



## Summary :

The rebetiko song as a musical and social phenomenon.

## Date

20<sup>th</sup> century

## Geographical Location

Greece

## 1. The Name

The term “rebetiko”, today including a considerable number of Greek folk songs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, remains of doubtful origin. It has been used without discrimination and is still creating conflicting opinions. Even the etymology of the word gave rise to numerous assumptions: production of the word from the ancient verb “remvomai” (to wander) through the medieval “rembomai”;<sup>1</sup> Turkish origin from the word “rebet” (rebetis-es in Greek, meaning outlaw);<sup>2</sup> Italian origin from the Venetian word “rebelo” (rebel);<sup>3</sup> Arabian from the word “rubaiyat” (quatrain);<sup>4</sup> Slav from the word “rebenok” (brave)<sup>5</sup> and, more recently, a mixed origin “from the musical note Re (D) and the English verb beat...”.<sup>6</sup> None of the above assumptions has been confirmed. Besides, the term does not respond to any particular poetic, musical or choreographic form. However, it was allegedly associated with the “underworld”, that is, the part of society engaged in crime or vice: a short story by M.D. Chamoudopoulos published in [Smyrna](#) in 1871 reports the word “Rebeta” as “the night thieves”.<sup>7</sup>

According to the information available so far, the term “rebetiko” first appears in 1906, on the label of the record “Tik tak”. The lyrics of this song make no mention of the “underworld”. They are reminiscent of some songs Sokratis Prokopiou reports as “rebetiko” songs in the work he dedicated to old Smyrna.<sup>8</sup> However, the first publication of this work is dated to 1945. No other source or musician reports “rebetiko” before 1906. The singer Stelios Perpiniadis confesses that he first came across the word in 1918, when he read an article by the musicologist Faltaitis. As a result, there is every chance that record companies implemented the term. As a matter of fact, the development of record industry indelibly marks the development of music all over the world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the Greek music. It is almost impossible to define the “rebetiko type” due to the divergence between the most possible origin of the word “rebetiko” and its use. However, the term is widely accepted and used today. The multiple musical and poetic forms connected with “rebetiko” from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to date should be investigated.

## 2. The Framework

### 2.1. Historical Framework

The “rebetiko” song is included in a framework of radical and rapid political, economic and social changes. The populations reported in rebetiko songs were emigrants to America and internal emigrants moving from the Greek countryside to the cities, as well as [Asia Minor refugees](#). “Rebetiko” owes its immense popularity to the role it played as the tool the above populations used in order to adapt to their new lives. As for the 1922 refugees, the forms they inherited from their birthplaces helped the “rebetiko” song define a new “ground” and invent new reference points. Moreover, it probably helped Asia Minor refugees overcome their [disputes with the natives](#).

### 2.2. Setting

Although the songs were widely spread through records, most of “rebetiko” songs were performed in public places. In the early



decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century only a few houses had their own phonograph. The “discs” were usually played in coffee houses and taverns. Besides, the stage is always benefited from record advertising, although the atmosphere of a shed in Anapafseos Street of Piraeus or a coffee house attracting refugee workers in some US countryside is quite different from the stage of the Athenian hangout of Mourouzis in Alexandras Avenue of Athens or Marika’s in the 34<sup>th</sup> Street of New York. One thing is certain; there were violent incidents in all night haunts, sometimes with tragic outcome.

### 2.3. Composers and Singers

It should be noted that all the famous composers of “rebetiko” songs born before 1890 were from Asia Minor: Dimitris Barousis (1860-1944), Stavros Pantelidis (1870-1955), Kostas Skarvelis (1880-1942), Panagiotis Tountas (1885-1942), Kostas Karipis (1885-1952), Evangelos Sofroniou (1885-1942) and Yiannis Dragatsis (1886-1958). The first Greek composers appeared in the second “generation”, including Giorgos Batis (1890-1967), Iakovos Montanaris (1893-1965), Kostas Tzovenos (1899-1985), Dimitris Goggos (1902-1985), Kostas Roukounas (1904-1984), Markos Vamvakaris (1905-1972) and Stelios Kiromyitis (1908-1979). However, Asia Minor composers still outnumbered the Greeks. Among them were Gregory Asikis (1890-1967), Antonis Diamantidis (1892-1945), Yiannis Eitziridis (1893-1942), Manolis Chrysafakis (1895-1972), Zacharias Kasimatis (1896-1965), Vangelis Papazoglou (1897-1943), Spyros Peristeris (1900-1966), Dimitris Atraidis (1900-1970), Apostolos Chatzichristos (1901-1959) and Kosmas Kosmadopoulos (1903-1973).

