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# TATAVLA KEYFİ AS A REBETİKO MUSICAL REPRESENTATION IN TODAY'S BEYOĞLU LOCAL SETTING\*

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## Abstract

This study focuses on revealing conceptual dimensions of rebetiko as they are reflected within the multicultural local context of Beyoğlu. The article addresses the contemporary musical representations of rebetiko in Istanbul, focusing on the case study of the Tatavla Keyfi ensemble. Tatavla Keyfi ensemble has been active in Istanbul's music scene since 2008, with a primary performance base in Beyoğlu district. This article aims to explore the conceptual aspects of rebetiko that are shaped through the social dynamics of the interaction developed between the Tatavla Keyfi musicians and their audience. Furthermore, this paper endeavors to identify the symbolic meanings of rebetiko music

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within the multicultural context of Beyoğlu. The study is based on musicological, historical, and ethnographical sources, magazines and audiovisual material. Field research on the case study of Tatavla Keyfi constitutes the principal method of data collection, involving interviews with three of the ensemble's musicians. Through qualitative analysis of the interviews and the fieldwork data interpretation, the article highlights two essential findings: (i) rebetiko is being used as an 'umbrella term' embracing diverse musical genres and (ii) rebetiko's functionality as a defense mechanism aids in the examination of one of its symbolic dimensions.

**Keywords:** Rebetiko, Musical representation, Tatavla Keyfi, Smyrniiko, Istanbul-Beyoğlu

## **Tatavla Keyfi: Günümüz Beyoğlu Sahnesinde Rebetiko Müziğinin Bir Temsili**

### **Özet**

Bu çalışma, çok kültürlü Beyoğlu bölgesindeki yansımaları üzerinden rebetiko müziğinin kavramsal boyutlarını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Makale, İstanbul'daki rebetiko müziğinin çağdaş temsillerini ele almakta olup, bilhassa Tatavla Keyfi grubu örneği üzerine odaklanmaktadır. Tatavla Keyfi, 2008 yılından beridir İstanbul müzik sahnesinde etkin olup, performanslarını ağırlıklı olarak Beyoğlu'nun yerel sahnelerinde gerçekleştirmektedir. Bu makale, Tatavla Keyfi müzisyenleri ile dinleyicileri arasındaki etkileşimle şekillenen rebetiko müziğinin kavramsal boyutlarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Ayrıca, bu çalışma, Beyoğlu'nun çok kültürlülüğü bağlamında rebetiko müziğinin sembolik anlamlarını tespit etmeyi hedeflemektedir. Çalışma, müzikolojik, tarihsel ve etnografik kaynaklar, dergiler ve görsel-işitsel materyaller üzerine temellendirilmiştir. Temel veri toplama yöntemi olarak Tatavla Keyfi üzerine yapılan saha araştırması benimsenmiş olup, ayrıca topluluğun üç müzisyeniyle yapılan görüşmeler de içerilmektedir. Görüşmelerin ve saha araştırması verilerinin nitel analizi ve yorumlanması sonucunda makale iki temel bulguyu öne çıkarmaktadır: (i) rebetiko, çeşitli müzik türlerini kapsayan bir "şemsiye terim" olarak kullanılmaktadır ve (ii) rebetiko'nun savunma mekanizması olarak işlevi, onun sembolik boyutlarından birinin incelenmesine olanak tanımaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Rebetiko, Müzikal temsil, Tatavla Keyfi, Smyrniiko, İstanbul-Beyoğlu

## **Introduction**

Rebetiko is conceptualized as a cultural product, embodying multifaceted dimensions that arise within diverse cultural, sociological and musicological contexts of performance. This paper explores the conceptual aspects of rebetiko within Beyoğlu's multicultural local setting. The music ensemble "Tatavla Keyfi" has made a notable contribution to this effort, remaining one of the few ensembles in Istanbul that solely concentrates on rebetiko music today. Tatavla Keyfi ensemble, based in the Beyoğlu area, has been part of Istanbul's music scene since 2008. The ensemble has performed frequently at the "Makina Lokal" venue for the last seven years. Their repertoire is exclusively dedicated to rebetiko and traditional songs from Istanbul, Smyrna, and Piraeus. A significant part of this case study is based on the qualitative interpretation of the research fieldwork conducted during the ensemble's performances at "Makina Lokal" venue. This approach helps to uncover the meanings that emerge between the ensemble's musicians and their audience. The article addresses the following questions: Focusing on the local setting of Beyoğlu, when and under what socio-cultural context does interest in rebetiko music emerge? How does Istanbul's multicultural framework influence rebetiko, and what conceptual dimensions can be identified?

The first section of the paper reviews some significant sources that have contributed to the historical and ethnographic approach to rebetiko. This section is based on musicological, historical, and sociological sources, magazines, and audiovisual material, and constitutes a historical and ethnographic approach to rebetiko music, discussing the mentality, thematic aspects, and ideological world of rebetiko songs. The second section addresses the historical conditions that fostered the emergence and appropriation of rebetiko by the audience in Istanbul.

Field research is the primary method of data collection in the article's final section, focusing on the case study of Tatavla Keyfi. This section includes interviews with three of the ensemble's musicians—Güneş Demir, Charalampos Theodorelis Rigas, and Mamed Dzafarov—who provided insights into the ensemble's development and performance experiences. This fieldwork forms the basis for examining the ensemble's formation and the

dynamic interactions between its musicians and their audience, using qualitative data analysis.

