GREECE: HISTORY, CULTURE, AND GEOGRAPHY OF MUSIC

Greece has an extremely rich music culture, which is supposed to have originated in ancient times. There is no single and homogeneous music culture in Greece but a diversity of styles, genres,
techniques, meanings, instruments, persons, and relations concerning music, dance, song, and other related cultural performances. Today, Greek music—when performed or heard outside of the country—is mainly conceived as a genre of popular world music with specific geocultural and audiovisual connotations. Some of these associations derive from older myths about Greek music; others are based on conservative, nationalistic, and populist conceptions of it; and others are postmodern constructions of the contemporary mass media. This entry examines the history of Greek music and how it has been conceptualized in contemporary music research.

**Historical and Geographical Perspectives**

As presented in many of the traveling accounts of the 18th and 19th centuries, the official national narrative, conceptualizing the Greek nation from antiquity to our days, incorporating both classical Greek civilization and Christian Byzantium in one uninterrupted, unproblematic cultural continuum, was adopted and developed by Greek folklorists, on the one hand, and by the official state, on the other, in their general search for arguments to support the creation of an imagined historical construction, which was vital in the process of the establishment of the new Greek nation after 1821.

In the field of music, most historical musicologists as well as national music folklorists pursue a simple evolutionary approach to Greek music as a unifying art that (somehow supernaturally) connects Western European culture with the ancient Greek civilization. Moreover, the image of Greek music as conceived within Greece has been attributed to various connotations such as the use of the Greek language, non-Western melodic modes with microintervals, asymmetrical rhythms, as well as local ethos. These qualities support the idea of Greek music since the establishment of the modern Greek state, which imaginarily brings together Greeks inside the country and in the Greek diaspora. Unlike Ancient Greek music, which—in the present day—is a practically inoperative tradition, Byzantine music is devotedly performed in churches in different ceremonies and celebrations. It is the religious a cappella chant of the Eastern Orthodox Churches that has an independent modal music system based on the melodic formulas of the _Octoechos_ (the eight ecclesiastic modes) and the neumatic music notation, specially developed for serving the monophonic but highly ornamented compositions. Byzantine hymns are characterized by the use of Greek liturgical texts as well as a distinctive melismatic _parlando_ style. They usually incorporate the form of vocal _call-and-response_ between the lead chanter and the chorus—a men's choir which mainly sings the drone of the melody.

There are various terminology problems related to the identification of Greek traditional (Paradosiaka) and folk music (Dimotika), which reflect miscellaneous national and regional cultural, ideological, and stylistic similarities and dissimilarities. They are linked to a major reconsideration of popular culture due to the mass media and the reallocation of rural and urban spaces and populations. In addition, cultural management, tourism, and commoditization have transformed the philosophy of Greek traditional and folk music. As indicated by former typical categorizations, there are three district idioms of Greek traditional music: (1) the music of the mainland, (2) the music of the islands, and (3) the music of Asia Minor. This classification is usually associated with the reinforcement of a Panhellenic repertoire through a specialized music

![Figure 1](image_url) The central theme of the Lidinos is the laying out and keening of an effigy of a dead man, ceremonially decorated with flowers and herbs with magical properties. The game is accompanied by emotions and expressions of apparently genuine mourning and grief.

*_Source_: Author.
and dance educational system. Mainland music, which is usually called Dimotika (folk), is the music performed in the inland Greek prefectures of Epirus, Thessaly, Central Greece, Peloponnese, Macedonia, and Thrace. The island music comes from the Greek archipelago—the Sporades and the Cyclades, in addition to the Northeast Aegean Islands and the Dodecanese. Cretan music and the music of the Ionian Islands are usually examined as separate music and cultural areas because of their differentiated music and cultural dialects.