This preponderance was probably due to the pure professionalism of Asia Minor musicians. Besides, the first union of Greek musicians, the “*Allilovoitheia*” (mutual aid), was established by Asia Minor refugees. In the same period Kostas Tzovenos and Iakovos Montanaris were among the few “educated” Athenian musicians involved in “rebetiko”. It is indicative that they started immediately to cooperate with their Asia Minor fellows, while they ignored Giorgos Batis, who was considered inferior to them. When referring to Giorgos Batis during an interview he gave to the researcher Panagiotis Kounadis, Kostas Tzovenos stressed the “class” differences among the musicians: “in case someone belonged to the lower classes, we never befriended him. Because he would never come to us, either”.<sup>9</sup>

Things changed in 1933-1934, when “lower classes” became a reality. The first recordings of the Four of Piraeus<sup>10</sup> did not introduce any revolutionary form in music. They only recognised and revealed to the audience a concealed and marginal tradition. The later generation of Asia Minor composers like Giorgos Róvertakis (1911-1978), Anestis Delias (1912-1944) and Yiannis Papaioannou (1913-1972) as well as some earlier figures started to adopt, even superficially, the “Piraeus style” and closely cooperate with the “natives”. The rest of them gave way to the Greeks of the third “generation”: Yiannis Stamoulis (1912), Odysseas Moschonas (1912-1995), Giorgos Mouflouzelis (1912-1991), Gerasimos Klouvatos (1914-1979), Dimitris Fratis (1914-1978), Panos Petsas (1915-1980), Yiannis Kyriazis (1915-1982), Stelios Chrysinis (1916-1970), Michalis Genitsaris (1917-2005), Vasilis Tsitsanis (1917-1984), Marinos Gabriel (1919), Babis Bakalis (1920-2007), Manolis Chiotis (1920-1970), Kostas Kaplanis (1921-1997), Stavros Tzouanacos (1921-1974), Thodoros Derveniotis (1922-2004), Apostolos Kaldaras (1922-1990), Spyros Kalfopoulos (1923-2006), Fotis Chaloulakos (1922), Dimitris Skarpelis (1924) and Giorgos Mitsakis (1924-1993).

In the 1950s singers enjoyed an incredible popular appeal, according to the composer Thodoros Derveniotis, who also provides information about the unbelievable differences in musicians’ wages.<sup>11</sup> This was an old story. Already from the 1920s and 1930s, the “rebetiko” song had included big stars: Mrs. Koula, Maria Papaghika and Giorgos Katsaros in the USA, while Rita Abatzi, Rosa Eskenazi, Marika Frantzeskopolou, Antonis Diamantidis, Giorgos Kavouras, Kostas Nouros, Stratos Pagioumtzis, Stelios Perpiniadis and Kostas Roukounas were some of the stars in Greece. Among others, in the 1940s and the 1950s appeared Ioanna Georgakopoulou, Sotiria Bellou, Marika Ninou, Stella Chaskil, Anna Chrysafi, Panos Gavalas, Stelios Kazantzidis, Gregory Bithikotsis and Prodromos Tsaousakis.

### 3. Music

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the things in music in Greece and Asia Minor were more complicated than they seemed. On the one hand, the audience in Athens, just like in Smyrna, had become familiar with western European music through the opera and the serenades of



the Ionian Islands. On the other hand, they had also accepted the music of Asia Minor cities through the “café-aman” (nightclubs). When Panagiotis Kounadis asked Kostas Tzovenos about the repertoire of the Athenian “rebetiko” bands in 1912-1917, the latter answered: “Mostly amanedes” (long-drawn love songs).<sup>12</sup> Because there were neither sound sources nor musical recordings, only assumptions can be made about the musical character of the songs sung by bullies and prisoners, as reported by the writers Alexandros Papadiamantis and Andreas Karkavitsas in their works. In any case, the recordings of Yiannakis Ioannidis and Giorgos Batis are probably inspired by these songs.

### 3.1. Instruments

Although the bouzouki is considered today the basic instrument of the “rebetiko” song, it appeared only occasionally in recordings until 1934. The first known commercial records including the bouzouki were cut in the USA in 1928. They included songs of unknown creators sung by Yiannakis Ioannidis and Manolis Karapiperis. The bouzouki, just like the baglamas, belongs to the family of the tamboura with a long neck. It originally had three strings before Manolis Chiotis added a fourth string in the 1950s. However, the instruments of the Smyranean music prevailed until 1934, although some other instruments also appeared, such as the piano, the banjo and the accordion. The American recordings are quite different because the vocals are accompanied by only one instrument, the guitar, played by the singer. This category includes the recordings of Giorgos Katsaros and Kostis Avyssinos.