### **Socio-cultural Status and Historical Approach of Rebetiko**

This section examines some of the prominent figures in the literature on rebetiko music, highlighting their diverse methodological approaches and perspectives on the cultural, sociological, and historical significance of the genre. The first section of this article focuses on the historical periods of rebetiko to comprehend how rebetiko as a cultural product has been impacted by socio-cultural conditions. This section also seeks to understand how rebetiko has been reshaped through the transition from a particular period to another, ultimately reaching contemporary times.

Two of the characteristic contributors are Elias Petropoulos and Stathis Damianakos—the former through his extensive collection and anthology of songs, and the latter through his conceptual interpretation from a sociological perspective. According to Tragaki, Petropoulos categorized various musical genres under the label of ‘rebetiko traghoudhi’ by including smyrnaiiko (from Smyrna) and politiko (from Poli, Constantinople) songs alongside rebetiko and laiko compositions. However, his attempt to establish a history of rebetiko lacked sufficient support, leading to the creation of myths and stereotypical views about the genre that have persisted over time (Tragaki, 2007:110). The book “Rebetiko Worlds” by ethnomusicologist Tragaki consist another important source, as it provides a brief introduction to the culture, social status, and historical periods of rebetiko music, while also offering an ethnography of contemporary rebetiko revivalist music culture based on various fieldworks she conducted in Thessaloniki. One of her primary concerns is to convey how individuals perceive, practice, experience, and imagine rebetiko music today. She seeks to explore how people engage with rebetiko and the ways in which they re-define the genre by reviving it in the present day. Scholar Uğur Zeynep Güven Çetin provides an anthropological and sociological perspective, shaping and affirming theoretical models of the representations of the rebetiko music scene through the fieldwork she conducted for her doctoral dissertation

in the late 2000s. Scholar Daniel Koglin contributed by introducing statistically aided methods for gathering data on the individual experience of music. One of his primary goals is to examine the historical evolution of public discourse surrounding rebetiko in Greece. According to rebetiko's musical representations in Turkey he notes that since Turkish intellectuals reinterpret rebetiko's marginal status within a different cultural framework that is what makes it worthy of closer examination. Koglin explores the historical progression of its symbolic roles and investigates what makes its experience so unique. He briefly addresses the widely held belief that rebetiko represents a hybrid form, and thus an authentic expression of both modern Greek and Ottoman cultures, contributing to ongoing debates about intercultural fusion and the formation of identities through contemporary popular music in the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean regions (Koglin, 2016).

Scholars have frequently subdivided rebetiko into two main periods: the music of the cafés (what the Greeks call "Smirnέiko") and "teké style or bouzouki-based Piraeus style" (Ordoulidis, 2011:1). Before presenting the periodization of rebetiko, it is important to briefly discuss café chantant and café aman because these categories convey the pre-existing cosmopolitan and multicultural environment in which rebetiko music flourished. "Rebetiko has the potential to bear witness to a particular socio-cultural context, including the link between music and territorial origins; the construction of multiple identities through music as well as the revelation of the consciousness of being the other" (Güven Ercan, 2013:1). The environment in which the musical activity of café-chantants and café-amans first emerged is noted around 1873 (Tragaki, 2007:287) (Mourgou, 2022:211). "Café-chantants refers to a type of French Cabaret Venue where European music and dance performances were presented (Hatzipantazis 1986:25)". Scholar Dafni Tragaki describes the musical activity of both café-chantants and café-amans as 'oriental'. She observes that this term is defined in contrast to the concept of 'Western' music: 'oriental' describes long-standing local musical traditions, while 'Western' refers to recently introduced European musical trends (2007:15). Café-chantant venues were typically described as luxurious spaces, catering mainly to the middle class, whose customers would gather at small marble tables to enjoy their drink for

entertainment. This reflects the elitist tendency toward Europeanization attributed to the social context of cafe -chantants. Cafe -amans, on the other hand, offered a distinct social context in which ensembles of Jewish, Armenian, and Smyrna artists performed local music and dance traditions, providing a rich, inter-ethnic repertoire. It was a coexistence of multiple musical styles, as they had to please an audience from various cultural backgrounds. Folk songs (dhimotiko Tragoudi) are further pointed out as part of the repertoire performed by these ensembles in this context.

Café aman music was performed by local semi-professional small bands, the so-called *kala pechnidia* (literally 'good toys/games'), consisting of stringed instrument players from both the Muslim and Christian communities. They would have interacted and intermingled with groups of itinerant bands from Asia Minor who toured the ports of the Eastern Mediterranean, contributing to a multifaceted music scene (Zaimakis, 2011:8).

The prevalence of the café aman is the result of a set of social conditions and transformations related to the process of population migration to urban centers. Before the late 19th century, various forms of folk music intertwined in the café amans of the developing urban centers of mainland and island Greece, where different musical ensembles toured. According to scholar Mourgou, the development of connections and communication between different urban centers—especially the ports of the Eastern Mediterranean were a key factor for the creation of a network of venues across Greece, where urban folk music traditions flourished. (2022: 211) Scholar Dafni Tragaki identifies several Café-aman musicians, including as Roza Eskenazy, a popular female singer of smyrnaiiko and politiko song, Marika the Politissa, Vezos and Aghapios, who used to play in the Nea Ionia coffee-shop by the seacoast area and Panayiotis Tountas, were the vehicles that transported and communicated rebetiko song within a network of musical traditions featuring the circum-eastern Mediterranean area. (2007:50)