Greek music has a completely practical, functional, and communicative nature, beyond the rationale of the art for art's sake doctrine. Greek traditional music includes performing and perceiving sound, by singing, reciting, crooning, dancing, swinging, hearing, clapping, and so on, usually in combination with eating, drinking, and smoking. There are two essential preconditions for a successful Greek Glendi (festivity) with music, especially kefi (high spirits) and kári parea (a good company). Greek music is performed in numerous places such as houses, haunts, bars, taverns, coffee shops, and music stages as well as in festivals, carnivals, and other outdoor happenings, accompanying personal or communal instances of pleasure, celebration, and entertainment, for public religious events, national or provincial holidays, family fetes, and life cycle or seasonal rituals such as birth, baptism, name days, engagement, wedding, and even death. (Figure 1.)

Traditional Greek music belongs to the realm of oral culture, together with its diverse idioms due to the country's historical procedures, geocultural influences, and socioeconomic conditions, thus bearing analogies to other Balkan, Western, and Eastern Mediterranean musics. Typically, it is vocal music, often heterophonically accompanied by a variety of instrumental groups and characterized by wide-ranging ornamentation, improvisation, and the use of common poetic and song formulas. Its rhythmic meters are mostly duple, triple, or quadruple and sometimes irregular or free, resulting in the broad adoption of interjections and syllabic replications.

The nisiotiká is a discrete category of traditional music that consists of upbeat pieces from the Greek islands. They are generally created in accordance with the mandinada (rhyming couplets) formula—a mutual poetic structure in Mediterranean insular cultures as a practice of dialogical improvisation, largely performed in Cretan music (kritika)—as opposed to the music of the Ionian Islands, where one may find the kanóades, nocturnal serenade love songs of the middle class accompanied with plucked strings. This kind of music, influenced by the European tradition, later spread to larger Greek cities and has led to the reveal of the elafra (light popular music).

The rebetika songs are a form of Greek urban music, which was initiated as an outside mainstream culture having some bearing on Greek folk music and Ottoman café aman in Asia Minor. Poor rebetes or manges—men from the lumpen underworld—came in contact with the Christian refugee musicians who were expatriated to Greece because of the exchange of populations after the Asia Minor Catastrophe (the Greco-Turkish War, 1919–1922). This blend resulted in the establishment of two distinctive styles of the rebetika during the interwar period: the sýmmeiká (songs from Smyrna) and the petraliotika (songs from Piraeus), which introduced the bouzouki as the main instrument of Greek popular music. The classical counterculture era of the rebetika songs was followed by the period of their massive popularity, when they were considered to be praiseworthy enough to enter the popular music scene. Furthermore, the shifting of music preferences, the detachment from their previous sociocultural contexts, the differentiation of the performance practices and the audiences of music, as well as the vast intrusion of sound recording, commercialization, and other modern technologies of sound, resulted in the transsubstantiation of the older rebetika to the newer laíka songs. In fact, laíka is the post-1950s Greek popular music, colored with several particular nuances that differ by the epoch, the place, and the people performing and perceiving the music. Thus, there have been many varieties of this genre, indicatively (a) the entechná laíka songs, which intermixed components of the West and the East, that is, art and popular music and moved around the composers’ dipole of Mikis Theodorakis versus Manos Hadjidakis; (b) the neo kyma (new wave) music, which was an urban art folk movement having noticeable sociopolitical dimensions; (c) the skyladika (“doggish” or “dogghouse”) songs, contemporary bouzouki songs reprinted.
for kitsch aesthetics, electrified orchestration, and the loss of popular music's authenticity; and (d) modern Greek pop music, which blends all current market trends of the Western pop, electronic, dance, ethnic/world/neotraditional, rock, and hip-hop mainstream musics.

The continuous accumulation of human capital in urban areas shaped the need for a massive production of goods and services and therefore contributed to the birth of mass culture, including music creation. New musical places, practices, and patterns of behavior (clubbing, sklyadika and ellinadika) of the middle and lower classes seem to follow the dictates of the contemporary cultural industry, always under the leadership of the ruling bourgeoisie. New means of dissemination, such as the press, television, and the Internet, constitute fertile ground for the development of novel models of musical attitudes.

