Cretan Lyra

The Cretan lyra ( lýra) is a pear-form, bowed chordophone (typically with three strings) musical instrument of Greece, played mainly in Crete but also in other islands of the Aegean Sea. It is practically similar to the Byzantine lyra, the Renaissance rebecc, the Western classical violin, the Afghan rubab, and the Turkish kemence. Historically speaking, we can identify four kinds of Cretan lyras: (1) a small, primitive model of lyra with a sharp sound, called the lyráki; (2) the vrontólyra, which is a larger type of lyra for louder playing of bass tones, once used for lengthy open-space performances; (3) the violólyra, a nowadays rare, eight-shaped violin-lyra hybrid, usually with four strings, created during the interwar period; and (4) the standard Cretan lyra, which is a newer combination of the lyráki and the violin, common in all modern Cretan music.

Faithfully following the authentic local tradition, most lyras are entirely handmade. The main body of a characteristic Cretan lyra is carved together with its neck from a single piece of maple, ivy, oleander, walnut, or mulberry that is at least 10 to 15 years old. The cover of a lyra’s soundboard is made of aged cedarwood, and has two similar hemispherical soundholes that define the particular timbre of the instrument. Another essential part of the lyra is the “soul” (also known as the “devil’s wood-stick”), that is the soundpost, a small dowel which functions as a sound transmitter and critically affects the instrument’s volume and its quality of sound. The strings of a lyra are tuned in fifths (G3-D4-A4). Older versions of lyras were tuned in fourths and fifths (D5-A4-D4 or A4-D4-A3), which was called alla turca tuning. The tuning of a lyra depends on the voice capabilities of the musician, along with the thickness of its cords. Its strings were formerly made of animal guts, but today they are constructed of steel or various synthetic materials. The bow of the lyra is a bent fiddlestick with 150–200 horsetail hairs, occasionally accompanied by a number of additional small round bells that mark the rhythm. All woods are carefully selected, so as to be unaffected by age or weather and bear no scratches or knots. Construction of a lyra requires seven to nine days.
Lyra and Minstrel

In its most basic sense, the idea of a minstrel simply envisions a musician with a stringed instrument who travels the land singing songs of love, loss, and social criticism. Minstrels have often been tasked historically with keeping and recounting oral histories. Minstrels have been present in a variety of cultures throughout the past millennia, including the Kora players of Africa Kora, the troubadours and trouvères of 13th- and 14th-century France, the meistersingers and minnesingers of 15th- and 16th-century Germany, the blackface minstrels of 19th- and early 20th-century America, and the folk singer/songwriters of the 1940s–1960s United States (such as Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan). However, the roots of the minstrel in Western civilization trace to lyra players of the ancient Greeks, as evidenced by the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and other notables of the period.

Each lyra is independently adjusted to produce the desired sound (treble, middle, bass, etc.) and meet the requirements of its owner/user. The instruments are produced mostly by local manufacturers who are also professional music players.

Cretan lyra is a perfect instrument for performing speedy and vivid music as well as calm and expressive traditional melodies. Today, Cretan music is generally performed by a duo that consists of a lyrísis (lyrist, the lyra player) accompanied by a la(g)outiérís (lutist, the lute player). The second musician plays the rhythm and the chords and occasionally improvises on the lyra's melodic line. Sometimes lyra is played unaccompanied. As a rule, the lyrist also acts as the vocalist who sings the traditional 15-syllable rhyming couplets of mantinádes, which is a widespread type of musical and poetical dialogical practice in Crete and other Mediterranean insular cultures.

The instrument's fingerboard has no frets at all. The lyrist employs an unusual way of fingering a lyra's string. Instead of pressing it with the fingertip like a violinist or a guitarist, he pushes against one side of the string with the top of his fingernail. In addition, the lyrist plays the lyra in an upright position rather than holding it between the jaw and the shoulder. If he is seated, he rests it on his knee; if he is standing, he puts his foot up on a chair and rests the lyra on his thigh to ensure its stability. These positions are very conducive to playing an ornamented, vibrant melody.

When performing a tune, the lyrist plays on the first (the highest) string. Although the second and third strings are seldom used for playing melodic phrases, the bow often rasps both the second and the first or the second and third strings together, thus accompanying the melody with rough drone tones that create a primal sound and mood.

Since the second half of the 20th century, the lyra has become a powerful local symbol of cultural identity. Despite the fact that in many other Greek regions the violin dominates musical performance, the lyra in Crete enhanced its popularity while imitating the form, timbre, and masterful techniques of violin. This resulted in the extension of the lyra's repertory; thus, modern liras can be used to perform entirely new songs and dances in addition to the older ones. The most well-known tune played on lyra is the syrtós, a characteristic traditional Cretan dance, which
is widely known and performed in the regional recording industry and connects contemporary music practices to their historical background influences—both Western and Eastern. Other major Cretan dances performed on lyra are pentozálí(s) (either slow or fast), soústa, and maleviziótí(ko)s. Lyra performance is also applied in kontiliés, which are small melodic riffs and musical motifs with limited variety, on which mantinádes are improvised.

Distinguished Cretan lyra performers are, among others, Charálambos Garganourákis, Giórgos Kálogridis, Álekos Karavitis, Leonidas Kládos, Manólis Lagoudákis (Lágos), Kóstas Mountakís, Antónis Papadákis (Kareklás), Manólis Pasparákis (Stravós), Charilaos Piparákis, Antréas Rodínós, Thanásis Skordalós, Vasilis Skoulás, Antónis Xylóúris (Psarantónis), and the legendary Nikos Xylóúris. Ross Daly, an Irish artist who has been living in Crete for more than 35 years, specializes in the performance and study of Cretan lyra in the novel context of the global “world music” networks.

Although Cretan lyra is a musical instrument exclusively performed by men, Aspasia Papadáki (a famous female lyrist) has been interrelated with the persona of a woman playing the lyra. As the figure of the lyra is symbolically associated with a man’s body, one can realize why “lyra music” is tightly connected with the values and beliefs of contemporary Cretan society by articulating a wide range of emotions experienced by sensitive, yet harsh, males and manipulating cultural tourism policies through the control of commercial production of traditional Cretan music.

Nick Poulakis

See also: Greek Popular Music; Nisiotika

Further Reading

