything she does, because what she

looks like in the eyes of others, especially in the eyes of men, is of vital importance for what is normally considered to be success in her life". Garoufalia continues in the same interview, underlining what Berger has depicted,

> It was definitely considered an enormous failure for a girl to marry a man from a strange village or an older man. It was out of the question for any girl to dance immodestly because then no one in the village would ask her to marry them. One girl married a man in Kalogriana (a distant village). Although she had done nothing seriously wrong, she was loose in her behaviour and people thought she was disgraced.

Through this performance of song and dance the women were given the most direct representation of the rules, the beliefs and the expectations of the times and of their community as far as the roles of the two sexes were concerned. Their singing and dancing manners, however, were not merely defined by the beliefs of the community on what constitutes proper male or female behavior but also contributed decisively to the internalization of those beliefs on behalf of the young people. The term 'habitus' used by Pierre Bourdieu (1977) to describe how through everyday activities the individual internalizes the objective structures of society can be applied to describe and analyze the role that expressive activities such as singing and dancing in ritual form play in the recreation of social models and in the elicitation of consent on the part of women as to their domination. The habitus, according to Bourdieu, or in this case masculinity and femininity, is cultivated through interaction with an entire symbolically structured milieu and is registered in the form of the body and schemata of the mind. Cowan (1990) remarks that beliefs on gender and gender relations which are always relations of power, are embedded not only in songs and dances but in simple, everyday social practices.

At the same time, however, women gained new communicative abilities through their songs and were able to express in their everyday speech and in a culturally acceptable way thoughts and feelings that were forbidden and would remain untold under different circumstances. The 'marital dirge', the songs sung during the separation of the bride from the home of her parents after an arranged marriage is a typical example. At this moment taut with emotion, the young women know what awaits her in a strange home and having been left with no choice, expresses her grief through this song, "On a Friday and on a Saturday evening my mother sent me away from home and my father also tells me to leave". Likewise, as women cannot complain about the hardships of their everyday life in a rural society that duly appreciates hard work, discipline and obedience from female working hands, they sing, "Mother, you married me off badly and gave me away to the flatlands. I cannot bear the flatlands, I cannot drink warm water, my lips will wither and turn yellow". They could not say that they did not want to work in the heat, so they sang.

Women also found a unique mode of relief in the dirge when they lost loved ones. Additionally in many songs the redemptive role of humour can be detected. In a social system that regards sexual relations as a threat and where a woman's value (as well as that of her family) is judged by her ability to handle her sexuality, they use their songs to fall in love, to explore their sexuality, to let themselves get carried away by their strong emotions, and to proclaim their love for someone. Using the expressive means and cultural codes of the community they manage to express themselves publicly, often critically, to communicate, to indulge in self–reflection and become emotionally discharged.

Of course, social changes can also be seen through the lyrics of their songs. Thus, the women's participation in the national resistance during World War Two and their subsequent armed guerilla fight during the civil war (1946-49), their occupation with public life and the recognition of their struggles could not pass unregistered. So the shepherdess who traditionally sits on the top of the hill holding her distaff, an archetypal symbol of femininity, in the guerilla folk song becomes the partisan who holds a gun and wears strings of bullets around her chest rather than jewels (Koziou 2015).

I have presented two examples of how various music and dance practices that have already been recorded can be re-interpreted in order to demonstrate their connection to gender ideology of their relative society and time. I also show how the folk song became an important tool for the female farm workers of the countryside which enabled them to construct their identity and make their voices heard. I observed that these practices cannot only reflect the rules of society as to proper male and female behavior but they can also serve to reinforce and reproduce them.

Performing the Tradition

At the other end of this collective, dialogical (in the sense of a wider communication and exchange of thoughts and feelings) ritual performance lies the monologue of the professional musicians who are specialized and work for money. These artists radically separate themselves from and spatially place themselves in juxtaposition to their audience. This new condition is connected to numerous aesthetic innovations - characteristic features of the monologic (as opposed to dialogic), solitary way of life in the impersonal, big cities. For example, from the 1930s innovations in new, electrically amplified sound, new instruments like the electric piano and accordion, and a new hyperlocal repertoire taken from the record industry.