Back in 1976, Fivos Anoyanakis published a remarkable study to present the major Greek instruments of the folk music tradition, following Erich von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs's musical instrument classification system. Nowadays, the Museum of Greek Folk Musical Instruments Fivos Anoyanakis and Center of Ethnomusicology hosts an exhibition of about 1,200 popular instruments including aerophones, chordophones, membranophones, and idiophones from numerous geographical areas and historical periods of Greece. The most common are the various types of pastoral flutes flogera, souravli, and madoura; the island and mainland bagpipes tsabouna and gaida; the zournas (shawm) and the klarino (clarinet); the long-necked lutes tabouras and lagouto; the short-necked lute outhi; the lyra (lyre); the santouri (dulcimer); the toubeleki (pottery drum); the double-headed drums daouli and toubi; the defi (tambourine); the koudounia (bells); the masies (tongs with cymbals); and so on. A traditional Greek musical ensemble is often referred to as zygia (couple) or kompania (company). Basically, it is comprised of the zournas (later replaced by the klarino) and the daouli, in the mainland, or
the lyra and the toubi (later both substituted by the violin and the lagouto), in the Greek islands. At the present time, besides their standard arrangements, modern Greek folk orchestras have incorporated some other popular instruments as well, predominantly addressed toward more tourist audiences. (Figures 2-3.)

Gypsies have also played a significant role in shaping Greek traditional music culture. In earlier times, Greek inhabitants believed that to-be-a-musician was a subservient occupation; hence, playing music was a job that had to be done by the gypsies. The word gypsy was practically equivalent to musician. As a result, gypsies influenced the development of the styles as well as the structures of instrumental and dance music to a sweeter and melodious mode, especially through their idiosyncratic use of the folk clarinet.

Another important issue in Greek traditional music is the construction and preservation of musical instruments, an activity carried out either by professional (in earlier times, amateur) instrument makers or by the instrumentalists themselves. In Greek music tradition, most instruments have been imbued with animal, human, or even supernatural magical attributes and also bear the stamp of their manufacturer. Additionally, a great music teacher had to immerse his students in the carefully preserved secrets of his talent through oral and performance-based practices. On the other hand, during their apprenticeship, students were expected to gain knowledge of how to steal (i.e., to imitate) and assimilate their teacher's skills.

The commercial music industry in Greece began developing special interest in Greek folk music in the mid-1920s, when record companies which had established branches in Athens, such as Columbia, RCA Victor, Odeon, Panivaz, and others, invited musicians to their studios to be recorded on 78-rpm discs, which could be sold at reasonable prices and were intended for home use. Later on, when the saint's feast (panigyri) and the marriage celebration were on the wane in the villages, dancing was transferred to the internal space of the coffee shop or theatrical scenes, the demand for musicians was dwindling, and the occupation of practical musician was gradually declining.

As traditional music has been recognized as a masterpiece of cultural intangible heritage which needed to be preserved, the production of records and their content have been of increasing importance to researchers, ethnomusicologists, and dance scholars. With the growing popularity of folk dance and music as part of a general back to the roots movement, the tendency has been to organize the contents of records according to geographical localities emphasizing presentations of local musical characteristics rather than expressing ideologies of nationalism. Since 1967, a variety of records have been issued by research centers and private cultural organizations, such as the Centre for Greek Folklore at the Academy of Athens, the Musical Folklore Archives of Melpo Merlier, the Society for the Dissemination of National Music, the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation, the Lyceum Club of Greek Women and the Dora Stratou-Greek Dances, to mention a few. Some special productions that appeared in the market only to disappear a few years later now constitute collector's pieces. Many others were produced in issues of 1,000 copies—as the institutions involved did not have the financial means for mass production—and as such were usually ignored by commercial distribution networks and seldom appeared in catalogs. In the early 21st century, there is a great demand for

![Figure 4](https://example.com/figure4.jpg) The position of the dance in the group formation is governed by purely social rules. At functions such as the village feast, men and women join in on equal terms the dancing circle, either all together (alternate men and women) or separately.

Source: Photo archives, Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation.
Greek music records while the raw material of ethnomusicology is continuously disseminated from record shop shelves. The consumer is faced with a large choice of singers, folk songs, and styles. Record companies and radio programmers choose among the most popular and promote commercial productions while research centers, serving different ends, continue to release records aimed at preservation and dissemination of Greek music tradition.