From the late 1940s the number of musical instruments gradually increases and the “rebetiko” group becomes a real band. The sound is amplified through microphones and electric instruments. Finally, small objects like strings of beads and small glasses are also used as musical instruments.

### 3.2. Tempo

The nature and the occurrence of the tempos (rhythms) changed in the course of time. The most famous of them, the “zeibekiko” (asymmetric with a 9/4 tempo) and the “hasapiko” (double beat in 2/4), prevailed between 1933 and 1940. Before and after that period, the “syrtos” (double beat in 2/4) and the “çiftetelli” (double beat in 4/4) also held an important position. More rare rhythms are the “karşilama” (asymmetric in 9/8) and the “syrtos kalamatianos” (asymmetric in 7/8). Towards the late 1940s a number of Latin rhythms like rumba, bolero and mambo were adopted by “rebetiko”, according to the old Smyranean habit of incorporating metrical patterns of various origins in the repertoire.

### 3.3. Melody

The melodies used in the works of Asia Minor creators as well as the works of D. Semsis, K. Tzovenos and Y. Montanaris are exactly the same as those used in [popular urban songs of Smyrna](#). In the songs of the so-called “Piraeus school” the melody is restricted and repeated, including the alternate repetition of two connected notes (“diplopenia”). However, as compared to G. Batis, M. Vamvakaris, for example, wrote songs with a longer and more complicated melody. The adoption of the system of connected notes, which are played by instruments with fixed frets, is more or less of an aesthetic nature. Both the bouzouki and the guitar can produce independent sounds. In any case, the melody was still based on the tropic system, despite the interventions of the Metaxas bureaucracy and the prevalence of tempered intervals. Furthermore, despite the introduction of a relevant harmony, the character of the “rebetiko” music remained essentially monophonic. Subsequent musicians somehow lost continuity in tradition. Although a large number of them ignored the terminology of the musical modes<sup>13</sup> used by their predecessors, their ear led them instinctively to their roots. This is how expressions like “Do major alla Turka” can be explained.<sup>14</sup> Besides, after 1945 there was a return to melismata in a wider range and a more elaborate melody.

## 4. Lyrics

As regards morphology, the fifteen-syllable and the eight-syllable verse hold a privileged position, mainly in the works of creators born before 1910. The works of later lyricists are dominated by verses of various meters.



#### 4.1. Love

Love affairs are without dispute the major subject of “rebetiko” songs. But the way they are presented changes according to the historical, social and economic conditions of each period. Therefore, in the songs of Asia Minor creators love affairs are combined with other subjects concerning particularly the refugees: the search of food and accommodation, adjustment to the new fatherland and homesickness:

*Eimai dervisis, mezeklis, ap' tin Athina sevdalis.*

*Eim' Athinaios kai glentzes, pou m' agapoun para polles.*

*Spao seveda me tis Smyrnies, tis Mortakiotisses pou les,*

*Kai me tis Tsarmadiotisses kai me tis Fasouliotisses*

(I am a dervish, I like nibbling, I am an amorous Athenian.

I come from Athens and I like revelry, lots of women love me.

I am very fond of women from Smyrna, the Mortakiotisses,

As well as the Tsarmadiotiesses and Fasouliotisses)<sup>15</sup>

This homesickness will be later handed down to the rest of the Greeks in the form of songs reconstructing a fictitious East, with plenty of gold, palaces and “sinuous dancers”. From 1933 onwards the idolization of the woman, whose presence is very strong in the songs of Asia Minor creators, starts to gradually decline, as the woman is now confronted with a hard and scornful attitude. In general, the economic issues lie heavy on relations, which are increasingly tending towards the correlation of powers.

