Nisiotika

*Nisiotika* is a distinct genre of Greek music, song, and dance that consists of a corpus of light, upbeat pieces generally dealing with the sea, love, drinking, warfare, exile, and jollification. Nisiotika music originated in the Greek islands (*nisia*) of the Archipelago, primarily from the Sporades and the Cyclades groups of islands but also from the Dodecanese and the Northeast Aegean islands. It derives from older local traditional music, such as folk melodies, popular rhythms, shared poetic structures, and regional dances, all influenced by the music cultures of the various conquerors of this area (Ottomans, Arabs, and Venetians), as well as by the music of Asia Minor Greeks.

Most researchers draw a major differentiation between traditional Greek music of the islands and music from the mainland. The distinction between these two genres consists mainly of the following features:

1. As a rule, the island dances are in simple meters, usually of two or four beats, whereas in mainland Greece one can also find asymmetric rhythms, such as the *kalamatianós* dance in 7/8 (3+2+2/8).

2. Unlike music of the Greek islands, music of the mainland is performed primarily on anhemitonic modes, which are musical scales without semitones.

3. The usage of rhyme and melodic improvisation characterizes island music, whereas in the mainland these elements are rarely observed.

4. The typical combination of musical instruments in Greek mainland music was initially the duo *davul* and *zurna* (later davul and clarinet), whereas in the islands it was the pair *toubi* and lyre (or lute and violin).

Although there is a common basis in a characteristic “island sound” that extends all through the insular zone of Greece, the apparent seclusion of its islands has led to an independent shaping of particular music cultures. The majority of the nisiotika are played on lyre, clarinet, bagpipe, violin, guitar, mandolin, lute, and dulcimer. Modern versions of nisiotika employ other popular, nontraditional instruments such as the synthesizer, the electric and acoustic guitars, the bouzouki, and sometimes the drums or extra percussion. Nisiotika songs incorporate the common poetic form of rhyming couplets with extemporaneous verses, which is frequently encountered in Mediterranean insular cultures as a cultural practice of improvised musical and lyrical dialogue.

The most familiar occasion for performing nisiotika music is the *panigýri*, an annual religious feast that takes place outdoors, usually in large open-air plazas at the side of the church. These festivities—full of music, dance, food, and drink—bring together local inhabitants and operate like symbolic venues that reinforce social and cultural coherence. Other major instances of nisiotika performances are wedding and baptism ceremonies, carnival fiestas, the Clean Monday and Easter Sunday celebrations, as well as name-day or birthday parties and family gatherings.
The music of the Aegean islands is a vivid and cheerful expression of local insular cultures. This attribute is clearly revealed in their dances, which are characterized by the elegance of footsteps and the pounce of the dancers’ knees. Traditional nisiotika include, among others, bálos, soústa, sýrtos, tráta, karsilamás, and (i) karióti kós dance. They are mostly sequence dances done in an open or closed circle or couples, dancing opposite (karsilamás) or paired (bálos).

The most representative of the Aegean islands music, the bálos tune is usually rapid, lyrical, and enjoyable. It accompanies a partner dance that adapts all aspects of courtship (appeal, romance, demonstration of male and female roles, negative reaction, chase, capture, and final submission). According to earlier narratives about bálos, as men could not get straightforward access to the women’s area, they invented this kind of dance in order to flirt with them. The dance consists of simple, tripping hops decorated with delicate figures and variations. Both the themes and the style of bálos resemble those of soústa. Tráta is a traditional commemorative dance based on the song “I tráta mas i koureloî (Our ragged fishing boat).” It is performed by a chorus of women who hold their hands crossways, mimicking the hauling of the nets and symbolizing the everyday process of fishing.

Sýrtos is a line or circle dance, during which the participants hold their hands at shoulder level or a handkerchief by its two edges and dance in a counterclockwise direction. This is a pan-Hellenic dance, but it is performed differently from one place to another. Each insular form of sýrtos is named after the specific island where that version is danced: for example, skyríanós from Skyros, skopelítikos from Skopelos, and hiótikos from Chios. (i) karióti kós is one of the most recognizable Greek island dances, and it derives from Ikaria. Its performance is structured on slow-moving walking footsteps which accelerate to quicker ones. The dancers hold each other’s shoulder and dance in a circle. In most instances, the piece of music that accompanies (i) karióti kós is the well-known “I ógápi mou stin Ikariá (My love in Ikaria)” by Giorgos Konitópoulos.

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a massive outburst of nisiotika songs and dances through the appearance of several musical groups that performed in taverns and nightclubs in Athens, as well as in specific festivals in other provincial towns of Greece. The famous Konitópoulos family (notably Mihális, Giorgos, Kóstas, Vagélis, Agélikí, Násia, Eléni, and Irini) from the island of Naxos stimulated the wide diffusion of the genre through their huge discographic production and live concerts. Maríza Koch, a female musician, singer, and songwriter, contributed to the revival of the nisiotika through the urban art-folk musical movement called Néo Kýma (New Wave), mixing up traditional melodies with electronic instrumental fusions. The rebirth of nisiotika music was supported by the music folklorist Símon Karás and the renowned traditional music singer Dómina Samiou. In addition, the éntehni (art) band Dynáméis tou Aigaíou (Forces of the Aegean) seems to have played a significant role in the reorchestration of older traditional island melodies by means of a delicate new musical treatment.

The popularity of island songs was also increased by the MINOS-EMI production of the 1982 record Ta nisiótika (Island music), sung by Yánnis Páríos, a widely admired lead singer of light popular Greek music and love ballads. Later on, the nisiotika performers (both instrumentalists and vocalists) were accused of lapsing
into the subordinate, vulgar aesthetics of the Greek laikó (pop) and skyládiko (doggy) song, and castigated for the commercialization, electrification, and loss of the genre’s authenticity. Nowadays, most Greeks, especially the younger listeners, have become familiar with the nisiotika songs and dances through the revivals and renewals of the traditional island music. Because a fair amount of the nisiotika music has become part of the pan-Hellenic repertoire, these pieces can be heard and danced all over the country as well as in Greek diaspora communities.

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See also: Cretan Lyra; Greek Popular Music

Further Reading