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an oral tradition of urban, non-commercial folk music emerged, primarily among the economically deprived populations of Greek cities. This period marks the pre-history of rebetiko music. During this period the primary venues for musical performance during this time were hashish dens, gambling houses, and prisons, where rebetiko was flourished within a marginal community consisting

of prostitutes, gangsters, criminals, and former convicts. The majority of songs written during this time period addressed topics such as drug use, gambling, violent conflicts, daring exploits, and life in prison. Gauntlett (1985) notes that during this period musicians were amateurs, and their performance style was relaxed, relying heavily on improvisation. Both the lyrics and the melodic line were composed on the spot, shaped by the social interaction and context that prevailed during the musical performance. According to sociologist Damianakos, rebetiko songs originated in the early 20th century at major Aegean ports such as Piraeus, Thessaloniki, İzmir, and Istanbul. The initial compositions within the genre predominantly focused on themes related to drug addiction and prison life. However, over time, the sphere of song creation and dissemination expanded significantly, leading to notable transformations in the thematic content, emotional depth, and ideological dimensions of the music. Scholar Damianakos claims that the history of rebetiko encapsulates the history of the Greek sub-proletariat in an industrializing society and he divides the evolution of rebetiko into three periods, the 'primary', the 'classical' and the 'working' historical phase (2003:109).<sup>ii</sup> Figure 1 (below) summarizes these historical periods while also outlining essential ethnographic elements by categorizing them.

**BASIC CHARACTERISTICS AND DEVELOPMENT OF REBETIKO**

	<b>Primary Period</b> (until 1922)	<b>Classic Period</b> (1922-1940)	<b>Labor Period</b> (1940-1953)
<b>THEMATIC WORLD</b>	References mainly to hashish, prison, and the outlaw gang.	Songs of love and sadness «hasıklidika», of rebetika life.	Songs of protest, of working life, of emigration and motherhood. Songs about women and love, sadness, dreams.
<b>MORPHOLOGICAL ELEMENTS</b>	Simple orchestration, improvisation. Simple poetic style, primitivism, spontaneity. Anonymous creator, oral and limited dissemination. Place of production: Tekes, prison.	Enrichment of the folk orchestra. Similar poetic style. Slight retreat of Rebetika slang. Licensed creators. Oral dissemination and from records. Place of production: The Tavern.	Similar orchestration. Embellishment of the poetic style. Noticeable decline of slang. Licensed creators: expanded distribution through records. Place of production: The Tavern.
<b>IDEOLOGICAL WORLD</b>	Refusal to adhere to the dominant ideology. Special code of values and norms of social behavior. Overvaluation of the illegal life.	Simultaneous denial and acceptance of the dominant ideology. Non-legal status, conflict of subcultural references.	Progressive integration into labor ideology. Rejection of sub-cultural references.
<b>EMOTIONAL WORLD</b>	Inclination towards pleasures, hedonism. Pride.	Hedonism, fatalism, pessimism, escape. Pride, apologetic attitudes, repentance.	Retreat of hedonism and escape. Patience. Diffuse melancholy.
<b>RELEVANT SOCIAL GROUPS</b>	Circles of drug addicts and criminals. Illegal groups, constituted and organized. Autonomous and closed subcultural groups.	Coexistence of illegal groups and masses of the lumpen-proletariat. Coexistence of structured and unorganized groups.	Sub-proletarian masses (unemployed, casual workers). Merger trend in the working class. Organized and open social group.

*Figure 1.* Damianakos, 2003, p, 136

Scholar Tragaki claims that historical changes influenced the original form of rebetiko as a musical style. Until recently, rebetiko historical eras were delineated using evolutionary models. The transformations of rebetiko music were thus investigated in the same way that biological organisms evolve: the resulting schema involves successive eras described as the 'genesis', 'culmination', 'decay' and 'demise' of rebetiko, perceived as concrete and non-interactive stages of a predetermined course of tradition. As a consequence, there is a tendency to examine the history of rebetiko through the lens of its evolution within specific frameworks. However, from her perspective, the application of periodization serves as a useful tool in organizing the extensive archive of available audiovisual material. She subsequently outlines the historical periodization, as proposed by Gauntlett (1985):

1. End of 19th century – 1920: oral non-commercial tradition.
2. 1920 – 1936: first recordings and personal compositions.



3. 1936 (the imposition of censorship by Metaxas' regime) – 1941 (the invasion of Axis allied military forces).
4. 1941-1946: the occupation years (World War II).
5. 1946-1952: the popularization of rebetiko music (the emergence of arhondorebetiko, bourgeois-rebetiko style).
6. The 1960s-1970s: the first revival of early rebetiko music among urban intellectual circles.
7. 1980s-up to today: The second rebetiko revival.

At this point, scholar Damianakos perceives the evolution of rebetiko up to 1953 and focuses on categorizing genre characteristics, whereas Tragaki, noting Gauntlett's chronological trajectory, emphasizes the study and interpretation of the periods in which rebetiko is gradually reviving.

### **Mentality, Thematic Aspects and The Ideological World of Rebetiko Songs**

The comprehensive review of rebetiko songs, particularly those recorded during transitional periods between distinct historical eras, is an effective method for delineating the elements of mentality, thematic trajectories, and the ideological framework of the genre. The primary phase of rebetiko, embodies developments during the first two decades of the twentieth century, characterized by anonymous songs emerging from clandestine, illegal circles. These songs were disseminated orally in a limited, non-commercial manner, with their thematic focus centered on drugs, imprisonment, and the underworld.