The demanding improvisational playing of the instruments by the skillful musicians and their singing in front of the microphone emphasizes the idea of individuality that dominates this new condition. Apart from the fact that the singer plays the leading role, another innovative feature of the folk songs of this time is the appearance of the

female singers as members of professional music bands. In Karditsa this had already started to happen in the 1950s. A very characteristic phrase used by the music house owners while negotiating an appearance and conveyed to me by the musicians was the following, “If you don’t have a woman, you don’t get the job”. “We found the woman first and then made the deal”, confessed most of them. Athens and Piraeus supplied the small towns with women performers or just “women”. There were agencies where one could hire female singers through photos. Later it was found easier for the musicians in Karditsa to look for women in their local area starting by introducing their wives to the stage.

But what led the village men to make this demand? When I put this question to the men I interviewed, professionals and others, they agreed that in Karditsa the forerunners of professional female singers in the festivals were the singer in public places of entertainment called ‘café- aman’ and the ‘café- chantants’. According to the writer and scholar of the local history of Karditsa, Nikolaos Vogiatzis, “in the closed space of such a coffee shop, female artists from Vienna, Hungary, Constantinople, Armenia and Smyrna offered musical and other delights to the Turkish masters and later to the young men of the bourgeoisie” (Βογιατζής 2005).

In the words of one of my informants, a professional musician of traditional clarinet:

> In the old days, before our women appeared, there were shops called ‘café- chantants’. These were frequented by the aristocracy of Karditsa. Let me tell you how they worked and the similarities with our women nowadays. Let’s say that there were two singers. They would sing a couple of songs or none at all and then they would come down and keep the customers’ company. The way it is done now in the ‘skilathika’. In this way our women began appearing in the fairs. It started in one fair, people liked it and asked for them. There were some women among them who could sing very well. (Zervas Athanasios, interview at the musician’s coffee shop, Karditsa, May 2009).

The term «skiladika”, although witnessed at least since the 50s, has been used more widely since the beginning of the 1970s to stigmatize the commercial music that prevailed during the dictatorship and especially the infamous shops that proliferated in those years. Typical entertainment practices in these places were the breaking of plates, the throwing of countless flowers, the multitude of revealingly dressed singers and dancers and, above all, their availability to offer company to the customers (Κοκκώνης, Γ., Κοντογιάννης,Γ., and Οικονόμου, Λ. 2019).

The key phrase in the narrative above is “the aristocracy of Karditsa”. The poor farmers have internalized the notion that bourgeois entertainment, according to Western standards, is superior to their own tradition of the countryside. So, they do whatever they can to imitate what is, in their conscience, prestigious entertainment. The musicians, who no longer come from the community but are paid to play, have to stand on a

stage as in the city shops. Bales of hay or grass are used for that purpose or sometimes a wagon. In the rich days of the early 1980s these were replaced by a tractor platform.

By paying for their *order*, their right to choose the song to be played by the orchestra, they secure the right to occupy the dancing space for themselves and their company. Another tactic to enhance their symbolic capital, besides ostentatiously giving money to the musicians, is to dance with the singer. The man who would bring the singer down to hold him while dancing would be an object of discussion and envy by the other men in the coffee house the next day. The way the men addressed the 'artists' was extremely derogatory and reflected the relations between the musicians and the audience which had the background of financial transaction. A similar example is the spitting on the bank note so that it would stick to the player's forehead. Very often my informants conveyed phrases like these, with which the customers addressed the female singers: "You are a singer, aren't you? You will sing alright. And you will dance. We are paying you, aren't we?"

Demetra was one of the first great singers of my home area and these words made her exclaim,

> I hated singing. This job. A man would come drunk and pull me by the dress and tell me to stand up. It was a disgrace to stand up. We had to sit in a chair and wear a long dress. If our knees showed a little or if we wore trousers we were considered immoral. I did stand up. But to step down and hold someone while he's dancing? Never. I categorically never stepped down to do a man's favor either when they were drunk or crazy or if they wanted to show off. Because the next day everyone in the coffee house would say: "Well done! How did you get her to come down?" It was all about showing his power. That he could humiliate you and get his own way". Some of my colleagues did it. And then, when we went to the villages, people used to say: "the gypsies[sic] are here with the *diseuse*" [a French word used pejoratively for female singers]. (Alexiou Demetra, interview at my home, Karditsa , September 2009).

