

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

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Speaker: Gail Holst-Warhaft, Cornell University

Topic: Electrifying the Nisiotika: Mariza Koch and Aegean Rock

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Alexis Radisoglou (Columbia), Christos Tsiamis, John Chioles (NYU), George Fragopoulos (CUNY), Nikos Laaris (Manhattan School of Music), Nikki Leger (Columbia), Elena Tzelepi (Columbia)

#### Summary of Presentation:

Holst began her discussion by saying that she has come to the *nisiotika*, or island songs, very late in her own career: she had always thought of them as pretty but not terribly deep, and only recently has she come to see them as deep and tragic and beautiful; many are, she said, almost like prayers to the sea, songs trying to turn away the danger of the sea, which sound happy and lively but are shot through with a strong sense of tragedy. She also said that little scholarly attention has been given to these songs, which have not been taken as seriously as laments, Ipirotika, or Cretan music, for example. She cited Sotiris Chianis, Greece's best musicologist, now at the University of Binghamton, as someone whose work on the music of Skyros serves as a blueprint for what could have been done elsewhere, if the musicians were still around to support that kind of study.

She then gave a descriptive definition of what precisely we mean when we say *nisiotika*: the islands the name refers to aren't all the Greek islands; they are the islands of the Aegean, and not even all of them, but are more circumscribed, mostly to the islands in the Saronic gulf. The instrumental backing of these songs is pairs of instruments playing together: traditionally the violin and the *laouto*, though the *laouto* later disappeared, becoming replaced by the guitar. She also noted that because the islands in the Saronic gulf are so close to Athens, musicians were always crossing over between the two. *Rembetika* singers would come to Aegina, for instance, and many *nisiotika* songs became a part of the repertoire and were subsequently taken as *rembetika*.

After the civil war the islands, like everywhere else, suffered; the drain of young men meant that many unmarried girls came to Athens, where they worked as *doules* or *douletries* in homes. On Saturdays when they had the night off they would get together and sing and dance island songs. The beginning of this scene of island music came in the 1950s with the family of Irimi Konitopoulou, who came from Naxos together with her brother and her father, a fiddler. This family was also responsible for the genre of *skyladika*, because they began to play island songs in a theatrical, spectacular style that eventually degenerated into *skyladika*.

Mariza Koch, who was born on Santorini and made a name for herself as a singer from a very young age, came to Athens and learned from Konitopoulou. Koch was largely

responsible for the popularization of the *nisiotika* in the 70s. She was singing with Savvopoulos, who was always backed by rock musicians with him, and because the band was composed of a mixture of folk and rock instruments, Koch suddenly decided she wanted to combine the two—a thing that was considered scandalous at the time. During the dictatorship folk music was forced down people's throats, particularly in the schools, so the young people considered it a tainted form, and listened instead to foreign rock, as a reaction. Koch, then, was the first to bring folk music and rock together, and her album *Arabas* became the first gold record in Greece. The cover of the album features a door, on which the letter Z is written, which was a clear political signal that somehow slipped past the censors. That politicization allowed for this music to be accepted by the youth of Greece—and yet the reception for Koch's work was much broader than just the *neolaia*.

Once the dictatorship was over and she began recording again, Koch began to be more experimental with her mixture of folk and electronic music. She was also doing a lot of original composition, though Holst pointed out that her compositions were not recognized as such, because women at that time were not considered composers. Koch also made two LPs of children's songs from the islands, in order to introduce children to the songs she had been brought up on; in this, too, she was a pioneer, since children's music was not a genre in which musicians were recording at that time. Then, in the 1980s, Koch decided to go back to the *nisiotika* and record them in a traditional manner: she had undertaken the mixture of folk and rock for a reason, but now that reason was gone.

Holst concluded her talk by playing several tracks of Koch singing, including “*Thalassaki mou*,” “*Stopa kai sto xanaleo*,” and “*Tzivaeri*.” She presented “*Thalassaki mou*” as one of the songs that changed her understanding of island music, because of the power of the language, and the hypnotic play on the word “*thalassa*” (sea), including the words “*thalassonomai*,” and “*thallasoderneis*.” While it is not unique among the island songs, it gives an idea of their richness and seriousness.

Summary of discussion:

Q: In the 1970s I directed a play on Kalymnos, where they end every *glendi* with the song “*Tzivaeri*.” They asked me to end the play with that song, too, which I found extraordinary.

Q: The *nisiotika* are rhythmically simple in comparison with the songs of the mainland. I wonder if this simplicity could be a result of Venetian rule, or some other western domination?