A notable illustration of the behavior and ethos of organized criminal groups of this period is highlighted through the lyrics of the song "To Koutsavaki".<sup>iii</sup>

I was a koutsavakis,  
I didn't count my life I played my life with guns day and night  
I was a koutsavakis,  
I didn't count my life I used to play my adorable life with guns  
I always gambled by playing cards.  
Hold on, oh aman, I always said, someone else lost the money.

Tragaki highlights that the term *koutsavakis* refers to the urban gangster persona. *Koutsavakidhes* (the plural) formed a specific cultural group, they were usually engaged in illegal activities, observing their own moral system, slang idiom, dressing and behavioral codes and, of course, the associated musical genres, namely the urban popular music of *cafe-amans*. A later development of the *koutsavakis* persona is the urban *mangas*, the hero with the central role throughout most of the *rebetiko* songs (2007:15).

*Rebetiko*'s 'classic phase', which is placed chronologically from 1922 to 1940 is actually framed by two historical events: the population exchange (1922) that followed the Asia Minor War and the Metaxas' dictatorship, which censored *rebetiko* singing (1936). With the advent of refugees from the opposite Aegean coast the population structure of Thessaloniki changed dramatically; refugees soon made up one third of it. Songs from this marginal subculture resembled mournful laments sung in solid and harsh voices and bristle with references to fights, drug usage, loneliness, and death. *Rebetiko* music gradually gained recognition, drawing an increasingly broad audience. By 1950, through recordings produced by prominent musicians, *rebetiko* genre had fully entered the realm of popular music. "Rebetiko music of this period may be subdivided into two main styles (Morris 1980; Pennanen 1997:66) the Oriental or cafe music style, which in Greece is called *Smyrnai iko* (*Smyrna* or *Izmir*) style or school; and the so-called 'Piraeus style', referred to also as *Peiraio tiko* or *klassiko rebetiko* (classical or of Piraeus)". Although there has been considerable interaction, the two styles reflect distinct traditions in musical structure, instrumentation, historical and social performance contexts. The former was the product of the symbiotic relationship of a number of religious and ethnic groups (Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Turks, etc.) within the Ottoman Empire. According to scholar Kallimopoulou, the *bouzouki*-based Piraeus style was associated with the urban sub-culture of Greece (with hashish dens and prison), had different instrumentation (*bouzouki*, guitar and *baglamas*), a repertoire based on local musical material and original compositions, and a less melismatic singing style (2009:23)".

Many scholars consider 'Smyrneiko' to be the originator of Rebetiko. Frequently, the boundaries between the two species are confused. As a result, many 'Smyrneiko' songs are valued according to rebetiko aesthetics. Therefore, 'Smyrneiko' is characterized as a misunderstood genre. Smyrneiko genre takes two directions. On the one hand, there is the European version, which is influenced by Neapolitan singing in a lyric style. This musical genre's language is accented with erudition. This music is aimed at the upper-middle class of İzmir. On the other hand, the urban folk version of Smyrneiko is also a product of admixture as it combines the different cultural musical idioms that are heard in that era. The influences are varied and come from urban folk music, as well as Turkish makams and Byzantine music. There is also an influence of the formed Smyrneiko music from the music of the Aegean islands, secular music, European, Turkish, Armenian, Jewish and Arab traditions. From this point of view, 'rebetiko' songs combine elements common to a wide range of musical traditions in the Eastern Mediterranean." (Daniel Koglin, 2016). A characteristic example of a Smyrna song is the song on hicaz makam written by Roza Eskenazy (Figure 2).

**Φερετζέ φορώ**  
Ρίτα Αμπατζή (1934) Ρόζα Εσκενάζυ

Φερετζέ φορώ, γιαβρί μου να τον βγάλω λαχταρώ.  
Θέλω στη θερμή σ' αγάλη, αμάν αχ μερακλή.  
Για να γείρω απ' το κεφάλι, αχ σεβταλή.

Τώρα θα γλεντώ, γιαβρί μου,  
που 'βγαλα το φερετζέ,  
θα γλεντάω στις ταβέρνες, αχ μάγια μου 'κανες,  
θα γλεντάω με λατέρνες, αμάν συ με τρέλανες.

Χρόνια λαχταρώ, γιαβρί μου,  
απ' το χαρέμι για να βγω,  
θα 'ναι οι kizlar αγάδες, αμάν αχ μερακλή,  
οι αγάδες κι οι πασάδες, αχ σεβταλή.

*Figure 2.* Nikos Andrikos, 2018

I am wearing a face veil, my dear and I am looking forward to take it off.

I want to be in your warm hug, aman merakli

to lean over my head, ah sevdali'

Now that I've taken off the veil, I'm going to have a good time

I'll be having fun in the taverns, oh, you've put a spell on me

I'll be having fun in the taverns, oh, you've driven me crazy <sup>iv</sup>

At this song there might be observed elements with Eastern influences are reflected both through the lyrics and melodic line. According to scholar Andrikos, this is a Hicaz song highlights the fourth scale degree as a tonal reference (musical measures 2, 9, 10, 11) while simultaneously developing diatonic behaviors in the upper register. (p.131)

The words “ala turka” and “ala franca” relate to the two distinct poles that shaped ‘Smyrneiko urban folk song,’ which emerged in Greece from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. Most scholars regard the timeline of rebetiko-related events as a unified, ongoing history that defines the genre’s existence, employing various methods to divide it into distinct periods. Mourgou provides information regarding the Estoudiantines, which played a significant role in shaping the urban folk music of Smyrna from the mid-19th century onwards. According to scholar, these were small orchestras, consisting of three to eight musicians and two or three singers. Occasionally, small choirs would also participate. Estoudiantines was essentially music workshops, typically comprising orchestras with oud, violin, qanun, mandolin orchestras, and folk music ensembles with primary instruments such as the santouri and violin. Most of the musicians who formed these orchestras also worked in the ‘café aman’ of the Eastern Mediterranean, incorporating diverse musical genres into their repertoire. One of the most renowned estoudiantines, whose work has been preserved in recordings, was ‘Ta Politakia’, founded in 1898 by Vasilis Sideris and Aristidis Peristeris (Mourgou, 2022:194-196).