This narrative is an important testimony of the multidimensional role of such an artist not only as the protagonist of the musical performance but also of the construction of male identity - of the 'poetics' of manhood, or else, its performance.

In every case the reasons that forced a woman to 'come out' and sing were financial. Even the phrase 'come out into the profession'[2] signifies the ideas that society holds regarding the organization of space in connection to social gender. The female singers transgress the home boundaries and enter the male space of the coffee house, often adopting male practices such as drinking alcohol in public or smoking. But apart from

[2] Renee Hirshon (1978) uses the symbolism of space to describe the places of male and female activity that were acceptable by traditional society. It has been cross-culturally noted by various ethnographers, especially in societies in which professional female musicians are equaled to courtesans, that these women, although they move in circles inaccessible to their peers and enjoy a certain freedom, acquire a social stigma that follows and isolates them from the wider social tissue and other "respectable" women.

placing their voice and their bodies in public view, the financial transaction with a paying audience is the basic difference with the women who in the previous dialogical condition gained prestige and enhanced their symbolic capital by their singing which constituted a part of a wider ritual of the community.

What can easily be observed here is that with time and socio-economic change the de-ritualization of music takes place and the spontaneous, collective participation of the community in the creation and preservation of music tradition loses its strength. Even more so does the role of women who are no longer the protagonists of a trans-genealogical cultural practice but have to limit themselves to dancing to the songs ordered by men from the professional bands.[3] This practice which could indirectly influence and partly shape the musical program has also become scarce.

I have presented how music and dance has traditionally been an appropriate field for the representation, the public construction and also for the internalization of social beliefs about gender identity. However, through the practices of music and dance the ruling ideas can be questioned, challenged or even replaced. The vital social transformations of the past decades and the changes in the status of women have had an impact on the way they sing and dance. Many anthropologists and ethnomusicologists (see below) have now come to the conclusion that modern women, even in conservative environments, use the language of music and dance to show the freedom they have gained, to cast off years of restrictions, to proclaim their independence, to express wishes and emotions, to demonstrate their sexuality. A central part of several ethnomusicological studies in the Mediterranean is the exploration of how the members of a community sing what cannot be said, how they express thoughts and feelings forbidden in everyday conversations, and how songs can provide a voice for those who have less power and autonomy like women (Abu-Lughod, 1986). Anna Caraveli (1986), Suzan Auerbach (1987) and Nandia Seremetaki (1994) specifically examine how women express their discontent about their social position and their own perspective on reality through their dirges. Tim Rice (1994) has recorded many songs that show the feelings of terror and threat experienced by women towards men. On the other hand, Jane Sugarman (1997) mentions wedding songs in which the grief and disillusionment of the bride are expressed through a sense of humor.[4]

I will use another example of my own research. The venue is a wedding celebration in a wedding hall in the city of Karditsa in the late 1990s. The coy bride of the past who wails her separation from the home of her childhood with the marriage dirge has

[3] Marie Virolle (2003) notes when talking about the Algerian rai which women played a leading role in creating and disseminating in the 20th century, that the global market system and the ethnic music industry have succeeded in silencing women, something that had not been accomplished for years by the stern patriarchal system of the country.

[4] For the expression of freedom, gained by women, through music and dance see the work of Jane Sugarman (2003), Goffredo Plastino (2003), Caroline Bithell (2003) and Konstantinos Dimopoulos (2017).

been replaced by a pregnant bride who chooses to present herself to her guests with a *zeibekiko* dance, while at the same time she is singing the following lyrics, "Why don't you ask around about who I am? I'm a fine, open-hearted woman that has men wrapped around her fingers". In this musical event women have a leading and defining role both when they dance to the traditional folk songs and when they use their skill for a particularly sensual *tsifteteli* which is a frequent choice of the musicians. With their spontaneity, their mirthful cheers, the theatrical representation of methexis (a really deep psychic involvement) and joyfulness, they abandon themselves to a liberated and liberating way of their bodies, not caring about how this will be construed by the people around them.