A: First of all, I would say that rhythmic complexity is not something you see all over the mainland; you find it certainly in Macedonia, and in places where the Ottoman influence was strong. But if you think about it, jazz isn't rhythmically complex, it's all in 4/4—but what counts is what you do with that beat, how you play with it. A good dancer or violinist can do so much with a *syrto*, whereas you can find lots of songs in 9/8 that aren't nearly as exciting. The singers on the islands have a way of hanging back, behind the

beat, almost like Frank Sinatra, and the dancers hesitate before they step. It's subtle, but there's a lot more complexity than you might think.

Q: Since you were on Kalymnos years ago, I was wondering if they ever dance the *kalamatianos* there.

A: They would for a *glendi*, but it's not local at all. The *kalamatianos* and the *tsamiko* were deliberately introduced by the government as national songs, as dances that all Greeks could do together. This was around the turn of the century. One of the terrible things about island music is that you often see women or men dancing a *kalamatianos* to what should be a *syrtó*—they don't know the difference, so they just make the steps fit. Sometimes Mariza would have me get up and lead the dancing. She would say, "They should be ashamed of themselves."

Q: There's a complicated question I've been wondering about for years, and since you've dealt with Greek music as no one else in this country has, I was hoping you could help me answer it. In my youthful theatrical career, I repeatedly tried to make the composers I worked with try to understand Greek music, so they could incorporate it into the scores for the tragedies I did. The last time, I had an extraordinary composer, Richard Peasely, and I gave him the Kalymnian songs, and he kept coming back to me and saying, "It's all very good, but I can't incorporate it, I don't understand it."

A: It's true, they don't. And it's bizarre that they don't. I taught a class this morning where I was trying to get them to clap a *zeibeikiko*, and they got it in five minutes. But music people are so narrow in their understanding: they think they're trained, if you try to get them to sing a piece of Arabic music, they can't. Modal music in Greece is not terribly complicated, much less so than Persian music, and people can certainly get it if they're prepared to be humble. But most music people aren't humble enough to really listen.

Q: Of course composers usually have very steady and concrete ideas about music, because without them they couldn't face their work.

Q: I would suggest that Bartók gave the big answer to this, with the folk music of Hungary.

A: I think Bartók was so busy trying to find the Hungarian in Turkey he didn't realize that the Turks had very interesting music of their own.

Q: Your talk didn't really touch on the state of the *nisiotika* today. Is that something we should be talking about?

A: In the *odeia* they're now teaching folk instruments. And on Mytilini I met someone who had formed a group of about 20 students and was looking for someone to teach them. But there's no one left; really serious students go to Turkey to study. I actually think there's a bit too much admiration for Turkish music vis-à-vis Greek music: the

*nisiotika*, for instance, have nothing to do with Turkey, it's Greek music. The same can be said of *rembetika*. So many of the *smyrneika* are Turkish-influenced, of course, but the music of Piraeus is a completely different thing, a real local form. There may be an oud player in the background, but the words and instrumentation are what the Greeks did with the stuff that came to them from all over. Of course borrowings come from everywhere, but people in Greece do something else with it.

Q: But when we talk about *nisiotika* today, shouldn't we really be going to the musicians who have something to bring to the table? The people on the islands—or at least on Naxos, which I know well—now listen to the new *nisiotika*, which come from a moment in the late 70s into the 80s where the language of the songs was made more contemporary, with references to motorcycles and so on. There was a point in the early 80s when relations on the islands were changing, men and women starting meeting up in small bars where they would listen to canned music instead of live music, and it was a mixture of *skyladiko* and *nisiotiko*, as the *nisiotiko* absorbed these other forms. When you went to the syllogos for the August 15<sup>th</sup> dance, they would bring bands from Athens that played a more authentic *nisiotiko*. Now if you go, they play this form of a much more popular *nisiotiko*, which has taken a lot from that form that appeared in the 80s. And it's all over the radio, too. Also, when you were talking about “*Thalassaki mou*” and the tensions in the song, with the lyrics, I wanted to say that with these more modern *nisiotika* the language can be very jazzed-up. Lyrics are important in *skyladiko*, too.

A: I'll have to go to Naxos now, and hear these things. And I'm sure it depends on where you are, because island music has virtually disappeared on so many of the islands.

