

Book Reviews

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Once Upon a Time in Smyrna

Smyrne: E Mousike Zoe 1900-1922. Ta Mousika Katastemata, oi Echografeseis Diskon (Smyrna: Musical Life 1900-1922. Music Establishments and Recordings) by Aristomenis Kalyviotis. Epimeleia Nikou Dionysopoulou. Music Corner and Tinella, Athens, 2002, 202 pages, 12 euros.

By Gail Holst-Warhaft

As the author of this charmingly-produced volume reminds us, more than eighty years have passed since the event that is generally referred to as the “catastrophe” of Smyrna occurred. For thirty years after the disastrous defeat its consequences dominated Greek urban life, until the Second World War and the Civil War overshadowed it. Apart from its demographic and economic effects, the influx of refugees from Asia Minor had a lasting impact on almost every aspect of Greek cultural life, including its music. For many contemporary Greeks, the name of the city conjures not a literary or artistic legacy, but a style of music which owes its remarkably widespread revival partly to the proliferation of re-mastered 78rpm recordings of the style and to ensembles who have performed and recorded the music. Unless that is putting the cart before the horse, and the proliferation of the recordings and ensembles is due to a revival of interest in the music. In either case, the revival that began in the 1980’s has continued to this day, and includes a growing body of scholarly and anecdotal literature about the rich and cosmopolitan musical life of Smyrna.

Kalyviotis’s contribution to the literature on Smyrna and its music is a modest volume that adopts no theoretical or ideological stance but makes use of a variety of source materials to create a portrait of the city’s musical life in the early decades of the twentieth century. Kalyviotis’s portrayal relies heavily on accounts that have been published in other modern commentaries by Kounadis, Solomonides, Hatzipantazis, Syngros and others, but by combining his sources with old postcards, photographs of musical cafes, musicians, and dancers he adds a colorful new dimension to the story. Matching the pastel-tinted postcards of the period with descriptions of the sort of entertainment one was likely to find at a theater on the Smyrna waterfront in 1911, or a café *neon* where the boys of the “basso rango” of Smyrna society hung out, comes as close as we are likely to get to recreating the ambience in which the music we refer to as “Smyrna style” was performed. The liveliest of these descriptions comes from a memoir published by Dimitris Archiyenis in 1979. The Smyrniot “glendzes”, according to the author, having ordered a dance from the musicians: “would throw silver coins onto the strings of the santouri so as to make a clanking noise. He would then take a large silver coin and stick it to the forehead of the singer (having spit on it first). And then he’d order what he wanted from the musicians and have his fun.” (29)

For the non specialist, it is this opening section of Kalyviotis’ book that will be the most appealing, but for those who wish to delve more deeply into the subject, it is the remainder of the book, divided into chapters dealing with the sale of musical instruments, and the recordings of Smyrna music produced (or sold) by Eyub Sabri, Gramophone, Orfeon and other companies that will be of major interest. Kalyviotis’s account is both archival and synthetic. Drawing on the collections, catalogues and commentaries of Hugo Strötbaum, Panayiotis Kounadis, and Richard Spottswood, among others, and including beautifully reproduced record-labels, advertisements and photographs, Kalyviotis focuses his attention first on the sale and distribution of both wax cylinders and disks. The newspaper *Smyrna*, August 3, 1902, he notes, contained an advertisement in Greek from the phonograph shop of Eyub Sabri Effendi. The shop boasts cylinders containing “ellinika asmata” and “amanedhes.” Not a single one of these wax cylinders seems to have survived, and it is tantalizing to speculate where Eyub Sabri found his “Greek songs”. Did he import the cylinders from Europe and record them himself? At the earliest stage in the development of such recordings there was no method of reproducing the cylinders so they were recorded in batches of up to six at a time. By 1899, however, there was already a brisk trade in copying cylinders. Whether or not Eyub Sabri produced the wax cylinders himself, he soon expanded his franchise to include flat disks. In 1906, the cover of his catalogue reproduces the label of a recording by the German record company Odeon. Presumably Eyub Sabri had become the representative for Odeon in Smyrna.

While Sabri seems to have been among the first shops in Smyrna to sell recordings, other establishments sold musical instruments and sheet music. Again, Kalyviotis makes use of advertisements and catalogues, including a colored postcard from the shop of Louis Corletti depicting the range of his instruments and the target of his publicity; while a well-to-do family plays chamber music in the center of postcard, in the left hand corner, a young man sits on a stone wall amusing his friends with an accordion, and on the right, a trio of young men play violin, clarinet and possibly zurna under a girl’s balcony by moonlight.