#### 4.2. Dangerous Substances – Dangerous Life

The songs that refer to alcohol and illegal substances are included in two categories. The first category describes mainly pleasure. In the second category the use is attributed to the “hardships” of life:

*Charmanis otan kathomai den skeftomai tin peina*

*San mastourono, re paidia, dikia mou einai i Athina*

(I'm dying for a smoke, I'm not even thinking I'm starving

Friends, when I'm stoned, Athens is mine)<sup>16</sup>

The way in which Asia Minor refugees handle the issue of “social margin” reveals a political conscience explaining the unfriendly attitude of the Metaxas regime towards them:

*Den mas fovizei o thanatos, mon' mas tromazei I peina*

*Gia afto tsimboume lahana kai tin pername fina*

(We are not afraid of death, we are only scared of hunger



Therefore we are nibbling cabbage and doing fine)<sup>17</sup>

#### 4.3. Social Ascension

As a matter of fact, most of the subsequent “rebetiko” protest songs just reversed the roles, though without challenging the nature of the political system:

*Rebetiki kyvernisi tha ftiaxo stin Ellada*

*Kai mes sta ypourgeia mou rebetes tha eho arada...*

*Galloi, Englezoi, Germanoi kai seis Amerikanoi,*

*Afiste tin Ellada mas ton pono tis na gianei.*

*Tha dioxo kai tis vaseis tous, tha fygo apo to NATO*

*Gia na 'maste apo pano emeis ki aftoi na 'nai apo kato*

(I'm going to establish a “rebetiko” government in Greece

And have my ministries full of rebetes...

You, French, English, Germans and Americans,

Let our Greece relieve its pain.

I will turn their bases out, I will withdraw from NATO

So that we are on top of them)<sup>18</sup>

Social recognition is asserted through self-praising:

*Stin piatsa pou megalosa oloi m' ehoun thavmasei,*

*Giati eimai mangas kai exygnos kai s' ola mou entaxei*

(In the quarter I grew up everybody admires me

Because I'm crafty and brainy and a good man)<sup>19</sup>

Within the same framework are also included the adoption of ancient mythology, the epic and modern mythology produced by the cinema:

*I Greta Garbo, manga mou, tha anavei to tsibouki*

*Ki o Jan Kieपुरa sti gonia tha paizei to bouzouki.*



*Ki o Tzimi Londos gia dais tha kathetai stis tsilies*

*Ki i Lilian i Harvey tha diochnei tis baskines*

(Greta Garbo, my friend, will light the pipe

And Jan Kiepura in the corner will be playing the bouzouki.

Jim Londos, for he is strong, will be on the lookout,

And Lilian Harvey will be keeping the police away)<sup>20</sup>

#### 4.4. The Longing

Until 1936, the longing was almost exclusively expressed through amanedes. When the latter started to decline, “rebetiko” songs took over:

*Esy eis' aitia pou pono, katarameni moira,*

*Gi' afto kai pira apofasi ta matia mou na kleiso*

(You are the reason for my pain, my damned fate,

That's why I have decided to die...)<sup>21</sup>

The songs describing the hardships of expatriation increased remarkably in the 1950s:

*Kapoia mana anastenazei, mera nyxhta anisychei,*

*To paidi tis perimenei, pou echei chronia na to dei*

(A mother sighs and worries night and day

She is waiting for her child she has not seen for years)<sup>22</sup>

This increase was probably due to the massive migration noted in Greece in that period. Finally, the joyful cries and greetings between the singers and the audience or the singers with each other often included humorous comments on the song's lyrics.

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2. Παπαδημητρίου, Β., “Το ρεμπέτικο τραγούδι και οι σημερινοί θιασώτες του”, *Ελεύθερα γράμματα* 1-2 (1949).

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8. Προκοπίου, Σ., *Σεργιάνι στην παλιά Σμύρνη* (Athens 1949), p. 97.
9. Κουνάδης, Π., *Εις ανάμνησιν στιγμών ελκυστικών* (Athens 2000), pp. 154-155.
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13. Musical modes.
14. The score of the song “Το Bertaki” [the little cape (garment)] by A. Kaldaras, Σχορέλης, Τ., *Ρεμπέτικη ανθολογία Α΄* (Athens 1977), p. 118.
15. Δραγάτσης, Γ., “Athinaios Sevdalis” (an amorous Athenian), musical digital disk *Συνθέτες του ρεμπέτικου* 10.
16. Ειτζιρίδης, Γ., “Ο Prezakias” (the junkie), Σχορέλης, Τ., *Ρεμπέτικη ανθολογία Β΄* (Athens 1978), p. 52.
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18. Γαβριήλ, Μ., “N.A.T.O.” (NATO), Σχορέλης, Τ., *Ρεμπέτικη ανθολογία Α΄* (Athens 198 ), p. 257.
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20. Βαμβακάρης, Μ., “Prepei na chtiso ena tzami / An m’ axiosei o theos” (I should build a mosque or May the God help me), Σχορέλης, Τ., *Ρεμπέτικη ανθολογία Α΄* (Athens 1977), p. 232.
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