*Figure 3.* Politakia of Peristeris. (Kaliviotis, 2013)

Roza Eskenazy, a popular female singer of Smyrnaíiko song recalls that she made her debut in Thessaloniki around 1925 (Eskenazy 1982) (Conway, 1980). She used to perform at a coffee-shop in the Mevlane area (named after a Mevlevi dervish shrine located in the northwest part of the city). Marika the Politissa, also a famous female singer, sang there too. Interestingly, in a newspaper dated in 1881 it is reported that the local philharmonic that represented European-oriented urban music-making performed there too. Two stylistic stereotypes are also being briefly described by Koglin;

The Smyrna or ‘Asia Minor’ style was represented by professional singers of both genders and by instrumentalists who played various tempered and non-tempered instruments such as violin, santur, ud, piano, violoncello, guitar, mandolin or kanun. These musicians were usually immigrants from urban centres in Western Anatolia such as Smyrna (İzmir), Bursa or Ayvalık, many of whom had undergone formal musical training and could perform Ottoman or European classical music as well as popular and folk songs from diverse ethnic groups within the Ottoman Empire. Songs in the so-called Piraeus or ‘mainland’ style, on the other hand, were typically sung by a male singer and accompanied on buzuki, baglamas (a sort of miniature bouzouki) and guitar. As a rule, these instruments were played by local amateurs, autodidactic musicians from an underprivileged social milieu. Their repertoires, technical abilities and theoretical knowledge – as regards, for example, music notation or the Ottoman

makam system were generally much more limited than those of professional performers from Asia Minor (Koglin, 2016:51; Güven Ercan, 2013).

A representative song of this period is the following song:

**I will be a murderer**

Tell me what you did to me, evil witch

And I can't live even a moment without you anymore.

So, I drink bitter poison with a tear, I drink for you but I love you.

I'll be a killer but I won't leave you Either I will take you or I will perish.

I'm telling you I love you; I really love you

And you, the vagabond, tell me, come on, mortal man, get lost. v

The third period of rebetiko is characterized by Damianakos as the 'working phase' and is placed chronologically from 1940 to 1953 (2003:116). This is the period when the genre begins to flourish in the turbulent conditions of the war, the German Occupation and the Civil War. This period, rebetiko music is expanding and flourishing into areas of the working masses where postwar reorganizations and pauperism have resulted in unemployment and poverty. The ideological underpinnings of rebetiko underwent a transformation, gradually evolving into a form of popular music that resonated deeply with the psychological and emotional realities of the working class. Gradually the petty bourgeois society begins to reject the most obvious anti-social elements that provoked the moral indignation and contempt of rebetiko. However, the genre is not yet accepted by the dominant ideology. In the years 1950-53, the circles of the Athenian upper class discovered the unknown exotic species of the rebetiko. So, the mass media undertake the exuberant propagation of the genre for the purpose of profitability. Radio stations now decide to broadcast them. The song 'I am a worker at the port' is a representative song since it portrays the mentality of rebetiko's working phase.

I am a worker at the port, where no one can reach me  
and I work night and day, like a chosen lion.

In the evening, when it arrives and I leave the port,  
we go for 'katostarakia' and for beautiful penies (melodies).

And the next day again, with a good mood for job,  
we start work again, full of fun and joy.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Several reasons for the appropriation of rebetiko by Turkey's music audience**

This section examines the historical and socio-cultural conditions that facilitated the emergence and appropriation of rebetiko by the audience in Istanbul, as interpreted through scholar Koglin's perspective.

Koglin shaped a historical map related to the description of the gradual revival of rebetiko in Istanbul, spanning the period from 1946 to the late 2010s. The revival of rebetiko in Istanbul can be traced through several key periods, beginning with a high point in Greek-Turkish relations from 1946 to 1954. During this time, rebetiko thrived in entertainment venues run by the local Greek Orthodox community (Rum), where both local musicians and famous Greek singers performed. However, from 1955 to 1975, the Rum community's emigration following the anti-Greek riots of 1955 and the Cyprus conflict of 1974 led to a sharp decline in Greek influence in Istanbul's music scene, and many venues associated with rebetiko closed. In the 1970s and 1980s, new Turkish popular music genres, such as taverna music and 'özgün' music, emerged and began to fill the gap left by the Rum musicians. These genres helped preserve the spaces where rebetiko would later experience a revival, as they drew public attention to Greek music. The 1980s saw politically minded Turkish artists, like Zülfü Livaneli, collaborating with Greek musicians, cultivating interest in Greek popular music. This paved the way for a rebetiko comeback in the 1990s, highlighted by the success of the group Yeni Türkü, who released two albums featuring rebetiko songs translated into Turkish.