From 1909 onwards, sales of phonographs and records seem to have become widespread in the city. The famous shop of Paul Blumberg, with its clock suspended above the pavement of Francomahala Street was among the establishments where phonographs and records could be purchased by the wealthier citizens of the city. Kalyviotis concludes that the sale of musical instruments, gramophones, and records was conducted, for the most part, not by Turks but by Armenians, Greeks, Italians, Jews, and Germans.

The third section of Kalyviotis's book concerns the recordings made in Smyrna or elsewhere by local musicians. Those who are interested in Asia Minor music will already be familiar with the early recording history of the genre, and with the German companies Gramophone, Odeon, Lyrophone and Favorite, all founded in the first decade of the twentieth century. The new companies sent their representatives to Constantinople to record Greek and Turkish music. The company Orfeon (also called Orfeos on some labels), was founded in Constantinople in 1910 by the brothers Herman and Julius Blumenthal. Greek musical ensembles from Smyrna perform on a number of their recordings, usually with the acknowledgement "Smyrne." These pioneer companies were joined by the larger American companies, including Victor and Columbia. Recordings of Greek music were also made in other cities around the Mediterranean where suitable musicians could be found, including Smyrna.

With the destruction of much of the city in the fire of 1922, documents that might have thrown light on this early recording activity were lost, but as many observers have remarked, there is sufficient evidence to suggest a lively musical scene in Smyrna that included Greek "Estoudiantines" or musical ensembles, many of whose founding members had begun their musical careers in Constantinople. The most outstanding musicians were enlisted to perform on recordings made by the Gramophone company. In 1909, on a recording tour of the Eastern Mediterranean, a representative of the company recorded 108 songs in Smyrna, in Turkish and Greek. The recordings must have been successful judging by the fact that a second expedition in search of Smyrna musicians was made in 1911 and a third the following year, by which time Gramophone was facing strong competition from the newer companies, Favorite and Odeon. From the company correspondence, recordings and labels, it is obvious that Greek singers and musicians predominated in the early recordings of Smyrna music, and that they performed a wide variety of music.

Not all the well-known musicians of Smyrna found their way into the newly-founded recording industry, and Kalyviotis wisely includes a chapter about such artists as those who performed in the popular musical theaters of the city. The book concludes with a short chapter on the leading figures of the Smyrna musical scene, including photographs of such well-known artists as Lucien Miliaris, Yiannis Tsanakas, Vassilis Sideris and Yorgos Vidalis. Kalyviotis's list of famous musicians whose careers began in Smyrna or its environs (Tountas, Abadzi, Papaioannou, Gavalas, Payioumdziz, etc.) reminds us that the music they recorded in Athens from the 1930's on had its roots in a rich, polyglot musical tradition, of which we are still largely ignorant.

For true aficionados of the Smyrna style, many of whom will be familiar with a lot of the material presented in the text, the book's appendices alone are worth the price of the book. One is a collection of colored illustrations of early record labels including an Orfeon recording of the song *Aponia* with the designation "Rebetico." There is also a reproduction of a Favorite label "Tabahaniotiko Mane" with an illustration of a fetching auburn-haired girl cocking her ear to the gramophone. The other is a catalogue of songs, with information taken, wherever possible, from labels, and otherwise from the catalogues of the early recording companies. Faded labels and insufficient information make the catalogue less than definitive, but it is an improvement on what has been compiled to date.

An extra bonus is an enclosed CD, which contains a number of old and scratchy recordings, some of which are more than historical curiosities. One such is Tsanakas's fine amanes, *Adamaman*. Perhaps the most interesting feature of the CD is its cosmopolitanism. One song has Greek and French words, another Greek and Turkish, two others, Turkish. All the songs are sung by Greek artists. The musical styles are just as varied, with a fine *Yianniotiko* performed by Lefteris Memenlis, a number of amanedhes, a tsifteteli, a nisiotiko and a waltz.

I have no doubt that Kalyviotis will be attacked by "rebetologists" for his reliance on secondary sources or the imperfections of his catalogue, but this is a book that anyone interested in Smyrna will be grateful for, not only for the light it casts on a remarkable musical world, but for the variety and quality of its illustrations.

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