The men of course do not sit idle; they answer back by ordering a slow *tsamiko* and change their grip, holding each other by the shoulders, taking up as much space as possible on the dance floor in a theatrical effort of masculinity maintaining its ground. Jackets are strewn on the floor, boxes of champagne start arriving, they pour out a bottle of whiskey and set it on fire. That is a very conscious choice, not at all random, since, despite the emancipation of women and their substantial contribution to the family budget, the men almost always pay the bill and take care of the tips in all public social events. They are having fun and get out of line but they can afford the money for it. They pay because they are men and they are men because they pay. So, they use the rhetoric of dance and an ostentatious generosity to perform their male identity.

The point, moreover, where previous collective representations of female modesty are fundamentally subverted is the *zeibekiko.* Here is how Πετροπουλος Ηλίας (1990) describes the performance of this dance:

> The *zeibekiko* is danced by one person. Each man dances in his own completely personal way. The *zeibekiko* dancer dances looking at the ground. His face is serious, almost menacing. When the band plays the *zeibekiko* only one man dances on the dance floor. It would be an unprecedented scandal for a woman to dance the *zeibekiko.* And a sight like that could be the cause of lethal altercations. Only prostitutes danced the *zeibekiko*.

Now a days more and more women perform this dance in an attempt to claim more dancing opportunities, to expand their expressive abilities, to form and project a newer, more dynamic and emancipated female self. Thus, through the course of years of this male, exclusively individual dance which could in the past even lead to the killing of any uninvited 'intruders' on the dance floor who spoiled their 'order', one can imagine men's displeasure when they ask for their favorite dance, only to find the dance floor occupied by a woman.

Women's relation to instrumental folk music remains as prohibitive as it was in the past. In the older days of hard farm labour, at least until the late 1970s especially in rural areas, the hands of the women were always busy with their innumerous tasks of

motherhood and child rearing, housework and working in the fields. Their sole means of expression was their voice. The only point that differentiates the professional women is that they always appear playing the tambourine (see Figs. 1,2,3,4)[5] which no man performed on stage, but this is not considered a real instrument by the collective conscience, as many of my informants reported to me. Helen Koskoff (2014:129) points out that "Instruments, their sounds and performance contexts associated with women tend to be devaluated in many societies, often seen as amateur or associated with children". Especially in the Balkans the frame drum, (*def, daire, ντέφι*) has been associated with Muslim Rom female performers for at least a hundred years (Pettan 2003, Silverman 2003) and this association also led to the instrument being treated quite disparagingly.

Only two decades ago when the teaching of the traditional clarinet started in the music high school of my town female students were teased by their classmates. My experience in teaching the flute to primary school students can confirm that. This of course, for obvious reasons, concerns mainly wind instruments. Gradually, female artists who accompany their songs with a traditional instrument are starting to appear as well as all - women's bands that play traditional music. It remains to be seen how forceful and lasting their presence in the musical scene will be.

Figure 1

[5] Figs. 1 and 4 were entrusted to me by the featured singer, Eleni Palioura, and Figs. 2 and 3 by the featured clarinet player, named Thanasis Zervas. The location and identity of the photographer are unknown.

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

A Final Reflection

The limited scope of this article explores the two-way relationship between a society's gender ideology and musical thought and practice. On a continuum in space and time, through the dialogue between more traditional and professional performative practices, music, dance and song have been approached as symbolic sites where gender identities are not only represented, but constructed, affirmed and often challenged. Particular emphasis was also placed on highlighting the professional presence of women in the field of traditional and popular music from the past to the present day and how this is connected to society's dominant gender ideology.

Therefore, it can be argued that to a great degree many past prejudices about women's professional occupation in the music industry have been overcome. I recall the question my mother was asked very naturally by her acquaintance when she decided to bring my sister and I to our first music teacher for piano lessons: She was asked if she wanted to make us into singers. And though this concerns people who belong to an older generation and notions of the past, I will add the spontaneous reaction of a young man a few years ago, when talking to a female friend at a wedding a few years ago when she got up on the dance floor to sing. Rather shocked, he stated, "What? You'll sing? But you don't look like a *trago ythiara*".

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