Around 1990 the Turkish authorities lifted the ban on public screening of Kostas Ferris's film *Rembetiko* (1983), which left a deep impression on many viewers who had little or no acquaintance with the history of the genre. In 2007, rebetiko had gained enough recognition that the Ankara State Theatre produced a stage adaptation of *Rembétiko*, which was well received in both Turkey and Greece, signaling the genre's institutional acceptance and cultural revival (Koglin, 2016:93). At this juncture, it is essential to highlight another musical ensemble that was essential in the appropriation of the rebetiko. The name of this project is 'Cafe Aman Istanbul'. It was co-founded by Stelyo Berber and Pelin Suer in 2009. The band proudly presents the rich, historical and multicultural musical tradition of Anatolia and the nearby geographies, and substantially Turkish and Greek songs of the tradition. The band's debut album, *Fasl-ı Rebetiko*, was released by Kalan Muzik in Turkey in 2012 and by EMI in Greek.<sup>vii</sup> The aforementioned reasoning process and chronological listing of events elucidates the factors contributing to the growing familiarity of rebetiko among music audiences and the increasing interest in rebetiko over this period.

### **The Case Study of Tatavla Keyfi**

Güneş Demir, guitarist of the ensemble Tatavla Keyfi, described the progressive growth of interest in Anatolian and ethnic music within the multicultural context of Beyoğlu. He further elaborated on the underlying factors that contributed to the parallel rise in interest toward rebetiko music during the 1990s and 2000s. His reflections also shed light on the contextual dynamics within the Beyoğlu locale that facilitated the formation of Tatavla Keyfi.

During the 1990s, while I was in high school, folk music in Turkey was experiencing a renewal and new musicians were emerging in the scene. People had grown a bit tired of the old, traditional folk music style, especially the type promoted by TRT (Turkish Radio and Television), and new projects started to emerge. These new movements mostly developed around Alevi music, but by the late 1990s, due to the political developments in Turkey, possibly influenced by relations with the European Union and a general shift in the world, there was also growing interest in local and ethnic music in Turkey, including music in languages other than Turkish. Albums featuring this diversity of music began to be produced. It all progressed together. Later we formed a music group that focused on various languages from Anatolia and tried to keep track the newly emerging music bands. In 1997, Kardeş Türküler released their first album. Kalan Music

was producing a lot of archival albums at the time, and Muammer Ketenoğlu was in charge of music archival series, which had an essential pedagogical meaning. By the late 1990s, we were trying to follow any sources we could access. In the 2000s, I started studying at the department of social anthropology at Istanbul University. The atmosphere at Istanbul University was highly rich in culture. It was a gathering point of people from all social backgrounds, ethnic groups, and religious communities Istanbul. There were Armenians, Greeks, Kurds, Alevis—everyone was there, and it was an important place for cross-cultural interaction. At the time, this place felt like a treasure because, as no other accessible resource existed apart from the archive of Kalan Music. That is how things continued for years. I also joined the music and theater club at Istanbul University's Student Cultural Center. During that period, a cultural development had simultaneously begun to flourish in Taksim, and a new music scene started to emerge. Graduating from university, I got associated with the music scene of Beyoğlu. Throughout this environment I met with Tatavla Keyfi group and started performing with them. That is how until the last decade of 2000 a music life in Taksim started for us. Many musicians from Greece started coming to İstanbul, as well as some musicians from Armenia and other European countries. Kurdish music became very visible, and gatherings started to take place at certain venues in Beyoğlu that held jam sessions. This is how Tatavla Keyfi was born; it emerged from these jam sessions and musical gatherings (Güneş Demir Interview, February 2024).

According to Güneş Demir, the late 1990s and early 2000s, new musical trends emerged, reinforced by an increased interest in various ethnic musical traditions. The social changes of the time shaped by politics, along with a growing curiosity about the ethnic groups in Turkey and an interest in the Türkiye's past, played a crucial role. This development was part of a broader cultural and musical shift. This growth can be observed at Istanbul University and numerous venues in Beyoğlu, where improvised musical gatherings and jam sessions flourish. Furthermore, the cultural flourishing of Taksim resulted in a new music scene inspired by international influences. There is a growing interest in the multicultural roots of what we call Turkish classical music, which is increasingly more widely appreciated. This also reflected in the way Tatavla Keyfi define their musical ensemble:

Tatavla Keyfi was founded in 2008 by a group of Greeks, Turks, a French, and a Canadian-Armenian who shared a passion for rebetiko music. It takes its name from a well-known and historically significant district in our city that is central to Rebetiko, where some of the group's members currently live. Their repertoire strictly consists of rebetiko and traditional songs from Istanbul, Smyrna, and Piraeus. Drawing on a variety of musical traditions that originally influenced rembétiko, from Balkan folk to Sepharad music, and from Smyrnaiiko Minore to Greek Mourmourika, the band's mission has been to re-establish the organic link between rembétiko music and the social geography that produced it, in Istanbul, Smyrna and the Piraeus. Over time it has developed into a

platform, a gathering place for those who perceive rebetiko as a live and continuing musical heritage that best reflects their distress, delights, hopes and fears.



*Figure 4. 'From Tatavla Keyfi Record'*

During our discussion, Lecturer Charalampos Rigas, one of the ensemble's founders and a bouzouki player, shared some important information about the group's repertoire:

It is perhaps significant how our repertoire came to be, which, over the years, has changed periodically, but the foundation of the repertoire was rooted in this jam session approach. Over the years, we realized that the repertoire ultimately evolves in a dialectical relationship with the audience. For instance, you might perform a song that you really enjoy but do not see the corresponding acceptance from the audience, so you let it go. That's how it developed. It started with a base of songs that could be considered well-known, the "common rule" of Greek-Turkish songs such as 'Hariklaki,' "Sala Sala," and "Dimitroula mou" etc. Even then, the audience was familiar with some songs from the film "Rebetiko," particularly those by Ksarhakos. At the time, some of those songs were part of our repertoire, while others were absolutely unconnected; they were just Turkish songs that we enjoyed, so we began performing them because we figured they fit into our overall repertoire. We always said, "We only play rebetiko," but that was not the truth.