The dances of Greece are artistically attractive and are mainly classified on the basis of geographical and anthropological behavior, religious variations, and social and cultural way of life of each region. Generally, few dances are performed solo or even in couples. However, the vast majority of dances conforms to the pattern known as syrtos (meaning "to drag"), a chain dance in which the performers hold hands in various ways, grasp each other's belts or place their arms across each other's shoulders, and dance in unison, moving to the right and following the lead of the first person in the line. (Figure 4.) Everything other than the basic chain formation—speed, rhythm, steps, and way of performing—varies from region to region. Even the simplest steps of sta tria dance in 2/4 time, which are common to various villages, receive different treatment in different regions, and local embellishment and variations may be added to the basic step. Among the best known folk dances are syrtos, tsamikos, ballos, karsilamas, zonaradikos, sta dyo, sta tria, pentozalis, and trata.

It is worth stressing that the naming of a dance as described does not have the value of a scientific definition but retains the logic of indigenous interpretation. This occurs because dance was, and remains, an important element of social action in Greece. Dance performances are held on occasions when members of a community are called upon literally to join the dance in order to participate in a local festival, to celebrate a religious feast, to attend a wedding or family gathering, or to be present at some other kind of event such as a ball. The reference point for a dance occasion is the community the members of which belong to a single locality (hamlet, village, town, or even more extensive geographical area) and is subject in some degree to common traditions, customs, manners, and values. Every community possesses certain characteristic features, such as linguistic idiom, food, costume, music, song, and dance, which taken together give it its identity and distinguish it from other communities. By means of their participation in dancing, individuals contribute to the creation of a network of social relations, namely, the framework of social customs which any community offers to its members and within which it positions them (family, relations, friends, neighbors, workmates, and community). Within a community, there are many occasions in which men and women dance together, in turns or separately. Furthermore, on certain occasions, participation is determined by a person's age and social status. Traditionally, men and women usually use the same movements, but a distinction is made as to which variations are appropriate for one gender and not for the other. These distinctions usually consist of embellishment, and though ostensibly a decorative element, they are essential components in the realization of dances. Like costumes, sound, speech, and so on, these embellishments give the dances a distinctive character—local, regional, rural, or urban. Greek dance exists independently from neither the dancers nor the cultural context. Therefore, in order to understand the social, symbolic, and ritual significance of the dance, it must be studied within the framework of its social context (i.e., a dance event) in order to ascertain the interrelationships of the dances within a particular system.

**Modern Conceptions**

In contemporary Greece, dance experience has been mostly acquired through folk dance groups. The dance material of such groups consists of a wide range of representative dances taken from various geographical regions of Greece. Each dance group seems to have built a repertoire of dances based on aesthetic criteria (interesting movements, diversity of formations, variety of rhythmic patterns, melodies, and floor patterns) to create a visually and acoustically varied and artistic performance. Stage presentation of Greek folklore is seen to be one of the ways of expression, which drew attention to the causes and the context of social changes. In these performances, groups of dances executed in a
specific order might be called a suite (a term borrowed from classical ballet). Although these groups are not consciously performed as such, the order in which the dances succeed one another follows an aesthetic logic: A low dance, slow in tempo, serves as introductory dance employing the movements, or movement units, that will be used in the succeeding dances as thematic material.

Few people may also know that one of the most acknowledged Greek dance melodies, the Zorba’s dance or—as otherwise called—the syrtaki by the famous composer Mikis Theodorakis from the film Zorba the Greek is actually based on a traditional tune “Armenochorianos syrtos” or “Cretan syrtaki” originally composed, performed, and recorded by the Cretan folk lute player Yiorgos Koutsourelas in 1949–1950. Fifteen years later, Theodorakis mixed the minimalistic texture of the local Cretan music idiom with slower and faster versions of the hasapiko dance as well as the timbre of the popular Greek instrument the bouzouki. Through the attractiveness of the film’s music, the syrtaki dance, together with the bouzouki, became common national musical symbols of Greece from the 1960s onward. The melodic line and rhythmic pulse of the syrtaki have been excessively used with different orchestration for numerous reasons in diverse contexts, yet mostly identified as a characteristic musical representation of contemporary Greek tourist culture.