Q: Of course he's talking about a big island. I was recently on Anafi, which has about 200 inhabitants, and they have two musicians, who play the *toumbeleki* and the *tsambouna*, and the two of them make a *zeugos*, a pair. Koufonisi, though, has a lot of money, and it actually gives people the opportunity to spend time on music.

Q: But they have a network of musicians, violinists who travel to different villages, primarily in August, during the tourist season.

Q: There has also been a big hybridization of Greek music. I grew up going to the country and would see bands play all the time. This year I went to the traditional feast at Tiheion, outside of Nafpaktos, and it was very sad—they had no live band, only taped music, muzak versions of songs in which all the tempos were changed, and the same went for *rembetika*, too. There were even people dancing the *kalamatiano* around a tree, going not forward and back but around in circles.

Q: I have a question about lyrics. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were European scholars who gathered folk songs, even before Politis came along. Apart from the recorded versions you shared with us tonight, have you come across different versions or variations of these songs?

A: Yes, I have. There are lots of variations of “*Thalassaki*,” for example. But Politis was one of the worst offenders. When Sam Chianis was young he worked with Politis, and they would go around and listen to these people singing songs, and Politis would correct people, say they were singing the wrong words, tell them to fix it. He had this idea of the ur-text, this notion that there was a correct version. So a lot of the the *parallages*, the variants, got lost through his intervention. That’s one aspect of the sad tale of the decline of *nisiotika*.

Q: I still want to insist that I don’t necessarily see this as a falling into degeneration; there are forms of this music still being circulated, though somewhat different forms. But since you mentioned *skyladiko*, I wanted to ask, how do you understand it coming about?

A: I really don’t know. By the time I was there it was already there. Kazantzidis never flew, he would drive, and he would stop at the kinds of places truck drivers stopped, and would sing with them and talk to them, and I think he absorbed some of the *skyladiko* mentality. So he might have played some role in it. I’ve always thought his voice has that *skyladiko* edge to it.

Q: The whole notion of *skyladiko* is audience-driven: it’s the spectator who demands that kind of behavior from the singers.

A: Yes, there’s a performance aspect to it. *Skyladiko* isn’t so much about the songs themselves as about a style of performance. And the *skyladiko* singers copied Kazantzidis in their style.

Q: In the north, of course, you always had places for *klarina*. There was an ambiance and an atmosphere that was similar, but with *skyladika* it got choreographed at a certain point—the women singers, the champagne, it all got typologized in a way. And now there are full ensembles of dancers that are part of the program. Also, Kazantzidis is considered respectable *laiko* in terms of ethos and purity and nobility of sentiment.

Q: Kazantzidis is the artist to those people, as is Marinella; the others are the copyists.

A: It wasn’t their fault that they were imitated, but they were, I think. They represented a certain kind of *laiki foni*. And there is some element of *nisiotika* in *skyladika*.

Q: Though you also see a skyladization of *klarina*, of all kinds of folk music.

A: Can anyone tell me the etymology of *skyladika*? The question has never been satisfactorily answered for me.

Q: I think it comes from the phrase “*skilisia zoi*.” So again, I insist that the *skyladiko* quality doesn’t have to do with the music, but with the spectator.

Q: But we can also think about it in comparison to *rembetiko*. Just think about what we mythologize as a *rembetiko teke* or club from the 50s—we talk about it with a great deal more reverence than we talk about the *skyladika* now.

A: Yes, and of course *rembetika* was talked about as a kind of cheap music, in the very terms that are now used to refer to *skyladika*.

Q: Though there is a kind of commercialism around the *skyladika* that there wasn't with *rembetika*.

Q: I think *skyladika* is on its way out, and should be, because there isn't any *skilisia zoi* anymore.

Q: I have a question about the work you're doing in reclaiming or reappropriating Mariza Koch, bringing her back into the picture. I was wondering if you think there is some critical significance to her own reappropriation of this music, this gesture of distancing and nearing at the same time. Because you also brought her back as a composer, not just a singer.

A: I think she's getting that recognition now as a composer in Greece, very late in her life. She's been very much a path breaker. One important recent event has been the reopening of Kitaro in Athens, and she's been offered every Saturday night, if she wants it. And I'm sure she will go and sing there sometimes. People in Athens are nostalgic for it, in a way. But I think she's moving in other directions, the reclaiming of the folk songs, but also realizing that rock and roll was alive and well in those days. Greek rock has been neglected, too. It was different from foreign rock, there was a way of improvisation that Greek rock players did very well. It wasn't exactly an imitation of western models. And they were doing it for the same reasons: it was anti-government, they were persecuted for playing rock and roll.