It was, in fact, a defense mechanism for a musical audience that did not know much about this genre. Since I had the chance to perform in many local settings, venues and concerts in Istanbul, I realized that there is little awareness of the genres they are listening to. There were often instances where people would come to request pop music, which is why rebetiko represented more of a defensive identity for us rather than a definitive line. Personally, I have never been interested in authenticity in that sense. However, I found a different kind of authenticity in the city. If you consider how rebetiko emerged, both socially and musically, it initially developed in impoverished shantytowns, just like Tarlabası was—multinational and regional slums—and I felt that this was completely in line with that element. Secondly, from the beginning, historical rebetiko has constituted a hybrid. Musically, it encompasses everything, including Klezmer, Romanian, Turkish, and Armenian influences. Therefore, I cannot imagine anything more anti-rebetiko—essentially contradictory—than being overly

attached to the notions of purity and authenticity of the genre, such as insisting on playing exactly as it sounds in a 1936 recording. Ultimately, I believe that not being fixated on this kind of authenticity represents something more genuine. (Interview, Charalampos Rigas, June 2024)

Charalampos' testimony reveals one of the symbolic components of rebetiko. Many researchers talk about the need to preserve the authenticity of the genre by categorizing it. According to Charalampos, the use of rebetiko as a term appears to be necessary for establishing and maintaining the Tattavla Keyfi's musical identity—a defensive mechanism that interacts with the musical audience's choices. Scholar Rigas highlights the evolution of Tattavla Keyfi's repertoire which is being shaped by a dialectical relationship with their audience. Initially centered on well-known Greek-Turkish songs, it expanded to include pieces that aligned with the group's broader vision. The emphasis on rebetiko as an identity was more of a defensive mechanism for an uninformed audience rather than a strict adherence to authenticity of the genre. According to Rigas, rebetiko has historically been a composite genre with elements from Klezmer, Romanian, Turkish, and Armenian music. The author challenges strict opinions regarding rebetiko's authenticity, claiming that true essence of this genre lies in its adaptability and hybrid nature, rather than dedication to archival recordings. In light of these findings, it appears the term 'rebetiko' serves as an umbrella term encompassing diverse music styles such as Rebetiko, "Smyrneiko", "Turkish traditional urban music (Türkü)" and Laiko" songs. This is the reason why elements of the historical Café Aman, which had a diverse, multiethnic repertoire and a coexistence of several musical styles, are included in the current study. Tattavla Keyfi consciously describes the repertoire they perform using the title 'rebetiko'. As noted above, it appears that the functional use of rebetiko as a term serves as a defensive mechanism for them. However, the music they chose to perform is, in essence, perhaps closer to that of Café Aman.

The discussion with Güneş Demir provided insight into the historical and cultural transformation of traditional rural and urban music in Turkey. Up until the 1950s, traditional urban music, exemplified by popular songs such as "Darıldın mı Cicim Bana" and "Süt içtim dillim yandı," played a significant role in Istanbul's social and cultural life, particularly in nightclubs, gazinos and other social gatherings. However, as Turkey experienced substantial

demographic changes due to rural-to-urban migration, the musical landscape underwent a parallel transformation. During this period, Turkish music began to incorporate elements of Arab music, particularly Egyptian music, which was renowned for its advanced production techniques and widespread influence in the region. This interaction gave rise to a new musical genre known as “Arabesk.” According to Demir, the 1990s, the traditional urban music that once defined Istanbul’s cultural identity began to lose its uniqueness and became increasingly commercialized. As Güneş notes:

Nowadays, it is challenging to find places in Istanbul where people can listen to Turkish classical or folk music in its original form. While there are venues like türkü bars (folk music bars), these often present the music in a very stylized and narrow way, making it hard to experience the true richness of Turkish folk music. Folk music’s richness is not fully reflected in our era, and finding a good performance is rare. It is interesting how traditional entertainment culture is so alive and well-known, but not fully experienced. This is most evident during Tatavla Keyfi nights, when everyone gathers to dance to Greek and Turkish tunes like “Kalenin Bedenleri” and “Çadırımın Üstüne.” For the same reason, they even invite us to weddings. But there’s no alternative; people want to dance without being too traditional. Tatavla Keyfi seems to represent this balance—both European and traditional. (Interview, Güneş Demir, 2024)

To sum up, Tatavla Keyfi nights underlines the evolving preferences of their audience. While retaining connections to cultural roots, there is a clear need for entertainment that balances traditional authenticity with modern adaptability. As such, Tatavla Keyfi exemplifies a cultural synthesis that bridges European dimension with the Greek version of the songs and traditional Turkish music, catering to the changing tastes of contemporary society. The traditional song ‘İzmir Ağır Zeybek’ in makam Nikriz, which became known in Greece under the title ‘Neoi Hasiklides’ the period 1928 (Young Hashish Smokers).<sup>viii</sup>

Hay di Ya\_ lla ah şu dağlar ın taş la\_ rı ka lem gi\_ bi\_ as lanya-rim kaş la\_ rı