Just before the dawn of January 1, 2000, a globalized TV show began, viewed by hundreds of millions of viewers from around the world. For this planetary show titled 2000 Today thousands of cameras allowed the audience to view New Year’s Eve celebrations, musical performances, folk and art dance performances, and other features from participating nations, following the path of the Sun from east to west. In the Acropolis of Athens, the countdown for the welcome of 2000 started with a tribute to the composer Mikis Theodorakis and the poet Odysseus Elytis. Special projectors were placed on the walls of the Acropolis and offered a spectacular sight, which intensified, as time went on, to culminate in the start of 2000 broadcast around the world. This mega event stressed the phantom of racial continuity. Greece had four 5-minute displays representing the unbroken continuity of Hellenism: the Olympic Hymn and the National Anthem were performed by the Greek National Opera Choir in front of the Parthenon on the Acropolis, and two folk songs—the theme of which was related with the sunrise—were performed by Chronis Aidonides together with a folk orchestra early in the morning in the Temple of Poseidon in Cape Sounion. Listeners heard the striking of simandron (semanterion; a hanging wooden beam) alongside the regular church bells and with the sacred Byzantine chanting sung by Athonites monks of Mount Athos as well as an orchestral melody from Gioconda’s Smile by Manos Hadjidakis and performed by the Orchestra of Colours on the rooftops of the island of Santorini.

Four years later, the Olympic Games Opening and Closing Ceremonies held in Athens in 2004 were major events that were globally displayed. Both ceremonies relied heavily on music. The musical (as well as the overall artistic) concept of these ceremonies was to create a linear connection, a progressive linkage between Greece’s ancient past and modern culture. Starting from its mythological roots, the shows offered an assortment of cultural visualizations supported by reorchestrated and newly performed familiar music pieces trying to unite Ancient Greece, Byzantium, and Modern Greece. Under the direction of the choreographer Dimitris Papatsoannou, various well-known modern Greek composers (Manos Hadjidakis, Mikis Theodorakis, Stavros Xarhakos, Dionysis Savvopoulos, George Koumendakis, John Psathas, and Konstantinos Vitas), singers (George Dalaras, Haris Alexiou, Anna Vissi, Sakis Rouvas, Eleftheria Arvanitaki, Alkistis Protopsalti, Antonis Remos, Michalis Hatzigiannis, Marinella, and Dimitra Galani), and folk singers (Donna Samiou and Chronis Aidonides) were presented along with folk Greek dances from different regions of Greece (Crete, Pontos, Thrace, etc.). There were also some fresh arrangements of Western art music, a dance mix by the Dutch trance DJ and producer Tiësto, and a song performance by the Icelandic singer Björk. The main idea of the event was to underscore the humanitarian characteristics of Greek music and culture within the globalized, postmodern reality.
In another instance, Helena Paparizou—a Greek-Swedish pop singer and teen idol—won the 2005 Eurovision Song Contest by representing Greece and singing the song “My Number One.” The song is eminent for incorporating a fusion of music styles in order to seize diverse audiences. Namely, it includes a Euro-pop music melody and dance rhythm, naive English lyrics, bouzouki accompaniment and passages, a Cretan lyra solo, as well as a traditional Pontian dance performance imitation. Paparizou’s victory was celebrated in Greece, following the success of the previously organized Olympic Games and the unexpected triumph of the Greek national football club in Union of European Football Associations Euro 2004.

Nowadays, both Greek music and dance are staged in the context of various cultural institutions and organizations’ performances such as the Greek Festival that assemble the avant-garde of Greek and foreign performers. On the other hand, Greek television shows are completely dominated by the standards of the consumer society, promoting them so as to function at the expense of approaches and visions with both cultural content and context. The establishment of the Athens Concert Hall in 1991 allowed for the development of styles that had been neglected by state policy such as light popular song, traditional dance, and folk music concerts.

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See also Greece: Modern and Contemporary Performance Practice; Mediterranean Music

Further Readings