3  
Haydi ya\_ la h gör düğüme se ni se ev dim Haydi ya\_ la h gör düğüme se ni se\_ ev\_ dim

**Figure 5.** Transcription from Tatavla Keyfi s live recording <sup>ix</sup>

Τουρ νε και τουρ\_ νε τουρ νε\_ και\_ ναι

2  
πες το βρε μα\_ γκα μου\_ το\_ ναι

Νέοι κασικλήδες Ανωνύμου-Αντώνης Διαμαντίδης «Νταλγκάς» (1928)

**Figure 6.** Nikos Andrikos, 2018

Charalambos Rigas also highlighted valuable insights regarding the profile of the Tatavla Keyfi ensemble's audience and the ways in which it has evolved over time. Initially, he mentioned that there has been a significant change in the audience profile at live music venues over the past seven years, largely due to the rising cost of alcohol and overall entertainment expenses. He remarked that in the past, the audience was more diverse, consisting of students, artists, abroad Erasmus students, intellectuals, truck workers, bankers etc. Güneş Demir's testimony further confirms these observations:

We have always had regulars. These regulars have constantly changed over time. Some left Istanbul, others relocated, retired, or grew older. Some of our regulars are what the Greeks call "meraklis." The word 'merak' in Turkish doesn't fully capture the meaning, but in this sense, it refers to someone who genuinely loves and enjoys rebetiko. These individuals, each in their own way, have discovered this music and come to experience it. When we perform a new song, they watch us with excitement. Each one has their

personal story about how they became interested in this music, but there is something captivating about the aura of rebetiko that draws people in. Rebetiko has an aura -a world of its own, that continues to attract and engage listeners. It represents a certain state of mind, and there are people who come to experience and enjoy it.

At this point Charalambos Rigas highlights that the significant shift in the audience's perceptions over the past seven years is primarily due to the rising cost of entertainment. This, in turn, has led to a complete transformation of the profile of the customers attending Tatavla Keyfi performances. The majority of the audience now consists mainly of middle-class individuals and private employees. This type of customer is no longer the typical regular of Tatavla Keyfi. Whether familiar with the music or not, they attend with the primary goal of entertainment, rather than seeking a deep connection and interaction with the musicians of the group.

## **Conclusion**

The article explores the conceptual aspects of rebetiko as they are depicted through the case study of the musical ensemble Tatavla Keyfi. Through the examination of this musical representation within Beyoğlu's multicultural context, rebetiko genre appears to acquire symbolic dimensions. The ensemble's musical choices are not restricted to the rebetiko genre but also include a diverse range of music styles, including rebetiko, "smyrneiko," "Turkish traditional urban music (Türkü)," and "laiko" songs also drawing from various musical traditions that contribute to the genre's rich heritage. The members of the ensemble claim that the essential core of rebetiko rests in its adaptability and hybrid nature, rather than a tight commitment to archive recordings. The usage of rebetiko as a "umbrella term" appears to be critical in developing and maintaining Tatavla Keyfi ensemble's musical identity, functioning as a defense mechanism. Finally, it appears that over time, Istanbul's social and economic shifts have impacted both the formation of the musical audience and, consequently, the interaction between the musicians and the audience occurred throughout their performances, the essential experience of music and unique expression. The article highlights rebetiko's evolution beyond its traditional confines, emphasizing its symbolic dimensions providing findings on its hybrid and multicultural nature. This study might aid to the field of

ethnomusicology for understanding how cultural expressions survive and transform in multicultural urban environments like Beyoğlu's local setting.

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## **Personal Interviews**

Güneş Demir, February 2024

Charalampos Theodorelis Rigas, June 2024

Mamed Dzafarov, June 2024

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<sup>i</sup> Pennanen (1999, p. 68); Morris (1980, p. 81) in Ordoulidis, N. (2011).

<sup>ii</sup> Stathis Damianakos (1987) critiques the use of the concept of the subproletariat, arguing that it has often been applied too broadly by sociologists, encompassing any group or individuals in marginal or "peculiar"

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situations that do not fit within established social classes. He identifies three primary categories of sub proletarian strata within modern industrial societies. The first consists of groups living in a state of permanent illegality, forming insular and inaccessible communities. The second category includes the lumpen-proletariat—individuals in chronic poverty and long-term unemployment, who have been marginalized by the socio-economic system. The third category involves unemployed or seasonal manual laborers whose extreme poverty and job insecurity prevent them from integrating into the working class.

<sup>iii</sup> From Kounadis Archive, 2019, <https://vmrebetiko.gr/item?id=41801919>

<sup>iv</sup> Gramophone matrix 0T1418. Pheretze phorō (Φερετζέ φορώ) / Rita Abatzi (Ρίτα Αμπατζή). (2024). In Discography of American Historical Recordings. Retrieved October 25, 2024, from [https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/200016359/0T1418-Pheretze\\_phor](https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/matrix/detail/200016359/0T1418-Pheretze_phor)

<sup>v</sup> From Kounadis Archive <https://vmrebetiko.gr/item?id=4106>

<sup>vi</sup> Song lyrics from S.Chrysi's record in 1947. Damianakos, 2003; Ilias Petropoulos: 297

<sup>vii</sup> Makam Müzik Dergisi, Cafe Aman İstanbul, Interview Ramazan Çakmakçı, 2018, p, 44

<sup>viii</sup> From Kounadis Archive <https://vmrebetiko.gr/item?id=10154>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://youtu.be/opJvYhju5uc?si=3ZQSU1EuJkL2ibhh>